

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

*BALD HEADS & BLUE STARS: A THEORY,  
MODEL AND IMPACT OF VERBATIM  
THEATRE PRACTICE*

A Dissertation submitted by

Sarah Ann Peters, M Arts, BDED

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## Abstract

The aim of this practice-led research is to investigate the creative practice of a verbatim theatre process. Verbatim theatre involves interviewing a community about a topic or event, recording these conversations and using the resulting stories as stimulus for the creative development of performance. I have made a significant contribution to theatre-making knowledge by articulating a theory and model of practice and investigating the impact of verbatim theatre practice on a community of storytellers.

I engaged in a rigorous Reflective Practitioner Case Study to write and perform in *bald heads & blue stars*, through interviewing 15 women from the Queensland Alopecia community and translating their stories into performance. Across this process I facilitated a triangulated documentation of practice, to induce rich data sets that were integral to articulating a key outcome for the research: the Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis model and theory of practice. Current research has focused primarily on debates around truth and authenticity, leaving a distinct absence of engagement with the artistic practice of verbatim theatre. Within the framework of the Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis model I name and define key creative practices within the verbatim theatre process, such as Community Immersion, Listening for Aesthetics and Voicing Stories. Analysing and naming these practices provides a new and considered language around the artistic process of verbatim theatre, contributes to the knowledge and understanding of theatre making and is a step towards understanding the impact of creative practice on the storytelling community.

## **CERTIFICATION OF THESIS**

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software and conclusions reported in this thesis are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

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Signature of Student

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Date

## **ENDORSEMENT**

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Signature of Principal Supervisor

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Date

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Signature of Associate Supervisor

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Date

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# Table of Contents

1. Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
1.1. Research aims and questions .....	2
1.2. Research context.....	3
1.3. Thesis Structure .....	3
1.4. Research Outcomes .....	5
2. Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	6
2.1. Historical contextualisation.....	6
2.2. Contemporary porosity .....	9
2.3. Verbatim theatre in Australia: Contextualizing my practice.....	12
2.4. Core tension in the field: manipulating the truth or creating fictional authenticity? .....	14
2.4.1. Overview .....	14
2.4.2. ‘Real’ material in performance .....	15
2.4.3. Authenticity in performance .....	17
2.4.4. Authenticity, truth and the real in an Australian context .....	19
2.5. Methods of verbatim theatre practice .....	22
2.5.1. Methods of Practice: Kaufman and Hare.....	23
2.5.2. Australian playwright’s methods of practice: Valentine, Wilkinson and Horin .....	26
2.5.3. Methods of practice: The interview .....	31
2.6. Verbatim theatre conventions and form .....	33

2.6.1.	Alana Valentine: <i>Parramatta Girls</i> (2007).....	38
2.6.2.	Campion Decent: <i>Embers</i> (2008).....	41
2.6.3.	David Burton: <i>April's Fool</i> (2010) .....	44
2.7.	Impact on community of storytellers.....	47
2.8.	Positioning my theory of practice.....	52
2.8.1.	Influencing theoretical frameworks .....	53
2.8.2.	How theory influences practice through praxis .....	54
2.8.3.	A model for articulating a theory of practice .....	57
2.8.4.	Feminist theatre practice .....	58
2.8.5.	My intentions for <i>bald heads &amp; blue stars</i> .....	60
2.8.6.	Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis .....	62
2.9.	Conclusion.....	64
3.	Chapter Three: Methodology and practice.....	66
3.1.	Overview of practice .....	67
3.2.	Reflective Practitioner Case Study (RPCS) .....	70
3.3.	Methods of practice and documentation.....	75
3.3.1.	Reflective Journals and Reflective Transcripts.....	76
3.3.2.	Surveys (Storytellers experience) .....	79
3.3.3.	Integral Documentation (Interview transcripts, communication trails, publicity) .....	82
3.4.	Review of methods .....	82
4.	Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars .....	84

4.1.	DVD, Script and Teacher's Notes .....	84
4.2.	bald heads & blue stars.....	85
5.	Chapter Five: Verbatim Theatre process and form .....	121
5.1.	Community Immersion and communication .....	123
5.2.	Listening for Aesthetics in the interview .....	126
5.2.1.	Interviewer .....	127
5.2.2.	Mutual Storyteller .....	130
5.2.3.	Engaged Audience Member.....	134
5.3.	Artistic Transcription and Story Immersion.....	140
5.4.	Creative Development: Workshops and playwriting .....	142
5.4.1.	Voicing Stories.....	143
5.4.2.	Devising through discussion .....	144
5.4.3.	Critical feedback .....	146
5.4.4.	Post workshop processing.....	147
5.5.	Playwriting: translating stories into performance .....	149
5.5.1.	In the beginning.....	150
5.5.2.	Violet and Alopecia: translating the literal to the metaphoric .....	151
5.5.3.	Feedback .....	152
5.5.4.	Writing with conventions in <i>bald heads &amp; blue stars</i> .....	157
5.6.	Rehearsal and performance .....	164
5.6.1.	Actor's perceived responsibility .....	165

5.6.2.	Rehearsal strategies .....	167
5.6.3.	Rhythm and Breath .....	170
5.6.4.	Audience positioning .....	172
5.7.	Audience reception .....	175
5.7.1.	Actor's experience of the audience .....	175
5.7.2.	Audience reception.....	177
5.8.	Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis <i>in practice</i> .....	179
5.9.	Conclusion.....	182
6.	Chapter Six: Impact.....	185
6.1.	Survey One – The interview .....	185
6.2.	Survey Two – The script .....	193
6.3.	Survey Three – The performance .....	198
6.4.	Participant impact: Transforming perspectives .....	203
6.5.	Implications for practice.....	206
6.6.	Personal impact .....	208
7.	Chapter Seven: Conclusion .....	213
7.1.	Significance of the research.....	213
7.2.	Core research outcomes.....	214
7.3.	Future research .....	217
7.4.	Concluding statement .....	218
8.	Works Cited .....	219

9.	Appendices .....	237
9.1.	Appendix A: Email to AAAF database .....	237
9.2.	Appendix B: Article in <i>The Chronicle</i> .....	238
9.3.	Appendix C: Interview with ABC Southern QLD .....	239
9.4.	Appendix D: Timeline of data induction.....	240
9.5.	Appendix E: Early Journal Framework.....	241
9.6.	Appendix F: Journal Framework Three .....	243
9.7.	Appendix G: Journal Framework Four .....	244
9.8.	Appendix H: CAJ framework – creative development workshops.....	246
9.9.	Appendix I: CAJ framework – Rehearsal .....	247
9.10.	Appendix J: Reflective Transcript Framework.....	248
9.11.	Appendix K: Survey One.....	249
9.12.	Appendix L: Survey Two .....	251
9.13.	Appendix M: Survey Three .....	253
9.14.	Appendix N: Interview Transcript Framework .....	255
9.15.	Appendix O: bald heads & blue stars poster.....	256
9.16.	Appendix P: Television promotion.....	257
9.17.	Appendix Q: Newspaper promotion .....	258
9.18.	Appendix R: Teacher’s Notes.....	260
9.19.	Appendix S: My story for AAAF .....	274
9.20.	Appendix T: Continued communication example.....	275

## **List of figures**

Figure 1: Embedded layers of triangulation.....	73
Figure 2: Triangulated external data induction .....	74
Figure 3: Integral and External Documentation Codes.....	76
Figure 4: Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model .....	122
Figure 5: Converging Linear and Cyclical Narratives .....	152
Figure 6: Building Dramatic Tension .....	154
Figure 7: 'Gypsy Sticks' example.....	169
Figure 8: Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model .....	183

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Survey One, Question Two.....	186
Table 2: Survey Two, Question Five .....	195
Table 3: Survey Two, Question Eight.....	198
Table 4: Survey Three, Question One.....	200

# 1. Chapter One: Introduction

The story of my research begins with an interest in storytelling, theatre and community that each converge in the form of verbatim theatre. Verbatim theatre is complex and dynamic in both form and process. Within academic literature and the theatre industry the term verbatim theatre is controversial and its definition, history and ethics are frequent topics of debate. While there are scholarly articles that critique specific verbatim theatre productions or analyse them in relation to truth and authenticity, there is a distinct gap in research focused explicitly on artistic practice. My research contributes to this gap, articulating a theory of practice, naming and defining various practices across a verbatim theatre process, and outlining a model for creating verbatim theatre.

The term “verbatim theatre” is generally credited as coined by Derek Paget in 1987 (*Verbatim Theatre* 317). However, Paget acknowledges this term had been in circulation and used by practitioners such as Rony Robinson, Peter Cheeseman and Clive Barker preceding his official coining (*The Broken Tradition* 237). The term is often applied to a broad range of artistic processes and performances and this can result in conflict within the field of critical analysis. Australian academic Caroline Wake describes how verbatim theatre has been in some contexts “renamed the ‘theatre of witness’ [Schaefer 2003b] and the ‘theatre of testimony’ [Salz 1996]” (*Through the (in)visible Witness* 188), in an effort to better define the form. Testimonial theatre, documentary theatre, “proto-verbatim” (Duggan 149) and tribunal theatre are terms often used synonymously across the academic field to describe similar processes and plays. Within an Australian context the term verbatim theatre is still the most commonly used in the field to describe theatre performances that involve interviews with a community of participants as a key aspect of its process. This is evidenced through the term’s continued use by current Australian playwrights Alana Valentine, Champion Decent, David Burton and Kate Rice. I therefore use the term verbatim theatre consistently across this thesis.

My working definition, which is discussed in detail in Chapter Five, is that verbatim theatre involves interviewing a community of storytellers based on a topic or event,

## Chapter One: Introduction

recording these conversations and then translating the stories as stimulus to create performance.

### 1.1. Research aims and questions

Despite verbatim theatre's popularity the academic field is comparatively minimal. In 2006 Jeffers reflected that "little has been published about the form" (2), and while academic engagement has since grown in breadth and complexity, there remains a distinct gap in the field around verbatim theatre practice. It tends to attract "voluminous amounts of coverage in the arts pages of newspapers and websites but scholarly engagement has, to date, been limited" (Forsyth and Megson 1). I extend this to acknowledge that the scholarly debate is also predominantly occurring within the United Kingdom and the United States of America, with less academic critique within an Australian context. The dominant discussion within the literature centres on the material used in the creation of verbatim theatre and "questions of authenticity" (Cantrell *Acting in Documentary Theatre* 4). Specifically, whether artists use the recorded material ethically and authentically, and what it means for a play (an essentially fictional form) to be based on the stories of real people. Distinctly, there is minimal discussion on the values that influence practice, the method or process employed by practitioners when creating new verbatim work and finally, and perhaps most significantly, the impact that being involved in a verbatim theatre process has on the interview subjects.

In order to address these gaps my research has been framed by the following questions:

- What is my theory *of* verbatim theatre practice and how does it manifest *in* practice?
- What are the artistic practices of the playwright and collaborating artists in my verbatim theatre process?
- What has this project revealed about the form of verbatim theatre?
- What impact does involvement in this verbatim theatre process have on the community of storytellers?

## 1.2. Research context

The methodology used to frame this research is a practice-led Reflective Practitioner Case Study. I wrote and performed in a verbatim play titled *bald heads & blue stars* (2014), and triangulated a documentation of this process. This included personal reflective journals, interviews with the practitioners who collaborated with me throughout the process (who I refer to as collaborating artists), and a series of surveys with the interview participants who shared their stories. I refer to these participants as the community of storytellers, and for *bald heads & blue stars* this community was women with Alopecia. Alopecia is an autoimmune condition that results in varying degrees of hair loss and I interviewed fifteen women from across Queensland who have experienced this condition. These stories were then translated through the dramatic languages into performance.

It is crucial to acknowledge my personal position in this research. I am a member of the Alopecia community, and this has influenced my ability to connect with the storytellers and to understand the tensions of their experiences. I chose to work with this community because theirs is a story I am drawn to tell as a theatre practitioner, and because I believe in the potential of verbatim theatre to be an empowering experience. While my research focuses on the practices involved in the process of creating verbatim theatre, the process was influenced by my position within the Alopecia community. The outcomes of this research are specific to my case study; however through rigorous triangulated documentation and reference to the broader academic field, they are also transferable to other contexts.

## 1.3. Thesis Structure

The Literature Review begins in Chapter Two with an historical contextualisation of verbatim theatre and an overview of its contemporary porosity with other forms. I review the core tension that permeates the majority of academic critique on verbatim theatre: whether its use of interview material is a manipulation of the truth or a strategy to create fictional authenticity. The chapter continues with an overview of two playwrights' methods of practice from the global field: Moisés Kaufman and David Hare, and then three from an Australian context: Alana Valentine, Linden Wilkinson and Ros Horin. I critically analyse the conventions used in three

## Chapter One: Introduction

Australian plays and discuss how these conventions frame the narrative of each work. This analysis is a significant contribution to understanding how verbatim plays are shaped and the function of their unique conventions. The minimal research into the impact of the verbatim process on the community of storytellers is then summarised, before the chapter concludes with an articulation of my theory of practice. Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis is informed by critical theory, critical pedagogy and feminist theatre practice. Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis is the theory of practice that underpins the choices made throughout the process of creating *bald heads & blue stars*.

Chapter Three outlines the Reflective Practitioner Case Study methodology in detail. I describe my approach within this framework and the methods I used to induce data. Rigorous triangulation and practice specific induction methods are two key features of my research. The *bald heads & blue stars* script is included in Chapter Four, along with the educational resources that I wrote to accompany the performance.

Chapter Five presents the central and significant contribution to new knowledge and practice that emerged from my research: the Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model. This model is based on the creative practices documented throughout the process of creating *bald heads & blue stars*, and clearly names and defines various strategies and practices. Naming these practices creates an informed language through which to discuss, practice and critique the verbatim theatre process. Playwrights, educators and community arts practitioners now have the opportunity to use and adapt the model and its strategies in the creation of new works. The definition and analysis of these practices enables an opportunity to understand how each one functions in the verbatim theatre process and its potential impact on a community. This new language to discuss the artistic process of verbatim theatre contributes to the knowledge and understanding of theatre making and provides an entry for further research and critical engagement.

The community of storytellers was surveyed at three key junctures across the creative process to explore the experience of their participation. Chapter Six analyses the results of each of these surveys. The storytellers' reflections on being interviewed, reading a draft of the script, and viewing the live performance all have implications for creative practice. The data in this chapter provides support for

## Chapter One: Introduction

practices within the Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model, such as Community Immersion, active and dialogic listening in the interview and continued communication. Overwhelmingly, the storytellers describe their participation in the creative process as positive, validating and empowering.

### **1.4. Research Outcomes**

Two significant outcomes of this research have already been shared with the wider community: the performance season of *bald heads & blue stars* and the DVD of this performance that is available for public sale. Through the creation of these artefacts I have been immersed in the verbatim theatre process, and have articulated the Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model. This model is a step towards understanding what sometimes appears as the magical and invisible processes of theatre making. It is a step towards understanding the impact of creative practice on the community, collaborating artists and playwright. It is also a step towards teaching this process in schools and engaging with it in community arts practice, so that many more communities can benefit from the powerful potential of verbatim theatre.

## 2. Chapter Two: Literature Review

Verbatim theatre has evolved from a lengthy history in community and political theatre. This chapter begins with an exploration of this history in Section 2.1 before discussing the porosity of the form in the contemporary theatrical field in Section 2.2. Understanding how verbatim theatre has developed and its resonances with other forms enables my practice to come from a position of awareness; to acknowledge the developments and innovations that have come before. Literature pertaining specifically to verbatim theatre in an Australian context is summarised in Section 2.3. While the central focus of my research is exploring verbatim theatre practice, the most prominent point of critical engagement within the literary field is around the theme of truth; whether verbatim stories represent truth, how a playwright may manipulate those stories to present their own version of the truth and, conversely, whether verbatim theatre creates authentic fiction. These core tensions in the field are discussed in Section 2.4.

My process has been informed by the methods of other playwrights and Section 2.5 provides a brief overview and analysis of these, and emphasises the areas of practice that have not been rigorously researched. I have immersed myself in the form of verbatim by reading and analysing a significant number of plays and this has influenced my playwriting practice. Section 2.6 articulates some of the innovations and dramaturgical strategies evident in three of the Australian plays I read. The potential impact participation in a verbatim theatre process has on the community of storytellers is discussed in Section 2.7. A theatre artist's personal perspective on truth and their ethics of practice more broadly influences their practice in a verbatim theatre process. In acknowledgement of this, I have provided an overview of the theories of practice that have informed my own, and Section 2.8 concludes with an articulation of my unique theory of practice; Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis.

### 2.1. Historical contextualisation

The term verbatim theatre was coined by Derek Paget in 1987 (*Verbatim Theatre*). The term has been used in reference to a variety of processes and theatrical products. It has been mistaken as a “a mode of theatrical intervention developed since the

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

1990s” (Derbyshire and Hodson 198), and “in Australia there is an assumption abroad that the form was invented for *Aftershocks*” (Watt 198), an Australian verbatim play written by Paul Brown and the Workers Cultural Action Committee in 1993. Paget explains this misconception as a “broken tradition” of documentary theatre; that forms such as these tend to become more visible in certain socio-political contexts and then become forgotten (*Broken Tradition*). Consequently the methods and dramaturgical structures are not passed on as clearly as they are in styles such as Realism. This broken tradition begets an assumption that the form is new and innovative rather than deeply embedded in theatre’s history. This is a point Paget returns to, warning that there continue to be “academics who fail to take due account of the history” of verbatim theatre (*New Documentarism* 135). This section is my acknowledgement of the complex history that has shaped contemporary verbatim theatre.

Verbatim theatre was enabled by two separate phenomena. Firstly, there was a shift in theatrical content post World War One (WWI) towards a valuing of lived experiences and authentic community stories, with an explicit interest in the language and rhythm of colloquial speech. This shift was precipitated by the “Sturm and Drang, or Storm and Stress, drama of late eighteenth century Germany” which emphasised the “literal words of the people” (Garde, Mumford and Wake 9). The second more tangible phenomena was the invention of portable sound recording devices which allowed for an exact “taped actuality recording” to be used as “primary source material” (Paget *Verbatim Theatre* 317) in the process of developing theatre based on actual events and experiences. Verbatim theatre is often cited as beginning in the 1980s based on this technological development, however, as Gallagher et al. acknowledge, “its impulses can be traced back much further” (28). Two key impulses were 1920s Agitational Propaganda (agitprop) in Russia and Germany and The Living Newspaper form popularised in the USA in the 1930s during the Federal Theatre Project.

Agitprop was a vibrant form of political theatre in the 1920s and 1930s, designed for “performance to working class audiences in non-theatre spaces, ranging from the street to the gathering places of the working people” (Watt 20). It was developed in the USSR as “a means of communicating news to a largely illiterate population”

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

(Innes 23). Bulletins and local news would be read aloud to townspeople in a square or market and speakers began to “use speech, song, dance and gymnastics to dramatise [these] texts” (Innes 23). These conventions are still evident in contemporary street theatre and community performance events. Theatre troupes such as those operating under the Blue Blouse Movement (1923 - 1933), produced a “montage of political facts” (Leach 169) through their performances, using visual and performance literacy to disseminate information to audiences. Erwin Piscator influenced the development of agitprop in Germany, and his primary objective was to provide the working class audience the opportunity to “politicise itself through the art” (Holderness 106), and to encourage his audiences to believe that man can be changed by his surroundings and can himself change the surrounding world (116).

Agitprop was political, confrontational and innovative, with recorded material from life (in the form of newspaper articles, photographs and radio excerpts) projected into the world of the stage, valuing and validating the everyday experiences of the audience and “exploit[ing] the capacities of the slide projector and film to address topical social issues” (Garde, Mumford and Wake 11). Through these inclusions and borrowing from “commedia dell’arte festivals, parades and circuses” (Brockett 243), agitprop was a highly accessible community and “common peoples” theatre (Leach 170). It was a unique form of political activism that endeavoured to undermine the oppression of ignorance and used theatrical conventions that, at the time, were considered radical and subversive. Through its dramatization of news and local events, the phenomenon of valuing lived experience and using theatre to educate and inform, was evident in the form of agitprop.

The Living Newspaper, popularised in the 1930s during the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in the USA developed and adapted the agitprop form. It was the first time in US history that “theatre was subsidized by the federal government” (Witham 1). Set up as part of a Works Progress Administration (WPA) program in 1935 its specific goal was “to re-employ theatre artists who were victims of the economic crisis precipitated by the Great Depression” (Witham 2), thereby “keeping artists employed and struggling families entertained” (Garde, Mumford and Wake 11). The production of theatrical classics, development of new works, dance programs and circuses were performed within the parameters of the project. The intent was to develop a national

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

theatre to reach out to a wide audience and to represent their stories and experiences on stage (Witham 4). The artistic director Hallie Flanagan described the FTP as fighting “for theatres as an expression of a civilized, informed and rigorous life” (qtd. in Kaufman *Anatomy of an Experiment* 27). Both agitprop and The Living Newspaper incorporated material from real life into performance. However, rather than projecting recorded material into the performance to function as a contrast or juxtaposition to the story, as was common in agitprop (Innes 2), The Living Newspaper wove the material more seamlessly into the dialogue and plot development of the performance. Narration, direct address and a clear political agenda were also conventions adopted by The Living Newspaper (Barranger 572). Flanagan was “intrigued by what she called ‘the entertainment value of the fact’” (Witham 78). This interconnection of “the authentic and the theatrical” (Botham 41), evident in both agitprop and The Living Newspaper, is a core thread binding both forms to verbatim theatre’s history. A thread that Barranger (2004), Botham (2009), Paget (1987) and Watt (2009) each document as linking The Living Newspaper to later documentary and community theatre forms in both the United States and United Kingdom in the 1950s.

### **2.2. Contemporary porosity**

Ethnotheatre/drama, research-based theatre and tribunal theatre all hold parallels to the process and form of verbatim theatre. Judith Ackroyd and John O’Toole (2010) endeavour to chart the territory of “[e]thnodrama and its close relations” (19), citing documentary theatre and verbatim theatre as existing within this family tree. They demonstrate through an attempt to define each of these forms that labels are transient, “they shift and transmute and combine in different places and spaces” (21). Tom Cantrell suggests the array of definitions and names for forms such as documentary or verbatim theatre are an attempt to “distinguish the use of found material” (*Acting in Documentary Theatre* 2) in a work. Conversely, Saldaña suggests that the fields of ethnodrama, verbatim theatre and “over 60 other variant terms” (*The Backstage and Offstage Stories* 2) are merely different names for the same process. I contend that this homogenization ignores the clear differences between forms rather than celebrating them, it “rather unhelpfully groups dissimilar devising processes and performance modes together” (L.Taylor 379). The differences

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

between forms is not a blurring of the same practices, but rather they are porous and “porosity at boundaries can potentially be celebrated” (Paget *Acting with Facts* 173) for the innovations and opportunities that one form enables in the other. This porosity is evident in the creative practices used across a variety of forms, such as Community Immersion, interviewing, maintaining dialogue with participants and the creative development of performance. These methods are explored explicitly in Section 2.5. Acknowledging the porosity between forms is beneficial for both the theatre artist and the academic, as it can prompt innovative experimentations in artistry and enable the research and knowledge of one form to enhance the understanding of another. In this section I briefly explore ethnotheatre, research based theatre and tribunal theatre, highlighting their porosity with verbatim theatre.

In 2003 Saldaña described ethnotheatre as “employ[ing] traditional craft and artistic techniques of formal theatre production to mount a live performance event of research participants’ experiences” (218). The emphasis on participants’ personal experience connects the form to verbatim theatre’s focus, although they each approach this emphasis from different agendas. Ethnotheatre seeks to research the phenomena of experience clinically in the attempt to understand it in an educative and tangible sense and present that experience. In contrast, verbatim theatre explores the emotions, relationships and kinaesthetic qualities bound up with experience and can represent that exploration through metaphor and theatricality. Saldaña describes ethnographers and theatre artists as sharing a common goal; “to create a unique, insightful and engaging text about the human condition” (*Dramatizing Data* 229). This closely parallels Australian playwright Alana Valentine’s assertion that “our subject as playwrights is always human behaviour under pressure” (*Personal Interview* 2012). This mutual focus on human experience and the common understanding that theatre is an enabling form to explore and analyse that experience is one of the key similarities between verbatim theatre and ethnotheatre.

Mitchell, Jonas-Simpson and Ivonoffski extend this focus on lived experience to a discussion on research-based theatre, specifically in relation to their project on patients living with dementia titled *I’m Still Here!* (2006). In this project, research-based theatre “proved to be [a] meaningful medium for enhancing understanding of lived experience in different groups and communities” (198). A value underpinning

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

their approach was a sense of responsibility to “giv[e] voice to the experiences” (199) described by their research participants. In part this responsibility is driven by the belief that sharing lived experience through theatre is an avenue for creating social change. This is reinforced by Beck et al., who outline that “all forms of research-based performances have the potential to expand understandings, engage audiences and provoke new learning experiences” (698). While the key focus of research-based theatre is primarily on research and education, there is porosity in the practices and ways of working outlined by Mitchell et al. and Beck et al., such as Community Immersion, interviews and continual communication/member checking.

In the UK verbatim theatre has moved away from a focus on community stories and closer towards topical political commentary in the form of tribunal plays (Luckhurst 211). Tribunal theatre use court transcripts as the core of their dialogue and “demonstrate a shift from the local to the national, and are concerned with miscarriages of justice, the implementation of law, public institutions and issues relating to human rights” (Luckhurst 211). This is evident within the field of works emerging from the UK across the last decade, such as *Guantanamo: Honour Bound to Freedom* (2004), *Bloody Sunday* (2005), *Called to Account* (2007), *Deep Cut* (2008), *Tactical Questioning* (2011) and *The Riots* (2011). While Luckhurst places tribunal theatre within the category of verbatim theatre, Paget suggests that conflating or grouping the forms of verbatim theatre and tribunal theatre into a homogenous group will lead to confusion over their very different methodologies (*Broken Tradition* 233). While the first impulse towards verbatim theatre was a “concern to tell working class histories and stories” (Luckhurst 200), the shift towards tribunal theatre is often a shift away from these communities, and the plays “of the last decade deploys celebrity voices as much as it does ordinary ones” (212). Previous manifestations were focused on local histories, community experiences and “the sinewy language that often emerges from testimony” (Paget *New Documentarism on Stage* 32), however the current trend in verbatim theatre is to “work with a larger political canvas” (130). Paget’s 2008 definition of verbatim theatre acknowledges the growing diversity of the form, stating it “originates in interviews, and its scripts utilize in greater or lesser ways recordings of actual words real people have spoken” (130). This definition is reflective of the continuing development of verbatim theatre in a contemporary context.

## 2.3. Verbatim theatre in Australia: Contextualizing my practice

Verbatim theatre's development in an Australian context has maintained strong connections to Paget's description of early verbatim theatre, with an emphasis on the language of testimony. Rather than eclipsing the local and community based stories, there exists a genuine diversity within the form, and the drama is often driven through tension between community and politics. Watt describes this as the "local/global nexus" which "becomes central so that the play is at least potentially about a broader international issue as it is lived at the local level (the global is always local somewhere)" (204). He asserts that it is the continued connection to the local in an Australian context that creates verbatim's sense of authenticity (194). Ros Horin's *Through the Wire* (2004), Alana Valentine's *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* (2009) and Roslyn Oades' headphone verbatim plays (*Fast Cars and Tractor Engines*, *Stories of Love and Hate* and *I'm Your Man* 2003 - 2012) all wrestle with a larger political canvas while maintaining connection to the stories and language of a community. Garde, Mumford and Wake's "A Short History of Verbatim Theatre" provides a comprehensive summary of some of the key verbatim plays developed in Australia since 1990.

Australian theatre academic Caroline Wake, and researcher and playwright Linden Wilkinson are at the forefront of academic engagement with verbatim theatre in an Australian context. Anderson and Wilkinson (2007) discuss the resurgence of verbatim theatre in relation to themes of authenticity, empathy and human connection. They argue that what makes verbatim theatre unique is its "immediacy, [it] demands a focus and works on our imaginations in a unique way" (165) because it is a live encounter with the human experience. They suggest its purpose is to connect with an audience on an emotional and intellectual level, striving to "empathetically inform and empower through authentic story" focused on local living history (156). Verbatim theatre in an Australian context embraces the diversity of the form, it is "a portmanteau term, incorporating a stylistically rich and varied product that owes its origins to spoken text but does not always perform these words literally, as they are spoken" (Anderson and Wilkinson 154). Significantly, this emphasis on spoken experiences includes an agenda of empowerment, of giving

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

“voice to people who might otherwise go voiceless...and to tell stories that might otherwise go untold” (Wake *Towards a Working Definition* 2).

My definition of verbatim theatre has been influenced by the work of both Wake and Wilkinson, however is also reflective of Amanda Stuart Fisher’s delineation between documentary theatre and verbatim theatre (*That’s Who I’d Be* 196). While Stuart Fisher is a London based academic and theatre artist, her critical engagement with verbatim theatre reflects the values and practices of my Australian context.

While documentary theatre “makes greater use of retrieved documents and the archive...verbatim theatre tends to prioritise the utterance of witnesses” (Stuart Fisher *That’s Who I’d be* 196). Documentary theatre often uses pre-existing texts in its creative development. In contrast, integral to the verbatim theatre process are interviews with a community that have been expressly devised by a playwright for the sole purpose of generating material for performance. This differentiation recognises the agency and artistry of verbatim theatre practice from the outset of the playwright’s or company’s process, including the induction of source materials. This is a stark contrast to the documentary process which incorporates material that exists outside the creative process. This differentiation does not deny the artistry of documentary theatre, however highlights that it uses material that was originally created for non-artistic purposes. This distinction is crucial in understanding my approach to verbatim theatre where the emphasis remains firmly on the induction of spoken stories in the creative process. This also broadly reflects the practice of Alana Valentine, a leading figure in the verbatim field (Cantrell *Acting in Documentary Theatre* 8).

My working definition of verbatim theatre is that it involves interviewing a community of storytellers based on a topic or event, recording these conversations and then translating the stories as stimulus to create performance.

## **2.4. Core tension in the field: manipulating the truth or creating fictional authenticity?**

### **2.4.1. Overview**

Reverberating across the field is an engagement by academics with the theme of reality and truth. Cantrell describes this main theme from the field as “questions of authenticity” and “the complex and problematic relationship between the testimony from which these plays were derived and the productions themselves” (*Acting in Documentary Theatre* 4). The debate over what is considered ‘real material’ (and therefore inherently truthful) in a verbatim theatre performance is predicated by broader belief systems about theatre and performance in general. There are two main perspectives; firstly that in verbatim theatre (and other forms of documentary performance) there is material collected from lived experiences and events outside the world of the play which maintains its status as ‘real’ and truthful when incorporated into performance. This material exists alongside created material, or material that was specifically developed for the purpose of performance. This first perspective approaches the playwright’s role as one of shaping, editing and weaving the ‘real’ and created material into a performance that tells, to varying degrees, ‘true’ stories. The second perspective suggests that all material in verbatim theatre *is* created material, and collaboration and engagement with communities and lived experiences creates authenticity in the performance of that material. The first perspective opens up discussions about reflexivity and the extent to which real/true material should be differentiated from created material for the benefit of the audience, and to prevent manipulation in their reception of the story. The second perspective eliminates this debate, positioning all material as fictional and removing all notions of a universal or essential truth/fullness. It enables discussions on the value of fictionalising experience to more effectively convey an authentic representation of that experience and the artistic practice of verbatim theatre.

This section explores these perspectives through engaging with three critical questions that are evident across the broad field of verbatim theatre; is it possible for a work of theatre to tell ‘true’ stories or should we instead use the vocabulary of authenticity? Should verbatim material be demarcated from fictional material within

a text and performance? And what is the effect and value of reflexivity within the dramaturgy of a verbatim work? This section explores these three core questions, paying particular attention to their relevance and application in an Australian context.

### 2.4.2. 'Real' material in performance

Proponents of the first perspective advocate that the 'real' material in a performance should be marked as such to enable the audience to better differentiate between the facts and the created material in a play (Luckhurst; Duggan). In his review of verbatim play *Others* (2010) Duggan categorises the work as "proto-verbatim – 'proto' because, although making use of 'real words' gathered from those being represented, there is no claim of exact truthfulness" (149). Duggan's implication is that in contrast, verbatim theatre can make claims of truthfulness. Similarly, Luckhurst suggests that the "lack of clear sources in some verbatim plays is an ethical issue" (214). She praises Alecky Blythe's headphone verbatim practice, where the actors listen to recorded verbatim stories through headphones while performing, as clearly foregrounding the source of the play's verbatim material. Luckhurst also applauds the work of Tanika Gupta in *Gladiator Games* (2006), which notes specifically the source for her verbatim on the script itself and states that anything unmarked is a dramatization. Luckhurst applauds this as an "interesting model of notation for verbatim plays which incorporate invented material" (214), implying in a similar manner to Duggan that the verbatim material is un-invented or 'real'. Luckhurst and Duggan both exemplify the first perspective outlined above, and they each approach the field of verbatim theatre with this critical lens. The idea that theatre provides a space to pursue and disseminate truth, or that some material in a verbatim play is more real than other material, is one of the prominent threads of debate within the literature.

Luckhurst does acknowledge that verbatim theatre "like other documentary forms, is always stretched on the rack between a pursuit of 'facts' – a loaded word in its own right – and an engagement with artistic representation" (203). This has led to a debate over reflexivity in verbatim theatre and has become "one of the more contentious issues" within the field (Megson 531). Particularly "the extent to which processes of theatrical mediation should be acknowledged reflexively within the verbatim performance itself" (531). Bottoms argues that in order to prevent a

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

disingenuous presentation of truth, theatrical self-referentiality is “precisely what is required of documentary plays if they are to acknowledge their dual and thus ambiguous status as both ‘document’ and ‘play’” (57). Bottoms uses Moisés Kaufman as an exemplar of reflexivity, describing Kaufman’s *Gross Indecency* (1997) as an example of a work that constantly reminds the audience where and when a verbatim text originated through the vocal captioning of the actors. Bottoms advocates that “such performances need to foreground their own processes of representation” (61) and expresses a desire for this reflexivity in performance as a reminder to the audience that “this story is being mediated; that what is being presented is not simple truth” (62). He argues that while many verbatim theatre performances (in London specifically) are “worryingly un-reflexive” (67) in *Gross Indecency* Kaufman encourages his audience to think, not only about the content, but about how all information is shaped and delivered for a specific purpose.

Bottoms is particularly critical of David Hare and what he perceives to be his “masculine rhetoric” that “casually obscures the fact that realism and reality are not the same thing, and that un-mediated access to ‘the real’ is not something the theatre can ever honestly provide” (57). As a point of contrast, Duggan argues that it is reflexivity which makes “a claim for the work’s authenticity” (150), specifically in relation to *Others*. He suggests that the reflexivity in the opening moments of the play, when the performers explicitly discuss how some of the material was collected, enhances the perceived reality of the spoken text. This contrasts Bottoms who perceives the same technique emphasises the texts inherent theatricality.

Bottom’s critique of verbatim theatre assumes that all playwrights operate under the assumption that their work is providing audiences with greater access to ‘the truth’ and advocates reflexivity as a cure for the problem of verbatim theatre (61). Young supports this position, suggesting that even though notions of truth and authenticity “have been problematized in poststructuralist thinking”, artists and audiences “remain heavily invested in notions of truth” (72). Young suggests this is particularly evident in British verbatim and tribunal plays which “eschew all touches of theatricality, emphasizing above all the faithful representation of the words, vocal inflections and physical gestures of their interviewee-characters” (73). This view is reflected in Barnett’s ‘The Poverty of Verbatim Theatre’, where he argues that the

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

“wonderful riches of imaginative theatre production are rejected, or perhaps simply ignored, in the name of reproducing ‘the truth’” (19). Again there is a prevailing assumption that all artists universally approach verbatim theatre as a vehicle to truth, or with a rhetoric of “meticulousness” (Frieze 153). Young does acknowledge that some playwrights “often informed by feminist and queer theory...endeavour to interrogate and subvert strategies of documentation...thereby destabilising notions of truth and reality” (73), and like Bottoms he names Moisés Kaufman as an exemplar of this approach.

In contrast to the reflexivity advocated by Bottoms, Botham contends that the verbatim theatre process inherently promotes an “intersubjective version of the truth” (*From Deconstruction to Reconstruction* 307). She argues that while “a greater degree of reflexivity might improve verbatim drama’s ethical/political aspirations” (316) one of the form’s strengths is its inclusion of both information (through verbatim material) and deliberation (through the artistic voice of the playwright), without “relinquishing its artistic character” (317). It is precisely verbatim theatre’s potential lack of deconstruction that positions it as a form which promotes intersubjectivity through its emphasis on the diverse experiences of a community or event. This perspective positions reflexivity as an inherent feature of verbatim theatre, rather than a convention or strategy that could be applied to the form. This position is also explored by Lipovetsky and Beumers in their analysis of documentary trends in post-soviet Russian theatre. They argue that the verbatim method, through its engagement with diverse individuals within communities, actually “evade[s] any search for meta-narratives of ‘Truth’” emphasising instead “the representations of small and concrete ‘truths’ of separate social groups and subcultures” (304). The very process of verbatim theatre engages with diverse expressions of experience and identity therefore reflexively questioning the very notion of ‘truth’.

### **2.4.3. Authenticity in performance**

Stuart Fisher is at the forefront of the second perspective within the academic field. Her alignment of verbatim theatre with testimonial theatre instead of documentary is a key differentiation that frames her engagement with the theme of ‘truth’. Stuart Fisher argues that the intention to tell a community’s story (as opposed to using

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

elements of their story as research for a separate narrative) “engages the writer in an ethical contract with those offering up their life experiences” and that these subjects “should have some agency within the process” (*That’s Who I’d be* 197). Rather than making claims to ‘truth’, Stuart Fisher suggests verbatim theatre conducted in this way shares “subjective encounter[s] with an event or a situation” (197) in order to authentically tell stories of “personal perspectives and life experiences” (197). Rather than equating authenticity with “standard conceptions of truth” (as she suggests Hare does in his introduction to Soan’s *Talking to Terrorists* (2005)) we should instead “consider a more existentially nuanced articulation of truth grasped as ‘authenticity’” (*Trauma, Authenticity* 112). Using Martin Heidegger’s account of being-towards death, Stuart Fisher suggests that authenticity is not “factual veracity”, but instead “fidelity to the very conditions of our own existence” (112). This dramaturgy that “is less concerned with factual truth and instead embraces the poetic and the metaphoric” (115) as well as collaboration with and commitment to a community, enables a greater authenticity in the performance of lived experiences.

This position is echoed by Waters, a British playwright who argues that the “genuflection to journalism” (140) evident in much British verbatim theatre is merely observation, that does little to investigate or explore events and experiences. Waters critiques what he perceives to be a prevalent approach by artists to allow stories to speak for themselves as this “merely reveals the surface of actuality and rarely penetrates into the secret recesses of experience” (139). He argues that the stereotype of verbatim theatre; relatively unedited verbatim monologues delivered by actors seated in a line, is a “refusal of aesthetics” (140) and by extension a refusal to explore lived experiences authentically. Instead, Waters and Stuart Fisher suggest poetic and metaphoric shaping of verbatim material can provide closer authenticity to lived experience than a word-for-word dramaturgy. This poetic or metaphoric shaping of material *is* a reflexive intervention that emphasises “the process of writing... [and] highlights the issue of the relationship between representation and reality” (Young 75) and prevents the work from positioning itself as truth (86). Young suggests that failing to theatricalise verbatim material manipulates audiences into receiving the work as fact and may result in works that “collude with the mechanisms of injustice which they seek to expose” (86).

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Stuart Fisher discusses her perceived limits of verbatim theatre and states that “the verbatim playwright’s pursuance of factual truth and the fidelity to the word for word interview ultimately prescribes a truth of verbatim theatre where facts legitimate what it means to speak of the truth” (*Trauma, Authenticity* 113). She later states that playwrights are trapped by the methodology of the form because she sees their role as a promise to “tell the truth and to re-iterate only what they were told” (118). In one article from 2011 (*That’s Who I’d be If I Could Sing*) Stuart Fisher concludes that while verbatim theatre promises “a totalised, objective truth...testimonial theatre could better be understood as a leap of faith” (122). In another article the same year (*Trauma, Authenticity*) she embraces this alignment between verbatim theatre and testimony. She argues that “generating a ‘technical’ or even a ‘factual’ truth is not necessarily the function of verbatim theatre, nor should the question of truth be expected to form the grounds of its critique” (196). She explains this by suggesting that rather than aligning verbatim theatre with documentary theatre, which is based on documents that exist prior to a creative process, “we should understand the verbatim text more in terms of testimony rather than documentary” (196), as testimony is understood as subjective and contextual, thereby removing the question of whether the form manipulates ‘truth’. I agree that the question of ‘truth’ should not form the ground of verbatim theatre’s critique, and will now demonstrate how this position is reflected in an Australian context where verbatim theatre is consistently discussed within a framework of authenticity and artistry instead of truth and reality.

### **2.4.4. Authenticity, truth and the real in an Australian context**

Summarising the work of Australian playwright and academic Linden Wilkinson, Ackroyd and O’Toole (2010) state “if one can accept that performance is by nature artificial, one can perhaps allow for degrees of authenticity. Performance creates fiction to depict reality” (50). The practice of dramatization/fictionalisation is a theme that emerges in the academic field when authors embrace the idea that the verbatim theatre process is a creative and subjective one. Ackroyd and O’Toole consider that “fictionalisation is not the same as a retreat from authenticity. It can enhance the truthfulness of the research as well as the experience of the audiences”

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

(64). Duggan discusses the fictionalisation in terms of “authenticity effects” and defines this as a work “not attending to any sense of factual veracity but might be presenting something which speaks to the conditions of human existence” (150). In my interview with Alana Valentine she discussed the voice of the playwright in relation to verbatim theatre, and that often there is a perception that verbatim theatre artists “find” stories and re-tell them, as though they are “technological reapers” (*Personal Interview* 10) with no artistry to their work. Valentine expressed that just as Arthur Miller and Caryl Churchill have a unique voice as playwrights, so do verbatim theatre artists. She argues “I have to believe that my way of relating to someone is unique” and that through the artistry of this interaction material is creatively generated (10).

On the theme of authenticity Valentine shifts the notion away from the idea of authentically representing reality and instead suggests that the authenticity relates to the language of a community in performance; to the rhythm and patterns of speech that are specific to an individual or community. The authenticity of the language connects the audience to the characters, and is a strategy she uses to “knock on your heart and make you feel this” (11). This is reflective of Paget’s 2008 discussion of verbatim theatre and his suggestion that it focuses on “the sinewy language that often emerges from testimony” (132). Anderson and Wilkinson explain that people’s voices and their vernacular are linked to place, and texts resulting from these voices “inspire relatedness and identity” (157). This relatedness is what Anderson and Wilkinson and fellow Australian academic David Watt propose lend verbatim theatre credibility and authenticity, not the prescriptive recounting of transcribed verbatim or signposting of sources.

Australian playwright Damien Millar, author of *The Modern International Dead* (2008) explains the authenticity of his work in terms of actuality; “all of these events happened. But it is a play and should not be mistaken for a work of history or objective journalism” (i). Valentine completely dismisses the assumption that verbatim theatre is about objectivity or truth, “the reason I so passionately dismiss it is it kind of also refutes the work that you as an artist do” (*Personal Interview* 11). She is not merely typing up and rearranging ‘truth’, “it’s a creative process” (11). Australian playwright Champion Decent describes this creative process as a synthesis

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

between conceiving ideas, collecting material and collating stories (6). Each of these playwrights acknowledge that their works are built on recognisable material, whether that be the language, lexicon, event or experience, however they work from the position that they are artists and the work they create is theatrical and fictional. In this way they demonstrate the second perspective I outlined on page 14 that emphasises artistic practice.

German theorist and practitioner Daniel Schulze problematises the idealism associated with authenticity. He argues that regardless of how poetic license is used in the shaping of a dramatic work, if that work claims ties to people, events or experiences beyond the world of the play then “[t]he implicit contract of fiction subscribed to by any theatregoer is consciously violated and audiences are left in a world of possible authenticity” (Schulze 2). This world of possibility is problematic, as even though theatregoers may “have abolished truth with a capital ‘T’...audiences have demanded authenticity and real, individual experience” (Schulze 8). Framing verbatim theatre within a discourse of authenticity, albeit artistically rendered authenticity, may imply that this quality is “absolute or inherent” (8). Rather than discussing a form of theatre in totalising terms, Schulze suggests that:

...meaning and truth are created on an individual level. The truth of a play...is constructed in the moment of aesthetic reception by the individual and thus authentic but only in passing. [Framed in this way, theatre] knows and serves an audience member’s hunger for authentic experience. (8)

I align my own working practices with this emphasis on artistry and authenticity, agreeing with Stuart Fisher that the verbatim theatre process begins with the intent of performance, rather than using documents and material that exist outside the field of theatre. Chou and Bleiker describe this approach as enabling “audiences to see reality anew” (569), to place the individual reality of experience into the “realm of fiction” (569). My research focuses primarily on the practice of creating verbatim theatre and therefore extends and emphasises the subjectively artistic nature of verbatim theatre.

I would like to conclude this section by acknowledging Elizabeth Kuti’s analysis of Hare’s *Stuff Happens* (2005). This analysis is an example of scholarly engagement

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

with verbatim theatre that moves beyond the debate over truth and instead engages with and analyses the content of the play. Using the conventions of classical tragedy as her critical lens, Kuti argues that *Stuff Happens* could be considered a contemporary tragedy, where “the minutiae of hamartia accumulate to lead inexorably towards the catastrophe of war” (465). Kuti describes hamartia as the “glitch, the seemingly small or at least comprehensible moment of personal error, confusion, or seemingly minor moral mistake” (465) and aligns this convention of tragedy to the representation Hare makes of contemporary politics. Kuti’s analysis is insightful and challenges the reader to consider the narrative of the play as a piece of fiction; “what the scene captures is not historical truth per se – how could it? This is a play, necessarily selective in what it can show” (465). She understands that the play has employed dramatic devices, and critiques this work alongside Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and Kane’s *Blasted* (1995). Kuti champions all three plays for showing audiences “the narrowness of the gap between life changing decisions” (469). Kuti’s is a refreshing and unique engagement with a verbatim work that indicates the rich theoretical commentary that is possible when the question of truth is not the sole bedrock of verbatim theatre’s critique.

### **2.5. Methods of verbatim theatre practice**

Two questions underpinning my research, which link to the key research questions on page 2, are: a) what are the explicit methods of practice and artistic processes of the playwright and the people they collaborate with in the process of creating a piece of verbatim theatre? And b) how do theatrical, social, ethical and political frameworks influence, guide or problematise their practice? Just as there is great diversity in the definition of verbatim theatre there is also great diversity in how verbatim theatre is created. Wake emphasises that “though their processes may differ, verbatim playwrights agree that the process of *making* a verbatim play is as important as *performing* it” (*Towards a Working Definition* 5). My research explicitly focuses on the process of making, and in this section I review the documentation within the academic field of other artists’ methods of practice and creative processes. These processes range from working (predominantly) individually in the playwriting process, for example Alana Valentine and Robin Soans, or those who engage in a collaborative devising process, such as Moisés

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project and Nicolas Kent and David Hare with Tricycle Theatre. I begin with an overview of two prominent verbatim theatre playwright's methods of practice as discussed in the broader academic field: Moisés Kaufman and David Hare. I then focus explicitly on three Australian artists who work as the sole playwright in their verbatim theatre process: Alana Valentine, Ros Horin, and Linden Wilkinson. While I engaged in collaborative creative development workshops throughout the initial stages of devising *bald heads & blue stars* I then transitioned into individual playwriting practice, which is why I have chosen to focus on these playwrights. I conclude with an overview of how the practice of interviewing is positioned and explored in the academic field, crucially highlighting the need for explicit research focused on this intrinsic practice.

### **2.5.1. Methods of Practice: Kaufman and Hare**

Moisés Kaufman has written self-reflectively on his methods and processes of practice, primarily through “Into the West: An Exploration in Form” (2000) and “Anatomy of an Experiment” (2010) both for *American Theatre Magazine*. Kaufman outlines in these articles his collaborative ensemble approach with the Tectonic Theatre Project (based in New York City) specifically in relation to *The Laramie Project* (2000). This is a provocative and political work that explores the violent bashing and subsequent death of young gay man Matthew Shephard in Laramie, Wyoming and the highly publicised trial that followed. Kaufman was intrigued by the context of this horrific event and was interested in the process of travelling to the community of Laramie, talking to people and returning with ideas to create a play. For most of the Tectonic Theatre company this was the first time they had ever conducted interviews of this nature (Kaufman *Into the West* 18). On returning to New York the ensemble participated in three weeks of workshops to explore the 80+ interviews they had conducted. Their tasks included transcribing the audio recordings, selecting what they perceived to be the most relevant material, and performing these selections to the ensemble for further development (18). Each member of the ensemble would re-tell a story from one of their own interviews and they would “present the material, not just read it” (18), leading to what Kaufman expresses as the first stage of theatrical devising in their process. Performers used costumes and props in these presentations and made specific acting choices in their

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

re-telling to the ensemble. Kaufman and the ensemble returned to Laramie repeatedly, accruing five visits across a 12 month period in order to “know more, listen more intently, [and] follow these people over time’ (18). After each visit the ensemble would participate in creative development workshops, and it was during this process that Kaufman named his unique devising process; “Moment Work” (Brown 51). Rich Brown explores this technique in “Moisés Kaufman: The Copulation of Form and Content”.

Brown’s article investigates Kaufman’s artistic practice, and more specifically, the devising methods used by Kaufman and Tectonic. Brown describes the practice of Moment Work; collaborators develop moments - short sequences of performance that vary in length but can include text, movement, lighting and costume - and then present these to their colleagues in a workshop setting for exploration. These short performance moments sometimes become stimulus for further development, although it is the process of engaging with each idea to see what it may yield in a collaborative space that is valued by the company. A moment “can be as simple as a single gesture or breath or as complex as an entire scene” (Brown 51). Kaufman’s theory behind Moment Work is that all elements of performance should be considered equal, rather than what he refers to as the traditional practice of privileging the text. Kaufman compares his approach, which he articulates as “horizontal theatre”, to that of vertical theatre “where text serves as the foundation upon which all other elements are added in order to illuminate the meaning of the dominant word” (Brown 53). Moment Work embraces a horizontal approach to theatre in order to collaboratively “write performance rather than to write text” (Brown 55), and within this framework of devising, question “how does content dictate form and how does form dictate content?” (Brown 57). Kaufman describes form and content as a binary, and the experimentation with unique combinations and coupling of the two drives Kaufman and Tectonic’s theatrical investigations.

Kaufman’s development and articulation of Moment Work is a significant contribution to the field that enables insight to an element of his methods of practice. Using this method in creative development generated for the collaborators a feeling of responsibility for the Laramie community. They “had become personally invested in the people they had interviewed” (*In to the West* 18) and would advocate

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

passionately for them and their stories throughout the devising process. Kaufman alludes to the creative influence the ensemble members had on the stories that were included in the performance, reflecting that some of the questions they asked of the community “didn’t encourage fruitful discussions” (*Anatomy of an Experiment* 27) and that the ensemble changed their approach in order to generate what they perceived to be more engaging narratives. His reflections indicate an awareness that the interview context is a mutually creative space, however does not further extrapolate on the practices and strategies used by the ensemble.

The ensemble approach used by Kaufman and Tectonic is also evident in the work of UK playwright David Hare. Bella Merlin, an actor involved in the creative development of Hare’s *The Permanent Way* (2003) articulates that Hare’s method of practice involved the whole company of actors (who they referred to as actor-researchers) conducting interviews who then “fed back” the stories to Hare as the playwright (who didn’t conduct interviews). They served as “a creative filter for that which we deemed sufficiently theatrical or dramatically provocative...and our bodies were the primary resources through which those creative choices were communicated” (41). Merlin’s description of practice contains parallels with Kaufman’s emphasis on “writ[ing] performance” (Brown 55) as both processes embrace a horizontal approach to devising that includes broad elements of performance and not only the verbatim text. Hare then used this filtered and dramatic performance material as the stimulus to write his play.

Hare has received a lot of critical attention, however not generally in relation to his methods of practice. He is cited as being responsible for the phrase “factual theatre” (Duggan 150), that his plays are a utilitarian approach to “ventilate democracy” (Waters 138) and that his reflections on verbatim have helped others better understand their own practice (Gallagher et al. 25). He passionately argues against verbatim theatre being compared to journalism: “[t]he mistake is to imagine that simply because it can incorporate real life material, so it can be judged by similar criteria” (qtd. in Luckhurst 210). This is a criticism frequently levelled at Hare. Luckhurst argues that “certain plays present as very dubious in their claims for a rigorous working process” and that Hare (in relation specifically to *Stuff Happens* (2004)) “is remarkably unclear about the demarcation between what he may have

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

read or seen in the media and what he has invented” (212). It is evident here how critical engagement with verbatim theatre and verbatim playwrights is influenced by the critic’s personal position in the debate over truth, authenticity and reflexivity.

*The Cambridge Companion to David Hare* (2015) is an extensive analysis of Hare’s practice and a pivotal contribution to understanding his process of collaborating and writing. The book weaves Hare’s voice as artist with that of each contributing author’s research, resulting in the naming and deconstruction of various practices. A key method of practice described by Cathy Turner in her chapter “Hare in Collaboration” is “paraphrase plus” (119). This practice describes one of the processes between the interview and the writing. Rather than position the writer’s role in a verbatim process as paraphrasing the stories and experiences of a community, “paraphrase plus” acknowledges that “in order to become its own creative work, a ‘verbatim’ play must and invariably will go beyond” (119) reproducing the dialogue of another to “*pro-duce*” a dialogue that is mutual in its development. Turner suggests that “to think of the dialogue as mutual is to pay respect to your dialogue partner as a collaborator, with whom new meanings can be created” (119). In Chapter Five I build on this exploration of co-authoring stories in mutual collaboration.

### **2.5.2. Australian playwright’s methods of practice: Valentine, Wilkinson and Horin**

This section focuses on three playwrights whose practices and context parallel my own. Valentine is one of Australia’s most experienced and prolific playwrights, particularly in the field of verbatim theatre, with over 10 verbatim based works to her name. She has been interviewed by journalists and media writers, has written articles and delivered lectures on her practice, however there is minimal scholarly engagement with her process and work. This overview of Valentine’s methods of practice is based on non-academic material and an interview I conducted with Valentine in 2012 as part of my Master of Arts research. Her most recognised verbatim works are *Run Rabbit Run* (2004) and *Parramatta Girls* (2007) (Cantrell *Acting in Documentary Theatre* 8). Other works include *Grounded* (2012), *Head Full of Love* (2010), *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* (2009), *Eyes to the Floor* (2009), *Comin Home Soon* (2012) and *Watermark* (2008). Each of these plays involved lengthy

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

research periods as Valentine immersed herself in a community for each story. Community Immersion involves spending time in and with a community (Peters *Listening to Story* 38) and is a practice I further analyse and define in Chapter Five. Community Immersion for *Comin Home Soon* (2012) began as a request to conduct writing workshops with the Indigenous inmates at Goulburn Correctional Centre. Valentine worked with the inmates to write stories about their experiences, as well as speaking with children of incarcerated parents and the correctional centre officers (qtd. in Goulburn Regional Art Gallery 7). This immersion within a community involves responsibility and sensitivity. Valentine advises “people are going to trust you with their feelings and their lives so be worthy of their trust” (*The Tune of the Spoken Voice* 16). Building relationships and maintaining communication with the community of storytellers is integral to Valentine’s methods of practice.

In our interview in 2012 Valentine described her interest in verbatim theatre as a desire to focus on the story of a community and the peculiarities of their speech. This intent informed her first verbatim play *Run Rabbit Run* in 2004. Her articulation aligns with Paget’s 2008 definition of verbatim theatre, as it focuses on language, local history and community experiences (132). She describes a continuum of verbatim theatre from pure verbatim, where very little has been changed from the interview transcript, through to massaged verbatim, where the final product has been “inspired” by the interviews. Despite this fluid approach to the form she expresses that it should always adhere to three key values; it should be drawn from real life, have a “felicity to the kinds of language that’s used” (*Personal Interview* 2) and maintain some relationship with the community. Importantly, the form “begins to emerge as you work” (3), it is an organic process where the form is evident in the content.

This premise is similar to Kaufman’s emphasis on the binary of form and content. Valentine discussed her process of informed consent with the people she interviews, and how she explains her intent of creating a play from the stories told. This process is sometimes problematic as there is a “huge disparity between what people might understand you’re trying to do and what you’re doing” (4). The understanding is dependent on knowing what theatre is, and for Valentine “a lot of the people I interview and a lot of the people whose stories I’m passionate about putting on stage

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

haven't possibly been to a lot of theatre" (4). For this reason Valentine explains the importance of taking the community with you, of preparing them for what they might experience. In the interview process Valentine doesn't have one stock question that she always asks, however always gravitates towards asking "people how they get through their lives...fairly probing philosophical questions" (8). Valentine prepares a list of questions but admits "you do just get caught up in being engaged...you prepare so that you can let go of that preparation" (9). The "fantastic" moments in an interview occur when you've let a person tell you all of their known stories and then you get them sharing things they "haven't said before and they're in the moment...they're actually experiencing it as they're saying it, it's not prepared" (12). These moments provide the most rich and dramatic material for performance as the storyteller has shifted from an all knowing position to that of "not quite knowing" (12). Valentine's articulation of methods of practice is particularly relevant to my research, as she is working from an Australian context and her practice includes collaboration with community coupled with individual playwriting.

These are also features of Linden Wilkinson's playwriting practice. Wilkinson's chapter "A Day in December" (2010) is a detailed reflection on her experience of writing a verbatim play by the same name which explores a deadly train accident near the Blue Mountains in 1999. She describes the evolutions the play went through throughout creative development and credits the interest the project generated as being "directly attributed to the authentic voice of its content" (123). Wilkinson was intrigued by the event as she perceived there was "something to solve, something to understand" (125), and felt that verbatim theatre was the form to achieve these goals. After advertising the project in the *Blue Mountains Gazette*, six storytellers volunteered to be involved and Wilkinson invited four others connected to the incident to be interviewed. She describes that even though the community of storytellers was small, their stories were "so gripping" (125) she didn't feel the need to extend the group. While she later wrestled with the lack of diversity among the storytellers, she suggests forcing diversity can have a disappointing outcome as when "participants hadn't come forward voluntarily, they didn't have a story to tell. Their narratives were no more than an interview, whose content has been dictated by my questions" (125).

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Wilkinson's transcription process included every "nuance of language and every emotional colouration" and these "hesitations, repetitions, laughter and tears all became clues for actors in performance" (126). She feels that these inclusions during transcription enabled the accessibility and authenticity of the voices and stories in the play. While she had expected the event of the train crash to be "rich in crisis potential...[,] where I expected the drama to be was not where I found it" (127). Wilkinson was lured by a traditional three act structure and form, and the challenge of writing a play that "could move forward with a collective momentum" (129) despite being inspired by individual accounts. Her central challenge was to find "a way to translate" the stories that had been "told by multiple voices, into compelling drama" (129), and create relationships and interaction in the performance that did not occur in the event itself. In her playwriting practice Wilkinson looked for "common threads in the narratives" (129) and found links between stories within these threads that either spoke to the chronology of events or provided "conflicting reports of the same event" (130). Dramatic tension was therefore created through the differing experiences.

Wilkinson challenges that "if one can accept that performance is already artificial, can one allow for degrees of authenticity?" (141). While the process of writing stories into performance may remove the "rhythms of recall and monologue... does that dilute its veracity?" (142). All decisions involved in the writing process "involve a playwright's bias" (142), however Wilkinson is adamant that it is possible to "create a performed work that [meets] the challenges to authenticity inherent in the verbatim theatre form, without sacrificing the works integrity as a piece of theatre" (144). Consciously balancing the tension between authenticity and artistry is an inherent feature of both Valentine and Wilkinson's verbatim theatre practice and a phenomena I also experienced in the creative development of *bald heads & blue stars*.

In a similar approach to Brown's analysis of Kaufman's methods of practice, Wake provides commentary on Ros Horin's methods and dramaturgy in creating *Through the Wire* (2004). This is a verbatim play that Wake describes as one of the "most important" (*To Witness Mimesis* 102) verbatim works to explore the theme of asylum seekers in Australian theatre, despite suffering from "benign neglect in academic

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

circles” (103). By focusing on one artist and one project Wake has begun to bridge the gap between a theoretical discussion of potential practices and their impacts, to an explicit articulation of example practices. Wake provides a comprehensive summary of scholarship pertaining to theatre that focuses on traumatic experiences, explaining that “the scholarship on these plays tends to focus on three areas – production, representation and reception” (104), with particular focus on the risk of re-traumatisation within the playwriting process. The very act of interviewing people about a traumatic experience (specifically experiences relating to refugees and asylum seekers) may “inadvertently re-injure” them, either because “they have never told their story or because they have told it too many times” (104). Beyond the interview there are concerns over agency, “double silencing” (where a person and their story may not be included in the final performance) and the implications of casting the storytellers in the performance itself (104). These concerns and the verbatim theatre process in general is framed in the academic field within either a negative critique of its impact on the community of storytellers, or, when discussed for its political potential, in a more favourable way as a process that validates and empowers “voice and visibility” (105). Wake acknowledges this tension in her analysis of Horin’s interviewing practice, describing it as potentially problematic.

Horin asserts that she was “forensic”; sceptical of the storytellers’ status as genuine refugees and describes critiquing and questioning their experience (114). Wake warns that this “effort to be accurate” may be perceived as aggressive (114). She describes Horin’s decision to only interview four refugees and therefore only create four characters as a “redeeming feature” of practice, as this limits the possibility of double silencing as all storytellers are represented in the final performance.

Controversially, Horin invited the four refugees to audition for their characters in the play however only cast one (115). The potential impact of this practice is extensive and not only affects the refugees who were deemed unworthy to portray themselves, but as Wake explains, it also affected the actors who were cast, who didn’t realise until later that they were chosen instead of the person whose stories they were telling. The impact of this practice is further problematised, as the refugee who was cast as himself found the process of revealing every detail of his life and revisiting certain experiences quite challenging (116). It is evident from Wake’s analysis of Horin’s process that the ethics of verbatim theatre practice is complex and magnified when

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

the content of the experiences is explicitly traumatic. She summarises that “testimonial theatre is an ethically risky proposition, rife with potential for pain and exploitation” (117). However, it is the same process and methods of practice that Wake suggests renders verbatim theatre “politically efficacious” (117). It connects the micro level of individual experiences to a macro level of social politics, it enables audiences to identify with diverse cultural identities and community experiences. This identification can lead to political action, or more specifically “political mimesis” (117 – 118). Does the potential for connection and social change outweigh the potential for pain? To begin answering this question more research is required that moves from a discussion of the *potential* impact of creative practice towards an understanding of the *actual* impact for a community of storytellers.

### **2.5.3. Methods of practice: The interview**

Despite practitioners embracing “a broader set of methodologies informed by, for example, feminist and postcolonial discourses, and shaped by new technologies and reconfigured political priorities” (Megson 530), the practice of interviewing within the verbatim process has remained integral. It is more than a “prevalent research tool” (Luckhurst 212), it is a *creative* practice and one of the first moments of performance in a verbatim theatre process. The methods of practice used by artists in a verbatim theatre interview, whilst attracting ethical criticism about their potential impact, have not been researched and documented within the current literary field in an explicit way. Stuart Fisher mentions in a footnote that “more work should be done to trace the relationship between the site of the verbatim interview and the structure and content of the narratives that are told” (*That’s Who I’d Be* 199). She suggests that in her own practice it was apparent that the context and location of the verbatim interview informed the way in which the participants told their stories, and she describes the interview as a “dialogic encounter” (198). The research that Stuart Fisher advocates was the focus of my Master’s research in 2012 where I interviewed three Australian playwrights about their interviewing practices when creating verbatim theatre. One of my key findings was the articulation of Listening for Aesthetics (*Listening to Story* 11).

Extending on Stuart and Cash’s definition of listening for comprehension and listening for empathy (21), I outline a listening theory specific to verbatim theatre.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Drawing on the work of oral historian Jacquelyn Hall, researchers Deirdre Heddon and Della Pollock, and the experiences described by the three playwrights interviewed I coined the term Listening for Aesthetics. Listening for Aesthetics means:

paying attention to the energy and dramatic action of a participant's story, responding in an improvised manner to these stories, applying strategies to help generate story and constantly listening between the realms of the actualised context and the creative possibilities. (53)

These in-the-moment and improvised skills that are integrated within the notion of Listening for Aesthetics allow the verbatim playwright and their interviewee to co-author and generate performance related material. Based on the practice of this research with *bald heads & blue stars* I have extended the concept of Listening for Aesthetics in Chapter Five.

The verbatim interview is problematised as a space of potential. Leffler argues that the verbatim interview could be a disempowering experience for the storyteller. Citing Julie Salverson (Canadian theatre artist working with documentary and verbatim forms), he argues that the idea that a theatre form might demand someone to "tell me your story" has been misrepresented as a therapeutic dramaturgy. Instead, it could be reminiscent of a Christian discourse of confession (348), particularly if the promotion of the need to tell a story "becomes an imperative from without rather than a self-directed action" (350). This discourse of confession is designed to admit a perceived "wrongness" about one's character or behaviour (351) and is therefore a negative positioning of the storyteller. He argues that the verbatim interview establishes the framework for a self-deprecating discourse, disempowering the storyteller. Playwright Robin Soans (qtd. in Jeffers) refutes this view of the playwright as a source of disempowerment, stating that "people are not only willing, they're absolutely desperate to talk" (7), and argues that when people know their words may be used in performance they are eager to engage in the process. A further ethical concern about the practice of interviewing is the possibility that storytellers might be used as "a means to an end, rather than ends in themselves" (Dolan *The Laramie Project* 126). My approach to the interview is that it is acknowledged as a

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

place of performance through informed consent with the community of storytellers. My artistic agenda is made transparent from the beginning of the process, and all storytellers are volunteers. An integral component to my research is exploring the impact involvement in the interview has on the community of storytellers, and this is explored further in Section 2.7 of the Literature Review and in Chapter Five.

### **2.6. Verbatim theatre conventions and form**

Integral to my creative process was an immersion in the literary field of Australian verbatim theatre in order to learn from and be inspired by the work of other writers. “Usually, controversy rages around content issues, with the form itself dragged into public attention as a by-product” (Paget *Documentary Drama* 307). In particular I am interested in how Australian artists approach the form of verbatim and the kinds of conventions they use when working with and structuring verbatim material. This section reviews the current academic literature relating to the various dramaturgical conventions of verbatim theatre before focusing specifically on works from an Australian context. I demonstrate that there is a significant gap in the field of dramaturgical analysis and begin contributing to this gap through an analysis of the conventions used in three of the Australian plays I read in preparation for my own playwriting process. These plays are Alana Valentine’s *Parramatta Girls* (2007), Champion Decent’s *Embers* (2008) and David Burton’s *April’s Fool* (2010). As I will demonstrate throughout this section, despite some articulation of verbatim theatre conventions within the academic field, there is minimal discussion on the function of these conventions in shaping the dramatic action of a play. My exploration of the aforementioned plays serves as a foundational contribution to this field of analysis in an Australian context.

Within the field there are a myriad of terms used to describe how verbatim material is written into performance. These include “compression” and “shaping” (Luckhurst 207), “editing” and “juxtaposing” (Bottoms 59), “framing” (Jeffers 14) and describing the verbatim as being “distilled” (Anderson and Wilkinson 154). Each of these terms conveys a sense of how a writer may use verbatim material. They predominantly focus on the theme of reduction and the process of minimalizing verbatim material into a cohesive narrative. Juxtaposing and framing convey greater insight into the strategies used by writers and infer a process of active decision

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

making about the intentions of these dramaturgical approaches. While there are some notable exceptions, such as the article previously discussed by Kuti which analyses themes and narrative content, when the *form* of a verbatim work is discussed in the literature it is in relation to its conventions. The most commonly cited convention and one often referred to as the form's hallmark is "direct address" (Jeffers 3; Duggan 152; Stuart Fisher *Trauma, Authenticity* 116; Paget *New Documentarism on Stage* 137).

Further conventions include the incorporation of monologues (Watt 194), restaging the interview (193), narration, flashbacks (Chou and Bleiker 565), "scarce movement and functional design" (Botham *From Deconstruction to Reconstruction* 315), and a distinctly presentational rhetoric (Young 82). Young extends the discussion to a reflection on the language conventions of verbatim theatre and summarises that it is "often fragmentary, stumbling and repetitious" (81). Botham states that verbatim theatre often tells rather than shows and suggests that this is one of the form's limitations, leading it to be regarded as negatively "un-theatrical" (*From Deconstruction to Reconstruction* 311). These conventions are generally referenced as strict requirements rather than flexible possibilities. For example, Soans describes the "quintessence of verbatim theatre" as "a group of actors sitting on chairs, or cardboard boxes or a sofa, talking to the audience, simply telling stories" (qtd. in Hammond and Steward 21). Similarly, Luckhurst states that in its "purest" sense verbatim theatre "is understood as a theatre whose practitioners, if called to account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue" (201) and that "verbatim theatre is performed with actors in a line before the audience" (214). This is a restricted view of verbatim's performance conventions as I will demonstrate through the forthcoming analysis of plays.

There is a connection between the conventions of a text and the embodiment and performance of those conventions in performance. Jeffers describes this as "acting conventions" (3), discussing how actors need to learn the art of performing verbatim specific conventions such as direct address and "acknowledg[ing] audience reactions" (3). The conventions of verbatim theatre require "more flexible expectations of actors. Actors need to master direct address techniques and also effect rapid transformation of time, place and character of the kind unknown and

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

unnecessary to naturalistic theatre” (*New Documentarism on Stage* 137). Paget highlights the link between the conventions of a text and the embodiment and performance of those conventions on stage. I suggest that developing a deeper understanding of the conventions of a form will also influence and broaden the practice of rehearsing, performing and teaching verbatim theatre, as highlighted here by both Paget and Jeffers.

Ackroyd and O’Toole explore a variety of conventions and aesthetics in their work *Performing Research: Tensions, Triumphs and Trade-offs of ethnodrama* (2010). They frame their investigation within the field of ethnodrama and performance as research, although many of the contributors whose work they summarise are working explicitly within verbatim theatre. They articulate the following conventions of verbatim theatre: the amalgamation of stories and people to create “composite characters”; using fictitious dialogue to stitch together verbatim material (62); the use of mise-en-scene (64), “parallel storytelling, moments of stillness and comic timing” (70). Significantly, Ackroyd and O’Toole acknowledge that it is more than the dialogue and language that goes through a “dramatic transformation”; the way the writer chooses to represent locations (63) and intercut dialogue and action in order to convey their narrative (65), are also dramaturgical conventions that can be analysed in a verbatim work. Rather than creating characters who develop throughout the play, a convention of verbatim theatre is to have moment specific characterisations (72) with the incorporation of composite characters to make thematic links to “broader truths” (72).

These broader truths, or what Soans describes as a “unifying premise” (qtd. in Hammond and Steward 34), contribute to the emotional arc of the text and Jeffers suggests that verbatim playwrights look for this overarching emotional structure “rather than the linear narrative of cause and effects which creates the classic dramatic arc” (4). Soans argues that verbatim plays “should still be built around a narrative”, and there still needs to be “dramatic conflict” and characters who “undertake journeys of discovery of some kind” (qtd. in Hammond and Steward 26). Although he qualifies that these journeys may take place “while the character is sat in a chair, talking” (26). Significantly the discussion on structure and narrative aligns with an episodic approach to plot and character development, with the more

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

traditional linear arc in a verbatim work associated with emotion and mood. The narrative structure of each of the Australian plays discussed further in this section demonstrate a balance between both linear narrative and emotional arc. All three plays are event based (rather than topic based), and this enables a mirroring or organic reproduction of the timeline of the event within the dramatic structure.

Duggan, Wake and Bottoms move beyond merely naming conventions of verbatim theatre to explore the way they function within a performance. Duggan designates certain conventions the title “authenticity effects” (147) which are strategies that convey information about the creation of the play and its connection to the lives of people beyond the performance. Authenticity effects include stating within the dialogue a process of interviewing a community of storytellers, introducing characters by recognisable names and maintaining the fragmentary qualities of speech. How a writer uses these authenticity effects can convey the degree to which the play mimetically represents a story or explores an experience as something that happened, without positioning that story and experience within the framework of a universal truth. Contributing to this discussion on representation in verbatim performance, Wake proposes that performance which depicts actuality falls within the “realist” category, whether that be “diegetic realism” through a staging of the interview context, “mimetic realism”, moments of re-enactment designed to mimetically represent the actual experience, or a combination of the two (*To Witness Mimesis* 106). She suggests the convention of theatricalising stories renders them as more real, and references a segment of Ros Horin’s *Through the Wire* (2004) where characters are speaking over one another in short unfinished sentences. Wake argues that this “less structured, more scattered, and by implication less rehearsed” dramaturgy renders the stories and emotions “more authentic” (110), thus heightening the perceived reality of the narrative and the characters emotions.

Bottoms describes two conventions used by Hare that he associates with highlighting the authenticity of Hare’s work; addressing the audience as David and introducing characters with vocal captioning. Bottoms suggests these conventions are employed to act as “a reminder of the original interview context” (59) and to convey the real status of the character outside the world of the play. Accepting Bottom’s assumption, these conventions would fit into Duggan’s categorization of authenticity effects.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

However, as we know from Merlin's account of Hare's process, it was in fact the actor-researchers who conducted the interviews and not David as Bottom perceives the convention to imply. This example problematises the use of authenticity effects and demonstrates that these can also be manipulated. Hare's second convention, vocal captioning, is a strategy that Bottoms praises, describing it as a "model of reflexivity" (61). Bottoms references Kaufman's *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997) as an excellent exemplar of this convention, as actors in this work enter the stage, pick up a book or newspaper and introduce the source of the story to the audience (which is a convention reminiscent of verbatim theatre's ancestor the Living Newspaper). Bottoms suggests that this reflexive convention demonstrates that the play is "scrupulously researched" (61). As Duggan, Wake and Bottoms here highlight, the conventions and dramaturgical approach of the writer directly influences the degree to which the performance is considered authentic, real or making claims to truth, echoing the discussion from Section 2.4.

Across the literature there is some discussion on how audiences respond to and receive the conventions of verbatim theatre. Wake posits that the convention of re-enacting or theatricalising stories, what she denotes as mimetic realism, enables the audience to more readily identify with the content of the play (*To Witness Mimesis* 106). Soans suggests that audiences "will be willing to accept an unconventional format" and "expect the material to be contentious" (19). In contrast, Hare considers that the public perception of verbatim theatre is "at its worst a touch hectoring and solemn, and overly dependent on direct address" (*David Hare* 6). He perceived that audiences for his 2009 work *The Power of Yes* found it "unusual" due to its overt theatricality. Valentine has also reflected on audience and public perception and reception of verbatim theatre, stating rather comically that:

You may be accused of having little more literary talent than an editor..., patronizingly called an oral historian, some may joke "you didn't really write it". You may also be accused of being on a rather "worthy" jag, you may have the label "political" bandied about but not in a good way since it will be followed with "polemical" and even that hoary-old-

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

chestnut-of-the-imaginatively-bland “didactic”. (*The Tune of the Spoken Voice* 16)

While audience reception of verbatim conventions is beyond the scope of this review and research, each of these writers acknowledges that the form of verbatim theatre has a unique dramaturgical approach that is received differently than other forms of performance.

As this section has demonstrated, there is some articulation of conventions within the field and an emerging discussion about the function of these conventions within the narrative of the play (specifically Duggan’s articulation of authenticity effects and Wake’s alignment with realism) and their reception by audiences. There is minimal academic engagement with the conventions of Australian verbatim works (which disrupt the restricted view of the verbatim form) and how these conventions operate within the play text to shape dramatic action. This may be in part due to the accepted diversity of the form in an Australian context, reflected in the observations of Australian academics such as Anderson and Wilkinson, Wake and Watt, whose discussion of verbatim theatre conventions is broad, diverse and inclusive. This section will now move into an analysis of the conventions used in three Australian verbatim plays and specifically investigates how these conventions shape the dramatic action of each work.

### **2.6.1. Alana Valentine: *Parramatta Girls* (2007)**

Valentine describes her approach to *Parramatta Girls* (2007) as “massaged verbatim” because she “didn’t want to capture their exact voice, I had to capture the spirit, the soul, the way of being in the world that those women were” (qtd. in Oades 59). The play follows the story of eight women who were institutionalised at the Girls Training School in Parramatta; a home where cruel punishments, sexual, mental and emotional abuse were the norm. Valentine interviewed and met with over 35 women, however has used the convention of composite characters in order to amalgamate the stories. Oades explains in “Parramatta Girls: Verbatim Theatre about the forgotten Australians” (2010) there is also one “invented” character based on a story told to Valentine about a young girl who died in the home. This character serves to interconnect with the verbatim composite characters created through the

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

interview process. This reflects Ackroyd and O'Toole's description of fact and fiction being woven together in verbatim works. Structurally the play shifts between past and present, and is "a simple journey: a group of old girls attend a reunion, look around and then go home" (Oades 64). The transitions to these flashbacks and other assorted locations such as the Children's Court in Darlinghurst (Valentine *Parramatta Girls* 14), the showers (21) and the dormitory (27) are written as occurring on stage so that the audience can witness the actors becoming each new character or younger/older versions of themselves. While the structure is anchored around the event of the reunion, the majority of the narrative is formed through theatrical scenes that depict the women's remembered life at the home and are performed in present tense, or what Wake would describe as "mimetic realism" (106);

LYNETTE:           What? Would you do it with him?

JUDI:                No way. But if it's just my hand.

MAREE:            He'll want you to put it in your mouth.

JUDI:                Yeah, well if he does he can get me outta here on a Sunday afternoon. Like when he takes those other girls on excursions.

MAREE:            You don't know what you're doing.  
(Valentine *Parramatta Girls* 51)

The play then circles back to the linear plot of attending the reunion, exemplified in the following excerpt where two of the 'old girls' are discussing the contents of their files;

CORAL:            Gayle. I'm asking you straight. Read it to me please.

GAYLE sits and reads.

GAYLE:            'Committal to an Institution. Coral Dawn McGillivray. Born 25.9.1947. Charge: Neglect and E.M.D'

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

CORAL: Exposed to Moral Danger.

GAYLE: ‘Home visit – mother seen. She stated that the girl had not been home for five weeks and that...she did not know where she was.’

CORAL: Read that again

GAYLE: ‘She stated that the girl had not been home for five weeks and that she could not care less what happened to her’. (66)

While there are occasional monologues of direct address this convention is used sparsely and the text is predominantly dialogue, where the Community Immersion across the verbatim process becomes more evident. Through the language, verbal imagery and phrases of speech of the characters, the reader is given an insight into the mannerisms and verbatim of the women Valentine interviewed. From something as simple as capturing the dropped-ends of words; “the wind makin’ my eyes water, laughin’ and screamin’ with everyone watchin’ ya” (1) to phrases such as “[f]at lot of thanks that is” (36) and “[s]he’s been given a good going-over” (56), the language provides an authentic connection to the community of women Valentine interviewed. It is nuanced and specific, but doesn’t have the stumbling and repetitious quality that Young identifies as common in verbatim theatre, which is perhaps due to Valentine’s massaged approach. The authenticity effects are subtle, they exist in the place names, song choices and stage directions created by Valentine, yet clearly informed by people who experienced the context of the Girls Home, and therefore convey authenticity to the story.

Stylised physical movement is a prominent convention in *Parramatta Girls*, with stories and events being conveyed solely through stage directions. For example, the opening of Act One Scene 5 reads “[a]ll the cast march in, in formation” (30), conveying a sense of the strict order and discipline experienced by the women. Creating a heightened and stylised physicality can convey a greater sense of the emotion and feeling of an event rather than solely relying on the verbatim words. A detailed example of this is found in the following stage direction; “Marlene screams uncontrollably, all the loss and pain and grief and anger coming out in one massive

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

raging scream of fury and humiliation and frustration” (57). While often verbatim theatre relies on reflective stories and is therefore stereotypically deemed un-theatrical (as evidenced in the earlier observations made by Young and Botham), these moments of physicalisation and mimetic realism heighten the emotional engagement. This is a convention used in all three of the Australian plays discussed in this section.

### 2.6.2. **Campion Decent: *Embers* (2008)**

*Embers* (2008) by Campion Decent was commissioned by Hot House Theatre in partnership with the Upper Hume Community Health Service. Decent explains that it was developed using the ‘principles’ of verbatim theatre and that he found *The Laramie Project*, *The Permanent Way* and *Aftershocks* useful models of the form (Decent 6). The project involved an intense period of Community Immersion that was enabled by the support of local rural recovery support worker and ex-fire officer Les Hume. Together they conducted over 75 interviews within 26 townships in relation to the bushfire event in North East Victoria in January 2003. Decent used both the interview material and parliamentary transcripts in developing the play which he describes as “a community of ordinary people facing an extraordinary event” (Decent 6). The play uses projected text to provide context and factual information (what Bottoms would refer to as subtitles, Paget as captioning and Duggan an authenticity effect), and these also serve as a transitional convention between scenes. The world of the play oscillates between three contexts; the official public hearing in relation to the fires, unidentified characters sharing their experiences in the form of a spoken chorus, and named townspeople attending a community barbecue. This last contextual setting helps to facilitate the action with each new character arriving at the barbecue being introduced through vocal captioning and then telling their story. For example;

Kristina: A cattleman

Miranda: Aged 87

Kristina: From Mudgegonga

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Cattleman: All we had in '39 was the bloody bush, a blunt axe and a rake. (29)

The action of the scene is realistic for a barbecue setting (which is also highly relatable in an Australian context) however the longer stories are positioned as direct address. The personal experiences are juxtaposed with excerpts from parliamentary transcripts and this is used to drive the tension of the play, as the official documents often trivialise or contradict the first-hand experience of the community. For example;

Text= [It is the finding of the State Inquiry that CFA and DSE were appropriately prepared for the 2003 – 2004 fire season. The partnership between DSE and CFA has proved effective.]

D/farmer: [To audience] About as effective as a Mad Hatter's Tea Party, that's how effective it was. (69)

Also contributing to the dramatic action is the use of parallel storytelling, with multiple characters sharing their personal perspective of the event, providing insight to their relationships, personality and priorities. This convention serves to both demonstrate the diversity of experience and also highlights moments of connection, with multiple characters speaking selected lines in unison:

Susan: We were very well informed by ABC radio

All: Here! Here! (43)

The pace and rhythm of the play is timed through three textual conventions. Firstly, overlapping staccato lines that create mood and tension:

Male 2: Like a dragon.

Female 2: Like a train.

Male 3: Like a jet coming up the valley.

Male 1: F1 – 11s flying over.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Female 3: That sickening roar.

Male 4: You never forget it. (20 – 21)

Secondly, the use of lengthy monologues that enable story specific character development and sub narratives to emerge (40 – 42), and finally conversational dialogue that allows for relationships and interaction between characters:

DF/Wife: We all had our moment, didn't we?

D/farmer: Never feared for our lives I don't think, did we? I didn't.

DF/Wife: No, I don't think I ever thought this is it, I'm gonna die.

D/farmer: But the feeling afterwards? Just shattered.

DF/Wife: You went into a fairly depressed state for about three weeks.

D/farmer: I think I was alright.

DF/Wife: You couldn't get out of bed in the morning.  
(85)

A unique convention in this work is the approach to the composite characters. In *Embers* the composite characters are generally caricatures of recognisable community stereotypes, for example the Red Cross ladies, Politicians and Children. While Decent states at the end of the character list that when a name isn't given "it is at the request of the interviewee" (17), these characters appear to be employed as comic devices or points of tension and do not have the same complexity and depth as other named characters. The convention of using named and unnamed characters for specific dramatic purposes is also evident in David Burton's *April's Fool* (2010).

### 2.6.3. David Burton: *April's Fool* (2010)

*April's Fool* (2010) was commissioned by the Empire Theatre Project Company in Toowoomba Queensland and centres on the Terauds family after their 18year old son Kristjan dies from complications relating to explicit drug use. David Terauds, Kristjan's father, kept a journal during the time his son was in hospital. This document along with numerous interviews with family and friends, became the stimulus material for Burton's work. Burton explains in the author's note that "[w]hile all material is verbatim, editing has obviously condensed the material. These edits were done always to keep the intention of the speaker clear" (15). Here the reader is provided insight to the playwright's intention and premise for the work; to convey as closely as possible the intended meaning of the storytellers that were interviewed. It becomes apparent throughout the play that Burton's use of the verbatim material is in service of painting one complex picture of the central event, in contrast to Decent's approach of using juxtaposition to paint multiple versions of an event.

Similarly to *Embers* there are some named and many unnamed characters. Burton has incorporated actor characters in order to introduce, narrate and frame the world of the play, guiding the audience through the narrative and acting as signposts to the verbatim material. As the actor states in the opening moments of the play "[w]e will be using their words, collected from interviews, to tell Kristjan's story. We will be giving voice to them" (Burton 18). This is the reflexivity that Bottoms praises as a necessary convention of verbatim theatre (61), although *April's Fool* is the only work discussed in this section that applies this convention within the text of the play. Doctors, Paramedics and Nurses are given unnamed titles, while the Teraud's family and their friends have been named. Included in the dialogue is the following disclaimer: "Many names have been changed for their own protection" (18). The use of titles as character names then implies that these characters are used as devices within the work, and may present as more two dimensional than the named characters, as was evident in *Embers*.

The journal document (which is also listed as a character) is used to introduce each new theme of the narrative, and the reader learns why this document was written by David Terauds; "I am writing this to organise my thoughts. I need an outlet for my

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

turmoil and the police may need a statement at some point in time” (19). The journal then explains that Kristjan had spent a lot of time planning to attend a three day music festival with friends, which leads to the introduction of a named character through verbal captioning;

HELENA:            You know, when I was young we used to  
go to all day music things. I had been to that sort of thing

ACTOR: [to audience] Helena Terauds, Kristjan’s mother.  
(19)

We learn about the Terauds family through the observations and reflections of those closest to them. Our understanding of them is slowly built up as we learn specific nuances and critical insights to their character;

BILL:            Helena’s smart. I think she probably suffers from a  
bit of low self esteem. (25)

BOB:            He annoys the living shit out of me, but whatever  
he’s doing it’s because he believes it’s right. You gotta  
respect that. (25)

The three days surrounding Kristjan’s death is used as a narrative structure to the work, signposted through the use of dates and times which Burton suggests “may be spoken or projected. It is suggested they are not ignored altogether” (15). His caution here provides insight to the importance of these signposts to the dramatic action. The dates and times let the reader know that time is passing and that we are slowly getting closer and closer to the key event; ultimately, to Kristjan’s death. Even when the scene itself is providing more character development and contextual colour rather than specifically building tension through plot development, the dates and times heighten the mood and expectation. Burton has spent time developing the complexity of the characters, so that when we hear from their point of view it is an opinion of a character that we are engaged with and invested in. While *Embers* is also event driven, *April’s Fool* differs in that there are a central cast of characters who we repeatedly return to throughout the work. The multiple perspectives in *Embers* is often used to provide contrasting views to the events as they unfold, whereas Burton

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

has used the multiple voices to complement the audience's picture of the event. For example, when the family is let in to see Kristjan at the hospital, his brother Ari explains that his mother was "inconsolable" and "I was a bit withdrawn. I was needing to hit something. Just not knowing why..." (39). His sister Danika validates this picture for the reader stating "Mum was absolutely...she couldn't stand up. Ari always stood fairly back from it" (39). In this way Burton creates layers of complexity to the one version of events, rather than causing the reader to question the series of events, as Decent does in *Embers*.

The longer monologues act not only to provide further insight into the events and characters, but also to act as a breathing space for the reader. After building up the action and tension of the scene, Burton allows time for the reader to take it all in by incorporating expert monologues that provide a little distance to the emotion of the events. The Doctor explains medically what is happening to Kristjan's body and a moment later a "psychologist specialising in drug abuse and trauma" (43) talks generically about drug use and the implications it can have for individuals and communities. These educative moments allow the reader to connect the very specific characteristics of the Terauds experience to the broader themes of the play, what Ackroyd and O'Toole might describe as the "broader truths" (72), while simultaneously enabling a break from the high stakes emotion of the central plot.

There are seamless transitions between direct address and onstage interaction that help the rhythm of the work and move the action from past tense reflection into present tense mimetic realism:

ARI: They were really worried about me. I went to the hospital, but I couldn't go into the room. I just couldn't see him like that. It's not normal, seeing someone like that.

[NICOLE has faded. DAVID appears at ARI'S side]

DAVID: You don't have to be strong for me you know.

ARI: Don't Dad.

DAVID: I'm surrounded by people who have been strong for me. Because of them I can be strong for you.

[It's slow, but ARI suddenly lets loose and howls]. (64)

This physical and present tense performance (a convention also used by Valentine and Decent) engages the audience with the emotion in the moment. The inclusion of theatrical restaging of described experiences (mimetic realism) is a common feature of the Australian verbatim plays discussed in this section, contradicting Botham's suggestion that verbatim theatre is inherently un-theatrical.

This analysis of three Australian verbatim plays is a unique contribution to the field, as well as influencing my own practice as an artist. Significantly, each of these plays were event based. In contrast the focus for my project, the female experience of Alopecia, is topic based. Analysing the differences in conventions for event based versus topic based verbatim theatre would further expand the knowledge of the field, and is an area that I begin to explore in Chapter Five.

## **2.7. Impact on community of storytellers**

Stuart Fisher's "That's who I'd be, if I could sing?: Reflections on a Verbatim Project with Mothers of Sexually Abused Children" (2011) explicitly investigates the impact of involvement in a verbatim theatre project on the community of storytellers, or to use Stuart Fisher's lexicon, the "verbatim subjects" (194). It is one of two academic articles that focus explicitly on the impact of the verbatim process and performance on the storytellers, rather than solely on the audience. She is pioneering the research in this area of the field, and the findings from my research are a significant contribution to the knowledge and understanding surrounding storyteller impact. This section begins with an explicit overview of Stuart Fisher's work, before moving into an exploration of research conducted in related areas that may be usefully porous. This includes research into the impact of viewing verbatim theatre on general audiences, the impact on high school students who have created their own in-school verbatim projects after seeing professional verbatim theatre and, in a related field of study, the impact of research-based theatre on generating increased understanding for audiences in the areas of health and wellbeing.

Stuart Fisher challenges the normative criticism of verbatim; that it is an "unethical and appropriative practice" (194) that manipulates and commodifies the stories of

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

others in an attempt to “authenticate the plays that theatre makers wish to construct” (194). In contrast, Stuart Fisher argues that a verbatim theatre process can be “one based on reciprocity...grounded upon conviviality and of potential therapeutic value” (194). She argues that storytellers often choose to participate and “strongly [want] their experiences to be shared publicly” (201), they “enter into this process willingly and do get something back in return” (205). This something back was perceived by the storytellers in her project as gaining a critical distance on their experiences, allowing them to better understand and work through the implications of that experience (206), as well as an opportunity to connect with people who had had similar experiences. They also considered that raising awareness with a public audience (203) was a personally beneficial outcome, which is reminiscent of Dolan’s commendation for verbatim theatre.

Stuart Fisher’s method of practice “placed the empowerment and wellbeing of the mothers themselves at the heart of the project” (198), which manifested in an inclusion of the storytellers throughout the creative development process and a continual resolve to be reflective practitioners (207). This “ongoing process of self-reflection” and questioning “why we are doing what we are doing and how we think it will benefit the participants” (207) is suggested as a starting point for an ethics of practice for verbatim theatre. While I agree with Stuart Fisher that “it is important not to fall complacently into a false assumption that any methodology – however carefully thought out – can guarantee ethical practice” (206), the possibility of ethical practice is enhanced when the values and discourses that underpin our practice are critically explored. Stuart Fisher has not included extensive data from the storytellers in her article and instead focuses the discussion on the themes of identification and appropriation. Her article has been crucial in analysing my own data in Chapter Six, and I have extended on and provided evidence for aspects of her argument through the inclusion of storytellers’ responses.

In Wake’s “To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in *Through the Wire*” (2013) she explores the impact for the actors and storytellers of the realistic aesthetics used in the production and suggests that mimetic witnessing, whilst “ethically problematic ...was also politically efficacious” (117). Wake’s analysis is grounded in the concept that verbatim theatre could be

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

considered as a form of realism due to its mimetic conventions, its “moments of mimesis or re-enactment” (106) that are witnessed by the audience. While she acknowledges that historically verbatim theatre has been considered as part of documentary theatre’s ancestry and emerging from the work of Erwin Piscator, she argues that this “genealogy neglects how closely the practice of recording the voices of ‘ordinary’ people resembles the early practices of realism and naturalism” (107). Specifically in the context of *Through the Wire*, the combination of autobiographical inclusions, casting one of the storytellers as himself in the performance and the avoidance of double silencing by only interviewing and writing four refugee’s stories into the performance, all contribute to Wake’s assertion that this verbatim work is an example of mimetic witness and realistic aesthetics.

Mimetic witnessing is ethically problematic. It relies on the storytellers re-engaging with their experiences (which in Wake’s case study were considerably traumatic), can reproduce the ‘other’ as a spectacle (116) and, if the storyteller also participates as actor, can force them to function “as a signifier of authenticity” (116), taking on a greater level of responsibility in the production than they may have anticipated. Wake’s articulation of impact on the community of storytellers is a unique contribution to the field as it predominantly explores what she perceives as negative aspects of impact. However, Wake then extends the discussion to include the political impact of verbatim theatre on audiences more broadly, arguing that it is precisely due to what she describes as verbatim’s realist aesthetic that it can be “politically effective” (118) as this helps to facilitate identification between audience and story. While identification can be “potentially coercive, colonizing and collapse difference” (118), as also cautioned by Stuart Fisher, it can act to destabilise what an audience thinks they know about a community. From this “destabilisation comes potential recalibration” (118) which can potentially lead to political mimesis. Wake defines political mimesis as occurring “where spectators respond to images of protest or political action by recreating them in another time and place” (118), that “having had political activism modelled for them on stage, audience members felt able at least to attempt these actions off stage” (119). Wake’s article effectively interrogates notions of realism and mimetic witnessing in relation to verbatim theatre and successfully makes a case for the political potential of this aesthetic, whilst simultaneously acknowledging its ethical complexities.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Studies on how research-based theatre effectively disseminates health research findings can provide insight for the potential impact of verbatim theatre due to the porosity of the forms. Mitchell et al. describe the methodology applied by their team in the creation of a research-based drama about living with dementia, *I'm Still Here*. They provide explicit detail on their process and the methods they incorporated to induce and collect data. Importantly, they surveyed audiences to ascertain how the performance affected the audiences understanding of dementia and their relationships with family and friends who experience this condition. Similarly, Gray et al. argue the case for research-based theatre as “an innovative approach to disseminating” information (137) and provide an overview of their project *Handle with care?*, which is based on research with women experiencing metastatic breast cancer and the oncologists who treat them. Both articles focus significantly on the methodology of their projects, with emphasis on the value of Community Immersion and consultation. Gray et al. conclude that when presented through theatre, research in health care is made “more vital and useful”, it is “an extraordinary vehicle for training” and is an “empathic experience” (143). Both Mitchell et al. and Gray et al. acknowledge that research in the area of audience reception and impact is minimal and further study is required.

Rossiter et al. argue that the reason theatre is such a valuable tool in translating and disseminating health related research is due to theatre and medicine’s aligned focus on the embodied human condition (131). Rossiter et al. categorise and analyse a variety of research-based theatre productions in order to examine the “benefits and drawbacks” of various approaches, followed by a discussion of each projects process of evaluation (131). It is this second agenda that provides context and insight for my research on impact. They raise interesting questions in the latter half of the article around measuring impact, the link between content and aesthetics (139) and aesthetics and audience understanding (145). Whilst providing great stimulus for reflection and a summary of project evaluations and individual findings, Rossiter et al. conclude that there are minimal studies available and further research is required to explore the use, value and impact of research-based theatre.

Julie Salverson’s “Transgressive Storytelling or an Aesthetic of Injury: Performance, Pedagogy and Ethics” (1999) is a highly self-reflective analysis on her own work

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

creating a video with refugees in Canada. She outlines her approach to the project in relation to Levinas and his call “for an ethical relation which puts concern for others before concern for oneself” (2) and that what this means in performance is that the actor/director/playwright “assumes responsibility to guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny difference” (2). Instead of performing in a way that invites the audience to take on the story being witnessed and internalise it in relation to themselves, the performer draws attention to both the said and the saying (to use Levinas’ terms). Audiences are not encouraged towards an easy empathy but are rather demanded to be present in the process, “seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard” (4). The goal is not to show the unifying qualities between story and public, but rather to have them acknowledge one another, to “respond within the encounter” (3). Salverson critically reflects on their ability to achieve these goals in her project. While her approach was to present stories in a non-linear and partial way in the effort to disrupt the generalisation and categorisation of refugees stories, she reflects that “it is possible we went too far in fragmenting the stories... for a general audience used to empathising, to standing in, the gulf was too great” (6). Salverson’s ethics of practice actively works against creating the kind of identification that Wake describes as necessary to create destabilisation and recalibration, and as Salverson acknowledges here, perhaps in going too far they jettisoned a required element of realistic aesthetics. While Salverson’s work is based on the impact of verbatim theatre on general audiences, her work prompts critical questions for my own research with storytellers.

Rossiter et al. and Salverson each deliberate on the balance required between content and aesthetics in relation to impact for audiences. I consider that the term impact can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, Gallagher et al. refer to social intervention and Rossiter et al. empathic understanding. When a phenomena creates an impact we learn something either about the phenomena itself and/or ourselves. Therefore I perceive that there are links between my research on storyteller impact and the broader academic field of research on the process of learning. Anne Ryan in “Conscientization: The Art of Learning” (2011) explains that for Freire, learning is never neutral, it either pacifies learners or liberates them (86). In some ways the same can be said of theatre and more specifically verbatim theatre. It is political in process, content and form, as previously expressed by both Wake and Stuart Fisher.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Depending on the intended and perceived narrative it can both validate normative concepts and the status quo (to use Wake's phrase it can be ethically problematic) or it can engage audiences in a fracturing of dominant narratives. Ryan outlines Freire's use of the term conscientization, that it "denote[s] education that enabled the emergence of consciousness" and "convey[s] a sense of a learning process that is never static, never without further possibilities" (86). As already discussed, verbatim theatre brings individual stories of experience together with others, broadening the audiences understanding of the diversity of experiences. In Freire's conscientization process Ryan has identified three phases; awakening awareness, critical analysis and changing reality (95). The awakening awareness phase is when learners "come to realize that their experiences, albeit unique stories, resonate with the experiences of others" (95). This new awareness (or to use the lexicon of feminist theatre practice, this process of consciousness-raising) leads to critical self-reflection and transformation. This theory of conscientization is a useful framework for analyzing the learning and impact on the community of storytellers.

### **2.8. Positioning my theory of practice**

My research project focuses explicitly on verbatim theatre practice and its impact on the community of storytellers. Understanding the values and intentions that underpin my practice is therefore a vital component to comprehensively understanding the practice and impact findings. This section responds to my first research question; what is my theory of verbatim theatre practice and how does it manifest in practice? I am interested in why theatre artists would choose to create verbatim theatre and how these intentions influence their practice. I use the word intention to mean the purpose and attitude behind an artist's practice. In this section I explore the intentions and values that underpin my own practice and what I hoped to communicate through the performance I created. I have found the theoretical frameworks of critical theory, critical pedagogy and feminist theatre practice to be useful in articulating my intentions as an artist, and I begin this section with a brief overview of how I align my intentions with these theories. I explicitly draw on these theoretical frameworks in the articulation of my own theory of practice. I have named this Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis (EVTP) and conclude this section with examples of how

this theory of practice became manifest throughout the process of creating *bald heads & blue stars*.

### **2.8.1. Influencing theoretical frameworks**

Critical theorists perceive that there are different kinds of knowledge and different ways of knowing (How 116). Crucially, these knowledges are dependent on and by products of historical, geographical and social context. It is a theory based on speculation, that we do not “dogmatically accept” perceived given circumstances (3) but rather understand that what constitutes ‘truth’ is dependent on a person or communities experiences, discourses and context. Therefore, seeking to know and understand the context of others enables a broader understanding of knowledge, reason and the multiplicities of truth (6). Broadening “the horizon of our understandings” (120) teaches us not only about others, but makes our knowledge of self simultaneously more comprehensive. Critical theory promotes engagement with opposing ideas (or conflicting understandings) “in hopes of finding a third position that embraces, but also transcends both” (185). This echoes Hegel’s theory of dialectics and is also evident in Anderson and Wilkinson’s assertion that verbatim theatre embraces the intellectual and the emotional, creating a synthesis that transcends both in order to “empathetically inform and empower through authentic story” (156). The verbatim theatre process involves communication with a community and on behalf of that community, and it is this aspect of the process that aligns verbatim theatre practice to the critical theory framework. As Agger states “communication provides an ethical base for critical theory” (94) particularly when that communication is a dialogue based on respect. Through respectful communication with others we are able to broaden our understanding of the multiple ways in which people understand the world.

Critical pedagogy is one application of critical theory in systems of education and learning. Joan Wink defines the dialogue of critical pedagogy as:

talk that changes us or our context...Dialogue is two-way  
interactive visiting. Dialogue involves periods of lots of noise  
as people share and lots of silence as people muse. Dialogue

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

is communication that creates and recreates multiple understandings. (41)

This is an intent I hold for the dialogue in my practice as a theatre artist and in my methods as a researcher. In the critical theory paradigm, selves are products of their societal context. So therefore it follows that understanding other contexts enables a greater understanding of other individuals. Kanpol describes it as being “entwined”, that self and society are “intimately related” (94). Verbatim theatre enables engagement with other societal contexts. First for the artist in the process of Community Immersion, and secondly for the public audience when the voices of people from those ‘other places’ are dramatically presented in a public way. Just as Kincheloe suggests “a complex critical pedagogy is always searching for new voices that may have been excluded by the dominant culture” (24), Heddon argues that verbatim theatre enables the marginalised voice to “literally take centre stage” (3). Audiences engage with those voices through performance and are given the opportunity to “feel the other’s position in life” (Kanpol 94). Burbules and Berk outline that the “primary preoccupation of critical pedagogy is with social injustice and how to transform inequitable, undemocratic or oppressive institutions and social relations” (47). Just as the values of critical pedagogy are evident in Heddon’s assertions around her intents for verbatim theatre, I also acknowledge the discourse of critical pedagogy in my intent. I aim to share kinaesthetically in the stories of others and thereby begin to construct a knowledge of other communities and identities, critically engage with social injustice and, potentially, broaden an audiences understanding of self.

### **2.8.2. How theory influences practice through praxis**

The values of critical pedagogy are also evident in some of my processes of verbatim theatre. Wink outlines a process for critical pedagogy that involves learning, unlearning and relearning (18). The learning occurs as part of our context, it is what Kristeva described as our chora; “the Greek word for space, place [and] locality” (Ziarek 328). Kristeva argues that our experiences of chora are how our bodies become embedded with cultural constructs; family and social structures. The learning of our chora forms the lens through which we see and understand the world. Wink’s

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

‘unlearning’ refers to the broadening of our horizons, it involves “a shift in philosophy, beliefs and assumptions” (19). A shift instigated through the process of speculation and one that challenges “what currently passe[s] for reason and extend[s] it into something more comprehensive” (How 6). This challenge and extension occurs through engagement with or exposure to difference. Often classified as the ‘other’, interaction with this difference provides opportunities for us to reflect on our own context and understandings. Wink acknowledges that unlearning can be a challenging and traumatic experience that takes the subject on a journey through defiance, confusion and doubt as they consider the nature and content of their knowledge. However, at the other end of the journey is the opportunity to “see beyond” (Wink 25), or in terms of critical theory, to “transcend” (How 185) what we thought we knew and expand our understanding to something more comprehensive.

Learning, unlearning and relearning in the field of theatre practice occurs through praxis, a way of working that bridges the gap between theory and practice (Taylor *The Drama Classroom* 5). Verbatim theatre is an example of praxis as it bridges the thinking about to the doing. This occurs on a number of levels. On the macro level when groups are interviewed in a verbatim theatre process they are thinking about their experiences. They are remembering, naming and representing stories, ideas and discourses through verbal and physical communication. The playwright then bridges the gap to the doing; they creatively shape this thinking into a practical act through the artistic process of scripting and writing stories into performance. Verbatim theatre therefore combines theory and practice in a macro sense. On a micro level, the continual dialogue between interviewer and interviewed, and then later actor and director or between collaborators, provides opportunities for continual reflection on and improvement of practice (Taylor *The Drama Classroom* 107). Each party in the dialogue is given the opportunity to voice concerns, successes, interpretations and revelations. These voicings then inform, stimulate and provide impulse for improved practice. Dialogue, discussion and interviewing are practice, and at the same time are theorising. Throughout the interview the verbatim theatre artist is simultaneously *thinking about* as they Listen for Aesthetics and *doing* as they play the role of the interviewer and the practice this involves. At all times throughout the interview, playbuilding and performance process the playwright and other theatre artists can be enacting praxis, the constant incorporation of critical reflection on active doing. The

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

transformative power of praxis when viewed on this individual level has been articulated by Peter Abbs through his description of the five phases of art making.

The five phases begins with an impulse. This impulse is akin to an idea, a flash of energy, a “desire for an image” (Abbs 199) that comes from our contextual imaginings. The artist then pursues this impulse through engaging with a particular medium. This medium will have its own rules, “its own inner propensities, its own laws, its own history. It allows and forbids...the impulse can be lost in the material or...taken to an expected consummation” (Abbs 200). Abbs describes this phase as the most problematic as it involves taking a personal, contextual and inner idea and then wrestling with the requirements of a medium in order to express that idea in a public way. It is the binary of form and content that Kaufman and Valentine describe experimenting with in their work. The artist begins their reflective practice in this phase as they critically question whether or not their chosen medium is enhancing their initial impulse or limiting it. As the artist enters the third phase, the realization of final form, they begin to “discard, to select, to consider, to evaluate” (Abbs 201). These decisions are made by frequently consulting with the expected audience, either imagined or real; “it is as if a continuous inner dialogue is taking place between the artist and critic, between the creative subject and the sympathetic onlooker” (Abbs 202). Valentine described presenting readings of *Parramatta Girls* throughout her process in order to clearly shape the work and make decisions about its further development after hearing feedback from the storytellers and invited audience.

Abbs describes art as a public category, requiring communication with and recognition by community. This is the presentation or performance phase of art making, however this is not the end of the process as the audience is “an essential part of the art-making” (Abbs 203). Their responses, combined with the critical reflection of the artist themselves, provides the platform for the next artistic impulse. The whole experience of art making contributes to an artist’s cultural context, so each experience broadens this context and influences the next work. This is similar to Kaufman’s valuing of the Moment Work process, where ideas may never result in a polished stage performance, however the process of collaboratively devising and performing the moment within the workshop broadened the company’s understanding and experience and influenced future work. In this model all impulses

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

can inspire the possibility of a new idea. Critical theory and critical pedagogy are built on the foundation of the possibility of transformation, which is expressed in practice through the concept of praxis. I align my own intentions for transformed understanding with the concept of praxis and include it in my definition of EVTP.

### **2.8.3. A model for articulating a theory of practice**

Jan Cohen-Cruz outlines a theory of practice called “engaged performance”, and I have used her work as a model for defining my own (1). Cohen-Cruz describes engaged performance as a dialogue between the social call of a community and the cultural response of an artist, where the overall process “must benefit the people whose lives inform the project, not just promote the artist” (2). Paget emphasises that engaged theatre marks a shift between “generalised political commitment...to the specificity inherent in theatre of the single issue” (*Acts of Commitment* 175). This specificity in verbatim theatre is defined by the community of storytellers who participate in the project, combined with the playwright’s intent for the play. Engaged performance has “social justice aspirations” (8), “without being dull and pragmatic” (13). The goals of ‘engaged performance’ are “aesthetic and something else” (11), and I engage with this assertion that you can have multiple aspirations for a work “without compromising either” (12). She describes this as reminding actors that they “can walk and whistle at the same time” (12). Cohen-Cruz encourages “practices that share a similar impulse” to “claim kinship” (9). I perceive this kinship between my intentions for verbatim theatre and ‘engaged performance’, specifically around themes of engaging genuinely with community and maintaining multiple intentions for a project. I acknowledge this kinship in the naming of my theory of practice as Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis. Cohen-Cruz’s articulation of engaged performance reflects the empowering and transformational values of critical theory and critical pedagogy and provides the link between the social justice calls of these paradigms and the artistic field of feminist theatre practice.

A further model is Callaghan’s coining of the phrase “aesthetics of marginality” (262). Rather than use the term feminist aesthetics, Callaghan posits that aesthetics of marginality “designates that intractable space between politics and aesthetics and denotes the liminality of the theatrical space itself, the osmotic membrane between text and performance” (262). Callaghan uses the practice of Joan Littlewood and

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Buzz Goodbody as examples, and outlines that Littlewood's aesthetics of marginality included collaboration, a focus on the form as much as the content, emphasis on physical and vocal expression, altering genre conventions, viewing theatre as a catalyst for action and a space to create social and political awareness (268).

Callaghan has coined a term that she feels more aptly describes the intentions, practices and processes of a group of artists. This is also my goal in articulating EVTP as a theory of practice, as I do not perceive there to be an adequate lexicon available for verbatim playwrights to discuss their intentions.

### **2.8.4. Feminist theatre practice**

Elaine Aston, Sue-Ellen Case and Lizbeth Goodman each provide extensive overviews of the development of feminist theatre practice; its history, political agenda and innovative expression of content through form. Goodman asserts that not all women's writing is feminist, "feminist theatre is defined by its politics (feminism) rather than by its form (theatre)" (*Comic Subversions* 243). This is a crucial distinction and one I have considered in my own practice and particularly in this case-study. It would be easy to assume that a female playwright interviewing women about their hair was going to result in feminist theatre. I understand that feminist theatre has a certain political agenda and that those politics also translate into certain ways of working. "A Theatre offers possibility for feminist intervention on a number of levels" (Laughlin and Schuler 18), and it is these interventions that are demonstrative of a theory of practice. The politics of feminism is generally grouped into what Aston describes as "the three dominant feminist positions" (*An Introduction* 8); bourgeois, radical and materialist (although these positions have been titled differently across the literature). Materialist feminism, which "seeks to locate oppression in terms of the complex matrix of gender, class, race, ideology etc, and identify the historical sitings of such oppressions in order to radically transform society" (Aston *An Introduction* 73) is the feminist position I align my practice with. Case outlines that feminist theatre practice situated within a materialist position is "built on mutuality and inter-subjectivity", operating by enactment and engaged dialogue and rooted in everyday life (46). This description echoes Stuart Fisher's depiction of the verbatim theatre process as one built on reciprocity; that the community of storytellers choose to be involved in the project and are engaged

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

throughout the process. As I outline in Chapter Five, one of my key values that translates into practice is understanding the interview as a place where stories are co-authored in mutuality; that the interview is a constructed environment where both parties participate in the performance of storytelling.

Feminist activist and author bell hooks outlines the feminist movement as occurring “when groups of people come together with an organized strategy to take action” to eliminate any form of oppression, dominance or hierarchy (xi). Ackerly describes this organised strategy as “collective action” (2) and suggests it is a hallmark of feminist theatre practice, with a focus on collectively speaking and sharing in an effort to “make an otherwise insecure environment one in which [...] voices are heard” (3). Specifically, Ackerly asserts that these voices can be everyday people in everyday places (5). This valuing of lived experience and community story links feminist theatre practice to the hopefulness of verbatim theatre outlined by Dolan who suggests verbatim theatre makes unique connections between both individuals and ideas. She states verbatim theatre attempts “to create a ‘we’” (*The Laramie Project* 114), a community of people “who might not otherwise have spoken to each other” (113). My project exemplifies the collective action of everyday people, as the storytellers volunteered to be involved in the project and to voice their individual experiences to benefit the broader alopecia community. Verbatim theatre and feminist theatre practice enables a collective space for this sharing, a platform for a multitude of listeners. Verbatim theatre influenced by feminist theatre practice is a “theatre which aims to achieve positive re-evaluation...and/or to effect social change” (Goodman *Contemporary Feminist Theatres* 37) and thereby enabling performance to “be a transformational act” (Heddon 3).

Heddon and Goodman both include consciousness-raising as being a key outcome of feminist theatre practice, and Joan Scott outlines that this often occurs through the evidence of experience. This experience becomes visible through others seeing, and in the context of feminist theatre practice, through the specific seeing of the audience. Scott finds the use of experience as evidence problematic; that making visible the experiences of others is not enough to raise the consciousness of an audience or community as the experience does not speak for itself (83). Rather, making visible the “inner workings or logics” of the experience, and asking how the

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

experience was constructed (83) then allows for a critique of normative experience and the raising of consciousness. Scott argues that “what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political” (96). She states that analysis and critical viewing of experience can become the work of the artist or playwright, and this is an intent I hold for my verbatim theatre practice. Rather than allowing words and experiences to speak for themselves, the practitioner’s aesthetic mediation or “massaging” (to use Valentine’s phrase) of the material enables a critique of those words through artistic juxtaposition, staging and editing. Making the ideology visible and highlighting the inner workings and contested nature of experience can form part of the artistry of the verbatim theatre practitioner and also parallels the consciousness-raising and social change agenda of feminist theatre practice. Dolan states that:

feminism at this historical moment seems caught between reifying experience as truth, and proclaiming that although experience does dictate a certain material reality, it is a reality necessarily constructed in relation to social ideology and cannot be the basis of any fixed objective truth. (*In Defence of the Discourse* 96)

This echoes the tension in Schulze’s definition of meta-modernism; that despite deconstructing notions of absolute truth, the idea of individual and contextual truth, experience as truth, maintains a gravitational pull for artists. Balancing this tension was evident in my own playwriting practice and is explored in Chapter Five.

### **2.8.5. My intentions for *bald heads & blue stars***

Feminist theatre practice is a field that influences my articulation of Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis. While cultural/materialist feminist theatre practice may influence all verbatim theatre to some degree, the specific political focus of my project in this case study aligns strongly with a feminist agenda. I interviewed women about their bodies; specifically about how they perceive those bodies, how they feel they are perceived by others, how geography, relationships, context and time affect these perceptions. Just as “feminist theory, like other contemporary approaches, validates difference, challenges universal claims to truth, and seeks to

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

create social transformation in a world of shifting and uncertain meanings” (Weiler 12), I wanted to place the evidence of experience into performance to raise awareness, shape identity and transform or broaden the public community’s understanding of beauty and what it means to be feminine.

Through a collaborative devising process I have artistically rendered visible the inner workings and ideologies of these stories of experience with the explicit goal of consciousness-raising and social change. Bordo defines the body as “a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (91). Our bodies are a medium of culture, the way we ‘perform’ our body belies our discourse; our values and beliefs. Judith Butler states our identity is “tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (*Performing Acts* 270). The way these acts are read by others defines our relationship to our context and the other bodies in it. This is particularly pertinent in my verbatim theatre process in this case-study. In my Australian contemporary context baldness is most commonly associated with men or illness. For the women I have interviewed, performing their feminine gender (through the use of wigs, makeup, jewellery and tattoos) is an intrinsic part of their daily life, an active choice made each and every day. As Butler states, “gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term ‘strategy’ better suggests the situations of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs” (273). Some of the women I interviewed experience this duress of cultural survival every day, feeling they are “compelled by social sanction and taboo” (Butler 271). Through a discussion of the female body, particularly the bald/ing body, I aim to demonstrate an alternative symbol of beauty and femininity and enable the opportunity for a potential transformation of the way female bodies are inscribed.

At present, these bald/ing female bodies are continually being “memorised” on, memorised with “the feel and conviction of lack, or insufficiency, of never being good enough” (Bordo 91). By exploring the “inner workings or logics” (Scott 83) of these memorised experiences and working within the theoretical frame of gender and identity as culturally constructed and performed (Butler; Cudd and Andreason) I have created a politically feminist performance that challenges normative

understanding and strives, through the combined reflection and action of praxis, to transform understandings of beauty, feminine strength and female identity.

### **2.8.6. Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis**

Just as Aston advocates that feminist theatre practice “has emerged as a theoretical field of practice that deserves more attention than it has been given” (*Feminist Theatre Practice* 4), so too has the practice of verbatim theatre. Articulating a theory of verbatim theatre practice contributes to verbatim theatre’s field of knowledge, creates a departure point for genuine critique of practice and provides a theoretical framework for artists who claim kinship to reflect on and discuss their practice. After exploring why other artists may choose to create verbatim theatre and critically reflecting on my own motives and artistic intent, I posit the following definition of my theory of practice:

Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis is a decision to practice and create theatre inspired by a community’s verbal stories in a way that:

1. values listening to and sharing personal experience and community stories so that people are heard, visible and empowered through connection and community;
2. embraces collaboration, dialogue and experimentation with theatrical languages and conventions throughout the process of development to create innovative performance;
3. challenges normative and oppressive ideals, broadening our consciousness and transforming our understanding.

Understanding the values and intentions that underpin my practice is a vital component of comprehensively understanding the practice and impact findings of my research. Section 2.8 outlined the theoretical frameworks that influence my articulation of a theory of practice. It has moved from the broad to the specific, beginning with critical theory’s provocation that there are different types of knowledge and different ways of knowing. Importantly, within the critical theory framework knowledge is contextual and therefore changeable. Through an

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

understanding of the context of others we are able to broaden our own knowledge of society and self. Critical pedagogy focuses this attention on understanding oppression and social injustice, and encouraging others to critically reflect on their understanding. Engagement with other knowledges, ways of knowing and oppressions occurs through dialogue and sharing experiences. This can be a challenging and sometimes confronting process. Cohen-Cruz provides a model for how artists can combine artistic intentions with those of transformed understanding of social justice issues, without compromising either one (12). The shared values of mutuality, dialogue and everyday lived experience link the theories of critical theory and critical pedagogy to feminist theatre practice, and particularly to my intentions for my verbatim theatre practice.

Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis articulates my position amongst these converging theoretical and practical frameworks. Through defining my theory of practice I am actively exploring the “inner workings and logics” (Scott 83) of the experience of my practice, thereby applying the same values of my verbatim theatre practice to my research. Some examples of Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis in practice are discussed at the end of Chapter Five, however the three values articulated in my definition underpin all of the verbatim theatre practice findings in the following chapters. These findings for practice are contextually positioned within my intentions as an artist and the theory of practice that influenced my ways of working.

It is crucial to emphasise that this theory of practice, like most verbatim theatre practice, is one of potential. While I have already problematised the notion of potential elsewhere in this chapter, the following statement by Deirdre Heddon most significantly captures the infinite balancing act inherent in a practice grounded in potential:

I recognise its potential to also do harm or to fail in its politically aspirational or transformational objectives. This is precisely the liminal quality heralded by the word ‘potential’ – it can always go both ways. Some performances might well ‘fail’ to communicate, or ‘fail’ to move us, teach us, inspire us, challenge us. Some might prescribe to essentialist notions of self and identity, thereby further repressing or constraining

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

us. Some might speak ‘for’, rather than ‘as’, while others might be appropriated in unexpected ways or might appropriate other’s stories in inappropriate ways. Some performances might use the politics of the personal in a less sincere way, recognising that ‘the personal’ functions as a useful marketing tool in today’s culture where the personal is a popular and cheaply manufactured commodity. In acknowledging the potential of autobiographical performance, we need also to acknowledge the dangers. Though I am an advocate, I am not a naïve one. (7)

### **2.9. Conclusion**

Verbatim theatre is a complex and dynamic process and form. There are a myriad of frames through which it can be analysed and researched, however the most prominent theme across the literature centres on debates over truth, authenticity and reflexivity. As demonstrated across this review, there is a disparity between the levels of critical engagement with verbatim theatre in an Australian versus a UK context. In an Australian context playwrights and academics engage with verbatim as a creative process and form, and this positioning influences the way verbatim works are analysed. Wake and Wilkinson’s critical engagement focus on the dynamic tensions involved in translating verbalised experiences into performance, the political effectiveness of verbatim theatre, and the challenges involved in structuring a cohesive narrative from disparate stories. My analysis of conventions across three Australian plays further demonstrates the diverse approach to verbatim in this context, while simultaneously contributing to an understanding of how dramatic action is shaped in the verbatim form.

There is a significant gap in the field of knowledge around the artistic process and practices of creating verbatim theatre. Just as Kaufman has reflected on his practice and coined the devising process *Moment Work*, I seek to understand my own creative process and articulate the practices that emerge, contributing to the lexicon and knowledge of verbatim theatre practice within my Australian context. As addressed throughout this chapter there are a number of academics concerned ethically with elements of the verbatim theatre process, however minimal research

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

into the explicit practices that may enhance or minimise this risk, or how these practices influence the community of storytellers.

Specifically, I suggest that all elements of the verbatim theatre process are artistic in nature, and that there is a gap in our understanding of the skills and techniques associated with Community Immersion, interviewing and transcribing. There is currently minimal research that explores the process of collaborating and writing within the verbatim theatre form, and I suggest that the phrases currently used to describe the process inadequately position it as unartistic. I agree with Paget that enhancing understanding about a form and its conventions leads to a greater understanding of how to translate those conventions into performance and convey the dramatic meaning of a text.

This chapter has summarised my broad engagement with verbatim theatre's academic field, and foreshadowed how my research will extend on and contribute to this field of knowledge. Chapter Three details my practice-led research methodology, explicitly outlining how practice was documented and data inducted across the process of creating *bald heads & blue stars*.

### 3. Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

Australian theatre academic Brad Haseman explains that most practice-led research is led by “an enthusiasm for practice” (3) rather than a desire to solve a perceived problem. My practice as a theatre artist and interest as a researcher has been driven by an eagerness to engage with and understand the process, practice and impact of verbatim theatre, especially when that practice is situated within a value system of empowerment for the community of storytellers. My practice as a researcher is informed by my theory of practice, Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis. This is the theoretical paradigm within which my methodological choices are situated.

The four questions framing my research are:

1. What is my theory of verbatim theatre practice and how does it manifest in practice?
2. What are the artistic practices of the playwright and collaborating artists in my verbatim theatre process?
3. What has this project revealed about the form of verbatim theatre?
4. What impact does involvement in this verbatim theatre process have on the community of storytellers?

The Reflective Practitioner Case Study (RPCS) methodology, as defined by John O’Toole in *Doing Drama Research* (2006), is situated within the broader category of qualitative practice-led research, with a focus on inducing practice based data for analysis. This chapter begins with an overview of the practice that forms the bedrock of my research into verbatim theatre; the writing and performing of a new verbatim work *bald heads & blue stars*. It then outlines the parameters of my approach to the RPCS, focusing specifically on how this approach allows artist’s practice to “merge seamlessly into how we research” (O’Toole 56). The chapter continues with an overview of the methods used in the case study and examples of the frameworks created for triangulated data induction, before concluding with a critical analysis on

the effectiveness of my approach to the RPCS, and how effectually the methods enabled the practice and the induced data to answer my four research questions.

### 3.1. Overview of practice

I wrote and performed in the verbatim play *bald heads & blue stars* (2014) and documented this process. This section provides a narrative overview of my process, and appendix D graphically depicts the timeline of data induction. My verbatim theatre practice involves interviewing a community on a certain topic or event, recording these conversations and using the stories as stimulus for the creative development of performance. I refer throughout my research to the people I interviewed as the community of storytellers, and for *bald heads & blue stars* these were women over the age of 18 who have Alopecia; an autoimmune disorder that results in varying degrees of hairloss. I am a member of this community of women and also of the Australia Alopecia Areata Foundation (AAAF), and this has significantly aided my ability to facilitate connection with the broader Alopecia community.

I received ethical clearance to interview this community of storytellers on the 18th March 2013 (H12REA091) and I began by contacting the president of the AAAF about the project. She then sent out information and a call for participants to the database of members and promoted the project through social media (appendix A). This call specifically asked women with Alopecia who were interested in sharing their experiences and stories to contact me via email ([myalopeciastory@gmail.com](mailto:myalopeciastory@gmail.com)). I also did an interview with a local newspaper (appendix B) and one with ABC Southern Queensland local radio (appendix C) to raise awareness about the project. I then facilitated a rigorous process of informed consent that began with a response to the emails with a narrative and informal explanation of the project and my expectations of the storytellers. If the storytellers agreed a second time that they would like to be involved I then sent the official information and consent form and began organising dates, times and locations for the interviews. After this process I had 15 women who agreed to participate and they became the community of storytellers. Interestingly, of these 15 women, two indicated that they first heard about the project through radio, two through the newspaper, ten through the connection with AAAF and one as a referral by another storyteller.

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

I travelled to each of the storytellers home towns in order to conduct the interviews, travelling as far north as Cairns and west to Longreach between March and July 2013. The interviews took place at a location chosen by the storyteller, with nine interviews occurring in a public location such as a café or restaurant, and six interviews at a home address. At the outset of the interview I again explained verbally what my intentions were for the project and how I would use their stories to create a performance, and that this project was also part of my PhD research into verbatim theatre. It was very important to many of the storytellers that they would not be identified through name or age in the script or performance text and that I would be the only person to listen back to the audio recording. These conversations resulted in 20 hours of interview material which I then transcribed for use in creative development. I refer to these documents throughout my research as Interview Transcripts (IT) and they are numbered in the order in which I conducted the interviews. For example, the third storyteller I interviewed is identified as (IT 3). After each of these interviews I would critically reflect on my practice, either verbally (which is then transcribed as a Reflective Transcript, coded as RT) or through the use of a journal framework.

The storytellers then received their first of three surveys in August 2013, asking them about their experience of being interviewed for this project. The survey was administered anonymously through the software program Survey Monkey and 14 of the 15 women completed this survey. The second survey was sent in January 2014, and the final survey in September 2014. Throughout my research I refer to the surveys as S1, S2 and S3, and when referencing a specific respondent I have coded the material as follows: S2R5, which would refer to the second survey and the fifth respondent to complete that survey.

I submitted an application to Artsworx at the University of Southern Queensland for *bald heads & blue stars* to be produced in their 2014 season, and this application was successful. I devised and facilitated five creative development workshops with 14 second year undergraduate students throughout September to November 2013. These students were aged between 17 – 19, and consisted of six male and eight female students. We read through the transcribed stories and early drafts of the play and discussed their theatrical resonance and possibility for performance. I refer to these

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

students as collaborating artists, and asked them to document their involvement in the workshops through structured journal entries. These are coded as Collaborating Artist Journals (CAJ) with a corresponding number, and after the workshop process I had collated 21 CAJ's. I incorporated the collaborating artist's feedback into my writing and prepared a draft script to send out to the storytellers. I sent this draft script on the 7th January 2014, and the storytellers had the opportunity to provide feedback to me personally through email, as well as being invited to complete a second anonymous survey (in January 2014) about their experience of reading the play and their opinion on its content and structure. Nine storytellers completed this survey and their feedback was incorporated into my playwriting process and provided data for understanding the impact on the storytellers of reading the stories.

I collaborated with Artsworx at the University of Southern Queensland to apply for a Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF) grant to employ director David Burton for the production, and we were successful in this application. Burton is a playwright, author and director, as well as being a colleague. In collaboration with Burton I organised a reading of the play in April 2014 with the cast (whom I also refer to as collaborating artists) and feedback from this session (documented through an audio recording of our post-read discussion and then transcribed as a reflective transcript) was also incorporated into the writing process. At the outset of the research project I envisioned that I may be involved in some aspect of the production, however had not intended to be a member of the cast. While writing I realised that positioning myself within the rehearsal process from the perspective of actor would provide opportunities to explore the form of verbatim theatre in an embodied way. It also would enable an embodiment of female baldness in the performance, which was a feature many of the storytellers expressed in our interviews they desired to see in the production. As I both have Alopecia and a background in performing in local community theatre productions, the decision to cast me in the play was made collaboratively with Burton and my supervisor. The cast were invited to complete three journals across the production period; two during the rehearsal phase and one post performance. I also had three critical discussions with Burton across the production period, and these were transcribed as reflective transcripts (RTs).

## Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

There were four performances between the 28th August 2014 – 30th August 2014 at the University of Southern Queensland, and seven storytellers were able to attend the closing night performance. One week after the final performance the storytellers who attended the production were sent the third and final survey (in September 2014) asking them about their experience of viewing the live performance. Five storytellers completed this survey, and on the 29th September 2014 I wrote my final journal entry which marked the end of the case study. Figure Three on page 74 summarises the various data sets and how they will be named in the thesis, and appendix D visually depicts the timeline of data induction.

### **3.2. Reflective Practitioner Case Study (RPCS)**

John O’Toole and Philip Taylor are two key writers on the RPCS methodology. O’Toole explains that the RPCS “rejects the traditional social sciences outside in approach to researching professional contexts” (57) and instead places precedence on the practitioners “own construction of meaning, purpose and significance” (57). Cheryl Stock, a dancer who has applied the RPCS to her research on choreography explains that rather than solely depending on removed observations, in this methodology “the experience and body of the practitioner is placed along-side the text of the observer thus contributing a much needed dual perspective” (2). This approach acknowledges my position as the practitioner (in the context of this research, a verbatim theatre playwright) as being a valid, personal and contextualised perspective from which to reflect and research. In practice-led research the “practice is the principal research activity” (Haseman 7) and throughout my project the practice has continually influenced and shaped the research frameworks, particularly the frameworks for documentation. Baz Kershaw is an international leader on practice-led research and describes it as combining “creative doing with reflexive being” (64), where the researcher reflects on the artistic process that they themselves are conducting and the documentation of this reflection, alongside the practice itself, becomes research data.

A reflective practitioner is someone who critically reflects on their practice with the specific goal of identifying what that practice is, how it is actioned and what impact it has on the practice context. In a RPCS this reflection is induced and documented through a variety of case study methods in order to enable analysis and research. In

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

this model there is no hierarchy between the roles of artist and researcher; they are both equally necessary in the production of new knowledge. Sharon Grady in “Towards the practice of theory in practice” explains the relationship between the two roles as being “symbiotically linked”, that “sometimes our focus may be on analysis, at others times on practice, but there should always exist a dialectical relationship between theorising and practice” (61). Taylor and O’Toole both emphasise the importance of this dialectical relationship, referring to the process with Donald Schön’s phrase “reflection-in-action” (qtd. in O’Toole 56 and Taylor *Doing Reflective Practitioner Research* 28). Schon explains that the reflective practitioner “does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively...He does not separate thinking from doing...[and] his experimenting is a kind of action” (qtd. in Taylor 28). In my research this has meant that while the documentation of practice may occur through case study methods such as journal entries and surveys, the learning is occurring during the workshops and rehearsals, during the interviews with the storytellers, and during the physical act of writing the play.

As outlined in their preface to “Scriptwriting as Creative Writing Research II” Baker et al. argue that scripts, both stage and screen plays should “be valued as research artefacts in their own right” (1) and the act of creating them is a research practice (2) that both creates and disseminates knowledge (3). My practice as a playwright and the resulting script and performance are equally vital aspects of research as the case study documentation, as they both produce knowledge. Stock explains that being both artist and researcher allows for the exploration of “connections between perception and action, experience and cognition” (5) and therefore the nature of the RPCS is “not only relational but emergent, interactive and embodied” (5). This is why I have included reference to the script, poster and photos from the production in the main body of the thesis and encourage the reader to watch the accompanying DVD footage of *bald heads & blue stars* before reading the written findings.

Roberta Mock in “Researching the body in/as performance” argues that documentation in practice-led research is always personal and subjective (228) and that this may be problematic when identifying findings that are transferable beyond the research context. O’Toole (37) and Taylor (*Doing Reflective Practitioner*

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

*Research* 43) advocate that the integration of triangulation combats this concern and serves to validate and corroborate the findings; that triangulation in research ensures findings are plausible, credible and transferable (O'Toole 37). In my research, triangulation refers to the use of multiple sources who reflect from their perspective on the practice and experience of the verbatim theatre practice and process. These sources are the storytellers, the collaborating artists and my own practice as playwright and actor. Taylor describes triangulation as the "process of confirming the believability of observations" (43). As the practice begins, various methods of documentation are employed which all serve to "chart your meta-thinking about the research, and pin point moments of insight" (O'Toole 102). Through documenting individual moments of practice from multiple perspectives I am enhancing the believability and transferability of my research findings with the intent outlined by Barbara Bolt that "the knowledge claims that flow from practice-led research are able to be sustained beyond the particularity of a practice to contribute to the broader knowledge economy" (34). Bolt describes this contribution as "praxical knowledge" (34), when the findings have emerged from a convergence of practice, critical reflection and theory. Triangulation has been strategically employed in my approach to the RPCS to ensure the praxical knowledge that results can contribute significantly to both the academic field and the broader field of verbatim theatre practice.

A major feature of this approach is that "different methods are combined with the purpose of illuminating a case from different angles: to triangulate by combining methodologies" (Johansson 3). Triangulation is the "essence" (Johansson 11) of case study methodology. Gillham's book *Case Study Research Methods* (2000), Scholze and Tietje's *Embedded Case Study Methods* (2002) and Christine Meyer's "A Case in Case Study Methodology" (2001) have provided the bedrock of my reading into case study literature. Gillham's advice in structuring case studies has been particularly pertinent to my project. He warns that researchers need to be wary of being blinded by an assumed familiarity with the research context (18), to avoid self-censoring when reflecting and journaling (19) and to follow up on tacit knowledge (or intuition) with explicit evidence from the triangulation of sources (31). Significantly, Gillham embraces the use of case study methods for researching artistry as this enables "privileged access to thoughts, insights [and] mental discoveries" (90). Meyer writes that there are no stringent requirements for a case

## Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

study approach; that the design of the research strategy is up to the researcher (329). One of the strengths then is that “it allows tailoring the design and data collection procedures to the research questions” (Meyer 330) and this is a value I have applied in my approach. Verbatim theatre values the spoken word and therefore I have included a process of reflection that is audio recorded (the reflective transcripts, RT’s). I am focusing on the practice of the verbatim theatre playwright, therefore journaling my own practice and triangulating this with the journals of the collaborating artists provides both a depth and breadth of documentation.

The following figure visually depicts the structure of my practice-led research within the framework of a RPCS. I have tailored my approach to richly incorporate triangulation, embed the practice of verbatim theatre and ensure the strategic and targeted induction of data.

### Embedded layers of triangulation



Figure 1: Embedded layers of triangulation

Adam Ledger, writing specifically on the methods of documentation in practice-led research, references Angela Piccini and Baz Kershaw’s division of documentation into two categories; external and integral. External documentation refers to what is produced around and after the creative practice, and integral refers to the “mass of heterogenous trace materials that the practice process creates” (166). Balancing

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

external and integral documentation can improve the rigour and validity of practice-led research findings, in similar ways to triangulation. In my research the integral practice and documentation includes the interviews and transcripts from the 15 interviews with the alopecia community, workshop planning and facilitation, playbuilding materials, communication trails, media statements and performance documents (script, program and teachers notes). My external documentation relates to the case study methodology including personal reflective journals, the collaborating artist's journals and surveys with the community of storytellers. In the above figure, the integral documentation is manifest in the inner two layers of triangulation, and external documentation in the outer two triangulations. Figure two depicts specifically the triangulation of the case study data:

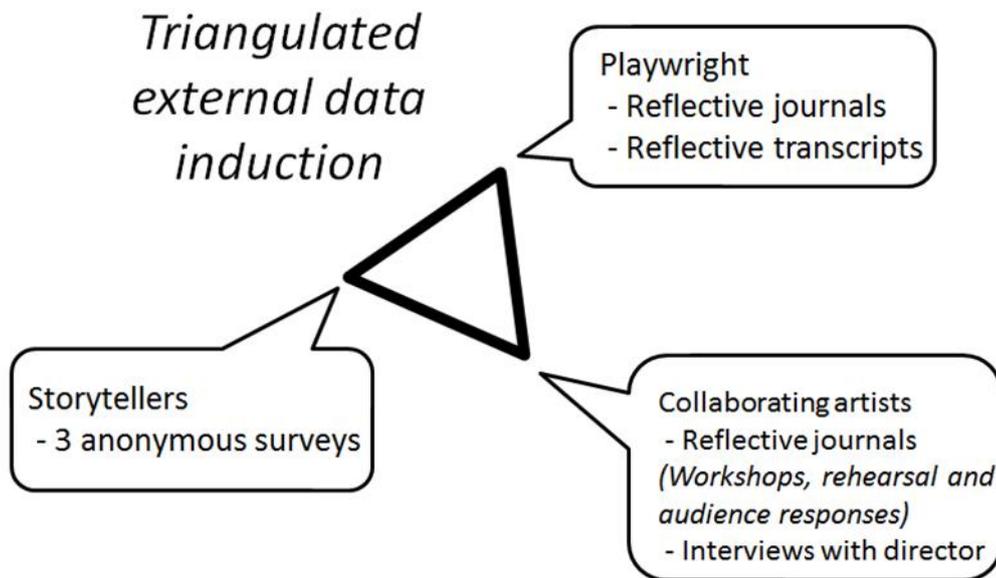


Figure 2: Triangulated external data induction

Ledger advocates that all documentation should be used as an integrated feature of any practice-led thesis (171), as the knowledge and insights that the documentation creates is an “entirely valid creative research methodology” (183). Barrett’s discussion on tacit and explicit knowledge aligns with Ledger’s avocation, as she states that through documentation of experiences, perspectives and reflections, practice-led research uses a subjective approach that can “bring into view particularities of lived experience” (143) and theorise the tacit knowledge created through embodied experiences. Qualitative research emphasises sensitivity over objectivity. “Sensitivity means having insight, being tuned into...It means being able to present the view of the participants and taking the role of the other through

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

immersion in data” (Corbin and Strauss 32). Through sensitivity and immersion in the data the researcher can slowly begin to understand the story the data has to tell (Corbin and Strauss 33). Valuing the documentation is evident throughout this thesis, as I use excerpts and examples to demonstrate and highlight the data that led to key findings.

### 3.3. Methods of practice and documentation

The methods of practice used to research the process, form and impact of verbatim theatre are the interviewing of the community of storytellers, facilitating creative development workshops, playwriting, rehearsing and performing. Due to the practice-led approach of this research, these methods are simultaneously methods of practice and methods of research. Naming, defining and deconstructing these methods is one of the core findings of my research, detailed explicitly in Chapter Five.

This section will discuss each of the external methods of documentation, and provide an explicit summary of the integral documentation that was collected as data for analysis. Each of the data sets are named as follows;

<b>External Documentation</b>		
<i>Document type</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Example</i>
Journals (J) x 67	Sarah Peters	(J24, 12/9/13)
Reflective Transcript (RT) x 23	Sarah Peters David Burton (Director) Cast	(RT5, 12/8/14))
Collaborating artist journal (CAJ) x 38	Second year undergraduate students and cast	(CAJ14, 14/8/14))
Survey (S) x 3	The community of storytellers	(S2R5)
<b>Integral Documentation</b>		

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

Email Communication (EC)	Sarah Peters and each of the storytellers individually	(EC 12/12/13, 12:13)
Interview transcript (IT) x 15	Sarah Peters and each of the storytellers individually	(IT 14)
Drafts of the script	Sarah Peters	(Draft 3/10/13)
Performance Script	Sarah Peters	<i>bh&amp;bs</i> script
Performances x 4 28/9/14, 11am 28/9/14, 7pm 29/9/14, 7pm 30/9/14, 7pm	Artsworx Production Team, University Southern Queensland	<i>bh&amp;bs</i> performance
Media and marketing	Various	(appendix B)

Figure 3: Integral and External Documentation

#### 3.3.1. Reflective Journals and Reflective Transcripts

There are two categories of journals in this research; my personal reflective journals and the collaborating artist journals. The personal journals are designed to document my practice and my thinking around that practice, to be a place of reflection and inquiry. Ortlipp explains that through the act of writing out her critical self-reflection she was prompted to “change my approach during the research process” (699) as reflective journals not only serve to “create transparency in the research process” they can also “have concrete effects on the research design” (696). I embraced this flexible approach and allowed both the practice and the research to influence the structure of my journal framework throughout the case study, and this resulted in four versions of the framework.

My initial journal frameworks (one and two) were highly coded and prescriptive (appendix E), as I was trying to apply all of my theoretical learning around reflective

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

journaling to the document. This became too constrictive and when reading Gillham's advice on case study methods and particularly on not self-censoring, I adapted the framework to better suit my practice. Journal Framework Three (appendix F) became more flexible and freeform. I was becoming immersed in the project and no longer required constant reminders of the questions and focus as I knew them intimately. I was also struggling to separate my reflections into the separate categories. I felt that they overlapped and that one reflection actually held resonance for a number of my research questions.

The shift into rehearsal also marked a shift in my thinking about the research. I needed a clearer guide for my reflections that would assist me in thinking about the practice in complex ways as I was unsure how the rehearsal process may assist with the research. This resulted in Journal Framework Four (appendix G). I realised that being involved in the performance gave me an incredible insight into form and process. I realised that I had been researching form all along, but from the perspective of reading written playtexts rather than physical live performance. This led to the formulation of my fourth research question and the creation of the final journal framework.

Structuring the journal reflections was vital to generating relevant data that could contain both depth and breadth whilst also allowing for research anomalies to be captured. As evidenced by the evolving journal frameworks, elements of the methods were adapted throughout the research project to more comprehensively induce and collect data that would paint a more complete and rounded picture of the practice. This reflects Meyer's assertion that the benefit of a practice-led approach is that the methods can be tailored to the research (330), and Ortlipp's suggestion that the frameworks for documentation should not be static, but rather flexible and responsive to the process (699).

The frameworks developed for the collaborating artists were created specifically for and tailored to their unique involvement in the practice. I facilitated creative development workshops and then invited the undergraduate students to think about the activities and discussion that we had undertaken during the workshop, and document these practices in relation to what we did as a whole group and what they did individually (appendix H). O'Toole states that "students and even professionals

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

do not automatically understand how to create and structure a reflective journal so that it is reflective” (107), therefore creating frameworks for both myself and the collaborating artists allowed me to target and scaffold specific areas of practice and align the discourse and language of the documents to each participant group. Similarly, throughout the rehearsal process I devised a series of reflective questions specific to the focus of our practice. The actors were invited to complete three journal reflections at various junctures in the production period, two during rehearsal and one post performance. The questions on each journal framework adapted to reflect the rehearsal process, and I have included an example of one of the frameworks as appendix I.

The journals were a place where we wrote “in order to learn and to understand” (Ortlipp 700), a place where a gut response to the practice and research becomes the first stage of analysis (Coffey and Atkinson 2), a place to “depict journeys of developing awareness” and provide “opportunities to highlight habitual thinking” (Harris 315). The reflective transcripts (appendix J) are another method for documenting and reflecting on my practice, however the crucial difference is that they are audio recorded reflections that I then transcribed. In this way my method reflects the values of my arts practice; valuing the uniqueness of vocal expression, the faster pace of speaking and the non-linear thought tracking that occurred when we spoke. Kershaw raises the question, where is knowledge located? (84) and is it possible to learn and know through doing and being? He suggests that through performance “philosophy becomes action and the location of knowledge is temporarily entirely undone” (84). Initially this was a method I only applied to my personal documentation of practice, however when reading back over the journals from the creative development workshops I noticed that one of the collaborators was very self-conscious about their ability to spell, as demonstrated in the excerpts below:

The concept of a bald puppet (maniquine (can't fucking spell)  
ght up to show alopecia - this brought to the surface

(CAJ 15, 4/10/13)

I came up with ~~an~~ idea of maniquin heads (however the fuck you spell it) being painted on, but that developed to the OHP and drawing on that, as mentioned before.

(CAJ 5, 25/9/13)

The comments made on the journal document imply a self-consciousness by the collaborator, and it was definitely not my intent that participation in the process would be disempowering. I had not previously perceived literacy to be a barrier, however after reading over the journals I decided to incorporate the option of spoken journal reflections during the rehearsal process. This allowed the physicality of expression and the actor's body and breath to influence the way the cast reflected on their embodied experience in the process.

### 3.3.2. Surveys (Storytellers experience)

In his article on language and meaning in qualitative research, Polkinghorne states that the reason we gather data is to "provide evidence for the experience" we are researching (138) and clarifies that experience is very different to behaviour. We can observe behaviour, such as my observations of the storytellers after our interview, however it is not possible to observe someone's experience. Therefore, other methods of data collection are required, and in my research I am inducing data on the experience of being involved in a verbatim theatre project through the use of three targeted and anonymous surveys. These surveys were designed to explore how the storytellers felt about being involved in the project, and what impact certain elements of my practice had on their experience. The survey responses also influenced the process and artistry, providing an additional avenue for the storytellers to be included throughout the process.

The intent of a 'good' survey is to measure a specific phenomenon (Fink and Fowler). However, as there is minimal research into the impact of verbatim theatre on storytellers (as outlined in Section 2.7 of the Literature Review) my central objective is not necessarily to measure a phenomena, but rather to see if there is something to measure, and what that might be. My goal in devising the surveys was to ascertain how participating in a verbatim theatre process influenced the storytellers

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

emotionally, socially, in relation to their understanding of Alopecia and their identity as a community. Rather than a quantifiably measurable outcome, my participant surveys were designed to produce information that describes discourses, experiences and behaviour (Fink 14). My surveys targeted three key junctures in the verbatim theatre process; the interview, the text and the performance. The literature on surveys and questionnaires discusses intent, question design, piloting the questions, dissemination and analysis of response. It suggests the most crucial factor for a researcher to consider when choosing a survey method is what you intend to use the data for (Thomas 2, Fink 3). All other variables in survey design are based on the central objective of the researcher, as this will determine type, mode, complexity and analysis methods.

To ensure that I induced data specific to my research questions it was imperative that I incorporate a balance of open and closed questions. Gillham states that open questions are harder to analyse but useful when seeking opinions and judgements (*Developing a Questionnaire* 5). In contrast, closed questions are easier to analyse and compare (Fowler 101), so my surveys are designed to benefit from the advantages of both approaches. Some of the closed questions in my surveys are “adjective checklists” (Thomas 15), promoted for their value in gathering information about feelings, and it was important to provide respondents with an equal number of positive and negative adjectives. The second type of closed question is a “rating scale” which enables me to ascertain the degree to which a person feels about a topic (Thomas 21) rather than just what they felt. Survey One (appendix K) demonstrates examples of these question types. However as Gillham points out, scaled responses do not allow for the answering of “why” a respondent feels a certain way (*Developing a Questionnaire* 32). This is where the value of open questions was embraced in my approach, as evident in all three surveys (appendices K, L and M).

As previously stated, one of the greatest disadvantages of open questions discussed in the literature is that the responses provided will be difficult to analyse (Gillham *Developing a Questionnaire* 5, Fowler 101) or secondly that participants “will give answers that are essentially irrelevant to your intent” (Babbie 127). This is when deference to the objective is beneficial in justifying my use of open questions. I am conducting a form of case study, which means everything relating to the case is

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

relevant and it is my role as researcher during the analysis stage to make sense of the data and discover how or why this response might be relevant.

I created these surveys in Survey Monkey and emailed the link to the storytellers. While Fink warns there is some risk of attrition in self-administered surveys (58) Fowler suggests that they are ideal when dealing with sensitive topics as the participant “does not have to admit directly to an interviewer socially undesirable or negatively valued characteristics or behaviour” (74). This was pertinent in my research as I developed a relationship with the storytellers and they may not wish to openly criticise me or the project. However, attrition was certainly a challenge; while I had 14 of the 15 storytellers complete the first survey reflecting on the experience of being interviewed, this reduced to only nine respondents in the second survey about the draft of the script and five for the survey that reflected on the live performance (although only seven of the storytellers were able to attend the production, so this final statistic is five respondents out of a possible seven). While the duration of the project may have affected the rate of attrition (it was approximately 18 months from interview to performance), some of the storytellers indicated in their first survey response that their main agenda in being involved in the project was not to see the stories transformed into performance, but rather to simply meet another person with Alopecia. Having satisfied their own goals early on in the process, this may account for some of the attrition in this project.

The analysis of the survey data occurred in the same way as the artistic process of finding stories and patterns in the interview transcripts. Gilham states that you should begin by categorising and coding the responses (*Developing a Questionnaire* 64). The first step was to find the substantive statements across all responses and then read through the material again looking for categories and patterns. These data patterns are then analysed in relation to one another and relevant theory before the results of the survey are written (Gillham 66-69). This process paralleled my artistic process of reading/listening to the interview transcripts from the storytellers, identifying the stories, looking for patterns and impulse, and then using these to creatively shape the material into a script.

### **3.3.3. Integral Documentation (Interview transcripts, communication trails, publicity)**

The integral documentation in my research is predominantly a collation of documents that were created as part of the artistic practice, such as the email communication with storytellers, planning documents for workshops and media articles. The one exemption to this is the Interview Transcript Framework (appendix N) as I designed this document specifically for this research project. I have included in this framework a space for artistic impulse and this is a direct reference to Abbs five phases of art making. Abbs states that the art making process begins with an impulse, it is a “stirring of the psyche which through expression desires clarification and integration” (195). When transcribing the interview I would often have bursts of ideas or imagine moments of performance, and this column allowed me to document this impulse instantly and parallel to the material that stimulated that impulse. It is in some ways similar to O’Toole’s description of memos as a method of documentation, as it serves to “pinpoint moments of insight” (102). Various media relating to the production can be seen in appendices O, P and Q.

## **3.4. Review of methods**

Regularity and structure were two key features of my approach to the RPCS. Ensuring that I was consistently documenting practice, either through my own reflective journals or through interviews and journals from the collaborating artists, was crucial. Maintaining regularity ensures that a more complex picture of the thinking, choices and strategies embodied in the practice-led process can be captured. This meant routinely reflecting after each interview with the Alopecia community, facilitating time during the creative development workshops for the student collaborators to reflect on their involvement, and following up regularly on survey completion. Structure is equally important. Creating practice-specific questions that frame reflection and prompt a broad consideration and deconstruction of practice is vital to inducing rich, relevant and triangulated data. This was highlighted through the cast’s journal reflections during rehearsal. I provided four to five questions, however always left the final question very open in an effort to provide a place for reflections outside the scope of my framework. The responses to this question were

### Chapter Three: Methodology and practice

always brief, or conveyed that they had too much to say; “[a] million things here” (CAJ 26, 11/8/14). Targeted and structured questions resulted in specific and detailed responses from participants across the research, providing insight to their experience of the process and their contribution to the practice.

Triangulation proved vital in my immersion in the data and analysis of themes and patterns. It enabled me to write about the practice of verbatim theatre with “warranted assertability” (Lingard 2013). This means that I understand the contextual nature of my findings and am prepared for critique, however, based on my practice and what I can learn from the data induced in this research, coupled with a review of the literary field, this is what I assert to know about verbatim theatre at this time. Being able to draw on the reflections of multiple parties across the process, particularly the community of storytellers through the survey data, enabled my findings to be warranted.

## **4. Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars**

### **4.1. DVD, Script and Teacher's Notes**

The contribution to knowledge from this research project began with the creation and dissemination of two artefacts: the *bald heads & blue stars* script and the 2014 production which was filmed through funding support from the Australia Alopecia Areata Foundation. This performance can be viewed on the accompanying DVD, along with a post-show Q and A session after the first performance. I also wrote teacher's notes to accompany the production (appendix R), and facilitated two workshops with local Toowoomba high schools based on this material.

Section 4.2 contains the *bald heads & blue stars* script. The script and performance are contributions to knowledge and contextualise the findings in Chapter Five. I recommend viewing the accompanying DVD prior to reading the remainder of this thesis.

## 4.2. bald heads & blue stars

### *Notes on performance*

When the roles are lettered A – E the actors are storytellers. They guide the audience through the world of the play and then step into the verbatim stories. Actor B is a male role.

When the roles are numbered 1, 3, 4 and 5 the actors are speaking the verbatim stories from the 15 women interviewed and sometimes their age is indicated in brackets. Role 3/C should ideally be a bald actor.

There are also specific scenes for the characters of VIOLET and ALOPECIA. ALOPECIA is played by the male actor, and the storytellers (roles A – E) become VIOLET and other characters within VIOLET's world.

Lights, music and the actor's energy should be used throughout the performance to create a change in mood where it reads 'shift' in the script. There are no 'scenes' but rather shifts in direction, energy and theme.

The lines in bold can be allocated to any of the actors not delivering the monologue.

Where the / symbol occurs in speech it suggests that the character has abruptly changed their intent or thought of a new way of expressing themselves.

The titles given within the stage directions are optional inclusions, for example they could be projected onto the stage throughout the performance.

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

*Music. Violet enters. She is clearly a bit nervous, but determined. She removes her wig, smiles, confident in her beauty in this moment.*

#### **Shift**

*Actors B - E enter.*

B: Alopecia 101 or

A: ‘Why the hell is my hair falling out?’

D: Alopecia is an autoimmune condition that results in hair loss.

E: Your body believes the hair follicles to be bacteria and your immune system works to get rid of them.

C: There are three main types of Alopecia.

B: Alopecia Areata is when you have small patches of hair loss anywhere on your body.

A: The hair in one patch can be growing back while falling out somewhere else, or you may have multiple patches at the same time.

D: Alopecia totalis is when you have lost just about all of the hair on your scalp, and have patchy hair loss in other areas of your body.

E: Alopecia universalis is when you don’t have any hair on your body. At all.

C: *(Incredulous)* No hair

D: None

C: Anywhere

E: Yep

C: Not even? *(indicates pubic hair area)*

B: I think they get the picture

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

C: So weird! But cool. Very cool. Like, literally

A: Both men and women can get Alopecia.

B: There is very little known about the condition, and no cure.

C: We spoke with over 15 women

D: Women up north in Cairns

E: Out west in Longreach

A: Across the border into Newcastle

B: And east along the coastline of QLD

D: about their lives, their loves, their hair

C: Lack of hair?

D: and the first time they met Alopecia

A: This is Violet

C: We're all going to play her at some point in her life

E: You're going to see a lot of her

D: Her journey with Alopecia began at age three

**Shift**

*Actor C becomes Violet. Actor B becomes Alopecia.*

VIOLET: Hi. I'm Violet. Want to play?

ALOPECIA: *(considers the request for a moment)* Yes! I'm the pirate and you're, you're my princess and we're running away from the baddies. Look out! There they are!

*They play and run off stage, then re-enter with Alopecia in front and Violet lagging behind*

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

VIOLET: I want to be the pirate, you're always the pirate, it's my turn

ALOPECIA: *(all in a sing song voice)* nah nah nah nah nah nah, but you can't catch me you can't catch me, you're just the princess nah nah nah nah nah nah

VIOLET: I don't want to play with you anymore!

*Violet is glum and won't play. Alopecia is slowly able to make Violet smile. They laugh and begin to play.*

A: She took him to primary school and introduced him at 'show and tell'

VIOLET: This is my friend Alopecia, and he helped me put my hair into 3 pigtails and we're best friends.

*Violet and Alopecia run off stage playing*

D: Three pigtails because her mum was trying to cover a big bald spot at the back of her head

C: Can you imagine the poor teacher?

A: And she never really noticed that he always hung around

**Shift**

*The word 'Diagnosis' is projected into the performance space.*

3: I lost all of my hair when I was about 12

4: 52

5: 9 months

1: 24

3: I lost it just in patches, like ten cent piece size bits, over 6 months

4: 3 years

## Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

5: 2 months

4: It came and went for a couple of years, but when I stopped breastfeeding is just all fell out

3: The worst thing was going to the doctor for the first time and being told its

All: Stress

*Engage with the audience. Lines in bold are spoken by Actor B.*

1 (55): And I remember rockin' into my GP and going "oh I've got patches here" and I thought my son must have been pulling it out, I didn't realise that it was a little bit more than that, and all my bloody GP, who I afterwards changed because he was so bloody awful went, "yeah well you know obviously you'll either go bald or you won't, your hairs falling out, you're stressed". And I'm thinking, you know didn't even refer me to a (*searching for the word*), you know a dermatologist, anything, and just, I got a complete blank, and that was horrible. 21 and here I was thinking the world had come to an end.

4 (55): It wasn't until much later that I learned it was an autoimmune thing, that my body thinks that hair is like bacteria and fights against it.

5 (35): (*sarcastically, as the doctor*) "oh yeah, its common, yeah, it's just common alopecia", "not much you can do, uh there is steroid injections and, you know, they're quite painful and don't work a lot of the time". You know, this is what they tell you, (*as herself*) "ok, do you wanna do a blood test or anything?" Oh we can do that, we'll have a look. You know what I mean?, you want to look into this at all? How bout, just for shits and giggles we'll just have a look at some blood.

3 (58): (*nervous*) I was very stressed when it first/ and maybe that was a trigger, who knows? I often think about that and I think, I don't know what happened cos I was very runned down through the stress and maybe I was ill and I didn't know it and, and that triggered something? Maybe I did kind of, what if it is stress and then it's kind of, like, my fault?

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

4 (40): It had gone away for so long, I thought ‘Oh its run its course’, but two months after I had my son, it just come out and come out. Oh I was so sad, I was um, I was just devastated, I went to the doctor and I started, I started cryin’, I said, ‘I can’t feel like that again’, cos it did used to get me really down. And he put me on antidepressants and

1: I said, I don’t think that’s what it’s about

DR: It’s just the baby blues

5: I don’t think so, I think it’s more than that

DR: Stress is sometimes a trigger

3: I’m not really worried about anything

DR: My guess is you’re stressed

5: I’m not fuckin stressed!

**Shift**

D: When Violet was 5 she was taken to Toowoomba to see a specialist.

*A becomes the mum and E becomes the doctor.*

*Violet is sitting on the stool. Alopecia is wary of the doctor as he looks at Violet’s head. Doctor moves away.*

ALOPECIA: What’s going on?

VIOLET: Dunno

ALOPECIA: Your head doesn’t hurt does it?

VIOLET: Nuh, don’t think so

*They watch the others talking*

VIOLET: Come on, let’s play

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

*Violet convinces Alopecia to play. Dr comes over and inspects Violet's hands, totally ignoring Alopecia.*

D: The doctor wanted to look at her nails, but she had pink polish on.

*Doctor exits and returns to being Actor E*

D: She felt guilty about that.

ALOPECIA: Reckon we'll get to go to Maccas?

VIOLET: Mum said maybe Pizza hut, if we're good.

*Mum exits and returns to being Actor A*

D: Her mum told her later that the doctor was talking about treatment options. The only thing they had had any success with was cortisone injections to the scalp which may promote hair growth.

C: Violet was five.

E: Her mum decided it was all just too harsh and they'd think about it again when she was older.

C: Violet learned later how tough that decision was for her mother

E: And regretted never saying thankyou

*Violet and Alopecia run off talking about the food they're going to eat at lunch.*

**Shift.**

*Each of the short lines in the following moment are as the same 'character'.*

1: I had this big piece of hair missing, like a triangular wedge

5: At that stage there was like 3, 3 twenty cent piece bits missing

3: It was actually the hairdresser, um, yeah she goes 'If I cut your hair too short you'll see the bald spot'. I'm like, um, bald spot?

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

- 4: That's when I started to worry
- 1: Patches from like 7 or 8
- 4: My husband said 'Oh looks like a bald spot on the top of your head'
- 3: It's the weirdest thing
- 4: You've just got no bloody idea what's going on
- 5: And it just kept coming
- 1: I'd run my fingers through my hair and they'd just be covered
- 5: With hair
- 4: My hair
- 1: I just kept thinking it's gonna stop, it is gonna stop, it's always stopped
- 3: Drips and drabs
- 5: Handfuls
- 3: A bit more here, then here
- 4: Excruciatingly slow
- 1: It happened so fast
- 3: One minute I had hair and then I had
- All: Alopecia

*Actor B becomes DAD*

- 5: When I was younger and Dad, you know, I was gonna lose it all and I was being all depressed and didn't want to leave the room and all that sort of stuff, he came in and he's usually pretty wise with his words...

DAD: I'm not gonna sit here and tell you that there are people out there worse, you know, that have other things wrong with them and world war whatever going

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

on and all that sort of stuff, cos I know you don't care cos you're going through this and you're upset.

5: And he was right. I honestly did not care about what was going on with all those people, this is what I was dealing with and that was the situation. And he's gone...

DAD: I'm not gonna say that to you but what I am gonna say is, if you had a choice, like you could go back and you had a choice and you had to lose something, part of your body, what would it be?

#### **Shift**

C: The 'how to treat your alopecia' guide

B: Or, 'please please please make my hair grow back'

C: The thing is, different treatments work for different people, but there isn't a 'cure'

E: There's no pattern or rhythm to it at all

B: What worked for a little while on some women did absolutely nothing for others

C: It's just the luck of the draw

D: Your hair could grow back

E: But if it's been more than 4-5 years

C: It probably won't. Sorry.

#### **Shift**

*All actors are on stage, and the storytellers engage with the audience.*

1 (48): Back in those days nobody knew anything about alopecia. Nobody wanted to talk about it, you know even when I was seeing the dermatologist it was like, blank. But the endocrinologist that they sent me to was great and lovely, and

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

we tried a few things but nothing really worked, and then I saw this dermatologist and he said

B: Oh yeah I can fix this

1 (48): He put me on steroids and just had to keep upping the dose, constantly, because it wasn't working and you know he'd set himself this challenge. I was having like awful mood swings and putting on weight. I was/ just felt like shit all of the time and it, you know, and you get to the point where you think oh, you know something that you don't want but you've learned to live with, or feeling like crap all the time? And I remember when I said this to the dermatologist and he said

B: oh so it's more fashionable to be bald than fat is it?

1 (48): I was so friggin' insulted.

4 (65): Have you tried..... 'Have you tried this?' 'Have you tried that?' (*Frustrated*) Ohhhh my god. I tried acupuncture, didn't work. I did that for a few months, acupuncture, didn't work, uh what else did I try?...oh going off soy, soy products, cos I'm vegetarian I used to eat/ not a fair bit of soy but I'd eat it at least once a week you know. Stopped all that, nah nothing happened, (*laughs*) I didn't actually start eating meat again (*laughs*) won't go that far. It has absolutely nothing to do with it, right? So little things like that I stopped but nothing, nothing more than that, like I didn't go on all juice diet or, didn't do anything like that, cos I thought I can't see where the correlation would be in that. (*Nervously ventures to say...*)I've heard like rubbing onions on...I actually did that, once or twice. It smelled bad, so I didn't do that anymore (*laughs*). Lots of herbal stuff that people recommended, oh, 'take this I've heard'/ like even just the other day a woman sent me an email;

3: oh I just heard on some program that rose hip oil or rose hip something or other

4 (65): I said 'oh thanks. I'll look into it' and that's as far as I go.

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

5 (30): I've heard that going gluten free can sometimes help, so I've started eating more lentils and um, what are those pea things called? You know, the ones that (*whispers*) give you terrible wind? Chickpeas! That's them. Can't say it's really done much for my hair, but I've never been so regular in all my life

1: I tried that Regain, you know that stuff men use?

3: Tried acupuncture for a little while, and one time they did a scalp analysis

5: This person would say take this

3: This person would say take that

4: Take that

5: Oh no don't take that

4: Extra zinc they said

1: If you just rub onions on your scalp

5: You need to be eating more meat

3: Dandelion leaf tea

*Actors assist in the following story. The lines in bold are spoken by Actor B.*

5 (45): And I was listening, it was like voices, voices, voices all around me. Take this, do that, you should be eating this and doing that, should should should should. And I had these two, (*she is handed two shopping bags – actors 1, 3, 4 exit*) I put everything in two garbage, two like shopping bags, you know, full grey shopping bags, and I was seeing this beautiful old doctor, when I was really/ I wanted the answer, I wanted someone to fix it, you know, (*declares*) this can be fixed! Everybody says they can fix it, and I've given them all this money, and they hadn't fixed it, and I'd been to you know dermatologists, I'd been to naturopaths, I'd been to reiki therapy, I'd been to, I had tried it all and I had these two bags and I went to the doctor and I said, 'I brought this because, I want to know what taking five hundred milligrams of this might do if I'm taking 600 milligrams of that. What will those two do

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

to me together?’. And he said, ‘now you’re thinking’. And I was like, I am thinking, he was like, ‘nobody knows because, nobody knows what any of this stuff is, we’re medical practitioners and they’re all, doing what they think is fixing it, and is it working?’ and I was like no, and he was like ‘well, now you’re using your brain and thinking about what all these possible cures could be doing, what do we know, high high doses of zinc might do to you’, or with dandelion leaf tea, with the yack poop rubbed in your scalp you know? I mean, I was trying it all and um... (*revealing*) and I’ve still got some, even now. Even now and then I’ll have a little, “oh I might have a go at this”.

#### Shift

A: Violet’s in year 5 and she’s

C: paranoid

E: Afraid that people will see.

*A, D and E become students playing handball, calling out Ace! King! Queen! And starting to play. Violet and Alopecia enter. Violet is unsure about the game.*

ALOPECIA: Hey, do you wanna play?

VIOLET: I can’t really play. I’m not as good as them.

ALOPECIA: Come on, we’ll be right

*Violet considers entering the game, but decides against it.*

VIOLET: (*to alopecia*) Let’s go play something else. This isn’t even fun anyway.

*They exit together.*

#### Shift

*‘High school’ is projected into the space*

5: Oh God, I can’t imagine how you dealt with having this as a teenager

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

- 4: Kids can be just so
- 3: Brutal
- 4: High school was
- 3: Challenging
- 1: You just don't feel like you fit in with everybody else
- 5: I had a great group of friends
- 4: It wasn't that big a deal

#### *Engage with the audience*

- 4 (30): So much of your life is... we are told it's all about looks and you can't really/ if you're being honest, it is about looks. You know I, I suppose through my adolescence, particularly, I got by on being smart and funny and a bit of a ring leader and, you know, through the years of teasing I just toughened up. I just became tougher than everybody else and/ although I was still a good girl, you know, but in order to deal with the teasing I just got smart mouthed and I just you know, used to just say...
- 3: (*Stands out to the side, defiantly looking at the audience*) 'oh can't you think of anything else, you know, "bald eagle", hello',
- 4 (30): you know, and I just give them other suggestions instead of, you know, I would just retaliate with how stupid their teasings were and I'd give them better ideas.
- 5 (25): We had a travelling group come through primary school teaching kids about leukaemia and so there was little bald puppets and things like that. Their troupe didn't check with anyone in the school and just assumed I had cancer and got me up on stage and gave me a pin and said...
- 2: 'you're really brave'

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

- 5 (25): blah blah blah. I was like, I would have been maybe seven, really young, had no idea they were going to do it, didn't know what to do, none of the teachers said anything, no one said anything. And eventually like later on in the day the librarian who I was like quite good friends with, cos I was a bookworm as a kid, came up and said 'are you ok?', like, someone should have said something', and no one did. That has stuck with me for a long time, it took me a long time, I would have been 13 or 14 before I could even start correcting people that I didn't have cancer. So, that's gonna happen.
- 4 (28): Oh hell no, I'd never take the beanie off at school. Like at our year seven graduation and cos everyone didn't want everyone else staring at me they actually all wore beannies as well, when we did like the end of year thing on the stage. It was really cool. But there was this one time when we were out in the playground and one of my friends actually did a handstand or a cartwheel or something and kicked me in the head and it fell off. I absolutely/ I went home, I went straight to the nurses office, 'got to go home'.
- 3 (25): I guess I always knew. I always knew I was different, cos it was a small school I didn't really have to, like all my friends were in that grade so, never really copped bullying till like high school. I had friends from primary school turn on me, and yeah, so basically just spent three months in the library. Used to hide in there. I used to get bullied/ I used to get picked on, like the boys would gang up on me and call me a 'freak' and 'baldy' and, stuff, and cos I got bad teeth as well so if they couldn't get me because of that they'd get me because of my teeth you know. I was never a big kid, I was always fairly small, so that was just one less thing that they could pick on me about. But yeah it went along until about grade ten. (*Have one of the other actors come up behind the speaker and act all tough and bitchy*) There was one girl, and this is going to sound really bad, but she said, she used to pick on me in class and I turned around and looked at her and I said, 'you keep going, you fucking bitch, you keep going I'm going to jam this pen down your throat'. (The other actor is completely shocked: should be comical) She left me alone after that.

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

1 (35): My father's a teacher, so every new school I went to I would have to then explain/ if I went to a school when I was wearing a wig I would have to, you know, get around to telling people about it. I mean it must have been bloody obvious to everyone, it's a wig for crying out loud, I don't know why/ I think I'm inherently a very honest person. I don't like deceiving people and wearing a wig to me was deceiving them because I would, when people met me they wouldn't be meeting me, they'd be meeting me with hair, and I didn't have hair. The agony for me was coming up with the words or the circumstance where I would say to these people that I'd only known for a few weeks in a new school...

4 (12): 'I've got something I need to tell you'

Others: oh! what what what (*4 whispers the story to them, and they run off to tell other people*)

1 (35): Usually the girls I would start with, and then I would just hope for word of mouth that it would get spread around. Which it usually was.

*They exit laughing.*

**Shift**

E: Violet's in year 8 now

C: She's found a way to ignore and hide Alopecia

E: And wears a head scarf to school.

*D and E become Violet's friends and they all sit together talking. Alopecia is still present, but perhaps sitting directly behind Violet, back to back. Actor A becomes the teacher.*

TEACHER: Violet. Come here please.

VIOLET: Yes miss

TEACHER: Is that appropriate school uniform?

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

VIOLET: Um, not really, but I/

TEACHER: We have a uniform for a reason Violet. Remove that immediately.

VIOLET: Um, can I just go to the toilets and do it in there? I'm just worried that I'll/

TEACHER: Now thankyou Violet.

*Violet removes the headscarf and Alopecia becomes more prominent. The teacher leaves. Violet rushes off.*

### **Shift**

C: When you're told to hide something about yourself

D: That it's 'wrong', or 'bad' or 'ugly'

E: It can totally overtake who you are

A: We heard about a lady

B: In her 70's now

C: Who was seven when her hair fell out

D: Her family stuck a wig on her head and said

All: That's what you wear

B: And from that day no one, not even her husband, saw her without a wig

*For each of the following sections of verbatim have the storyteller walk on with their family member (played by the actor in bold. When the family member speaks the line is in bold).*

4 (30): My mum can't cope with it cos my mum is quite vain and 'you should present yourself well' and all that sort of thing. Apparently you can't do that with no hair. She bought me my first wig, well Dad did, she went and tried

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

them all on and sent me photos of them. So she's quite um, overbearing in a 'I want to help' kind of way.

- 1 (40): Dad sort of... oh I think sometimes when he sees me/ well earlier on, probably not so much now anymore, but earlier on it probably...He's such a quiet, humble man, you know. He doesn't say too much unless its on the weather. He wouldn't know what to say but you can (see it on his face), you know what I mean? I know, from the looks on 'im sometimes that he, he feels real sad, you know, for me, and probably, still hopes that ...When he does see me without, you know when I'm/ when they are around me when I don't have it on, he sort of looks away, you know, not, he just doesn't want me to feel uncomfortable and, like I said... they forget.
- 3 (50): Mum? Oh she's been fabulous, you know really, like a really good support. I'd say she's probably cried nearly as many tears as I have. She always used to say 'look if I could give you mine', cos she's always had beautiful hair, like she's less grey than my sister. When we realised that I had to get the wig she paid for that first one, she organised/ we went up to Sydney on the train and did all that, so she helped me with all of that and she was really good with it. She generally contributes a bit to each of the wigs cos they're so expensive, but she's been really really supportive over it.
- 5 (28): Yeah I guess my parents are like, even now, 'oh you poor thing' and I'm like 'arrggh', just stop it, I'm fine you know. I don't want pity. I don't like being pitied for it, it's um, you know, yeah, I'm not a person who likes to be pitied.
- 4 (25): My brother, he's a little bit different. Like love him to death but he's not, it's like he's got his own little personality and his own little world. He's not that close to the family. And, it's hard to put it, like he is and he loves us, we know that he loves us, but all I ever wanted to do when I was younger was hang out with him. He's three years older, and he never did and I always thought it was because of my hair. So I guess I've got this underlying subconsciousness thing that I didn't want to embarrass him you know or have anyone ask him about
- 3: what's wrong with your sister?

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

- 4 (25): and anything like that. I mean we're a lot closer now that we're older, but I still haven't really got to that point where I can walk around like that with him. I have, but I don't feel good about it.
- 3 (45): I've got a six year old and she said to me/ I mean I don't ever criticise her, I always say 'oh look your hair is beautiful, and you've got the prettiest freckles and' and she said to me the other day, 'you've got very wobbly legs mummy'. And I guess it was just an observation and she said, 'and your tummy's a bit fat too', and I was like, 'well we don't use the word fat in this house, and I know my tummy's a bit wobbly but that's because I've had three babies'. And I just thought where does she get that from? I mean you hear other stupid women who say ridiculous things about themselves in front of their children, and the children are attune to go 'oh we have to criticise each other, that's what our job is' you know?
- 5 (40): When my son was, oh probably about three, four years old? He'd be horrified now, if I reminded him how horrible he was, but we'd be out shopping and he'd say 'if I can't have that, I'm gunna pull your wig'. Little shit.
- 1 (40): I remember in grade 11 I, I knew it was falling out again and I didn't tell my family for a couple of weeks. I was hoping that it wouldn't be true cos it was just coming out in dribs and drabs. You know, there'd be more in the plug hole of the shower than what should have been. I remember coming down the stairs, we had a two storey house, the bedrooms were upstairs and the living area was downstairs, came down the internal stairs and I just said to mum, 'I'm losing my hair again'. Well she just burst into tears, all of my sisters, especially my sister whose two years younger than me whose got glorious red hair, you know the whole family just gathered. I remember sitting in the bathroom with mum and um she was shaving off what was left of it, cos it was just getting thinner and thinner, and she was crying and I was crying and my sisters were all sitting on the floor outside the bathroom crying, everybody was just grieving with me and for me. Then when I lost it again when I was preparing to marry Andrew, I knew it was happening, it was getting thinner and thinner, I didn't tell anybody, I didn't tell Andrew, and I just um took myself off to the bathroom and shaved off what was left.

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

3: I worry the most about my kids, especially the girls. It makes me feel sick even thinking about it, but what if I've passed it on to them?

**Shift**

E: Violet's in Year 10

D: You remember year 10

C: You want to fit in, be part of the crowd

D: Be the people laughing

E: Not the person being laughed at

*Alopecia refers to offstage laughter.*

ALOPECIA: Hey Violet, what was the big joke today?

VIOLET: Don't worry about it

ALOPECIA: Seriously V, we must have missed something hilarious, those girls were...what were they laughing at?

VIOLET: Don't!

ALOPECIA: What? They were obviously having fun. You know, that thing we used to have, fun? What's up with you anyway?

VIOLET: What's up with me? Are you *(Cuts herself short)*.

ALOPECIA: What?

VIOLET: You. They're laughing at you.

ALOPECIA: *(confused)* What did I do?

VIOLET: You're here. And you're different. And you make me different.

ALOPECIA: *(realising that he has upset Violet but not quite sure how)* I...but...

VIOLET: Forget it. Come on *(she pulls Alopecia off stage)*

## Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

### Shift

A: Some of the women we spoke to talked about feeling anxious

B: About a feeling of unease that would build and build

C: Like a fear, or self-consciousness of being different

D: Kind of overwhelming

E: Not wanting to go out, panic attacks

A: Literally feeling the earth shake

5 (55): I started having these panic attacks, but when I was home I was fine, I was fine at home. But the second time around, oh, I thought, I thought can I do this again? I honestly didn't think I'd survive doing it again. Then we had the internet and that, I literally would call that my lifesaver cos I don't know whether I, I could see myself going back into that horrible place again where I didn't want to see anybody, didn't want to meet anyone, all that sort of stuff.

3 (30): For me I would just be generally anxious, like, when you're driving a car you worry about people crashing into you or having an accident all the time or, I'd worry about things I said to people all the time, or, just stuff. Its stuff that normal people don't worry about but it just plays on your mind, it's like a loop going on in your head, like 'I shouldn't have said that, shouldn't have said that' like a broken record. Worried feeling all the time, constantly have adrenaline shots you know, constantly get this jolt of adrenaline, whenever, like oh, feel anxious. And the Alopecia just added to that.

1 (40): When I have a panic attack, I can feel the tension building up inside me. You know I can feel it, in my stomach I can feel it happening. When I had my first panic attack I thought we'd had an earthquake. I was at work and I came out and I said to this girl that worked with me, 'did you feel that?' And she said no, I said 'the whole building shook, I had to literally hold on to something', she said, 'no nothing happened'.

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

4: ‘Your skin looks clear today, your lipsticks a nice bright colour, your teeth are nice and clean, your eyes look nice and white’. All that “positive affirmation in the mirror” stuff, it’s not usually me. But I physically had to go out of my way to do that. Because I (*pause*) I know what it’s like to feel suicidal. I knew where the line in the sand was.

**Shift**

C: Violet’s 16

*Violet and Alopecia enter and there is clearly tension between them. There are lots of pauses between the lines, lots of looks shared between them, lots of emotion.*

VIOLET: We need to talk. Look. You being here is really tough. And you’re everywhere. You’ve started sneaking into all these places you’ve never been before. (*This makes Alopecia smile mischievously, but that pisses Violet off. The following word is spoken with real heartache and anger.*) Stop! It’s not a joke! You’re suffocating me. I can’t do anything without thinking about where you are and what you’re doing. Are you ever going to leave? Please. (*Alopecia is avoiding eye contact, and Violet starts to get physical with him*) I’m seriously asking you, are you here to stay? Why can’t you just let me go. Look at me!! Are you ever going away?

*Pause. Alopecia shakes his head. Violet lets her anger and anguish out on Alopecia, pummelling on the chest and shoulders in her despair*

VIOLET: Why? Why? You bastard! Why are you doing this to me! It isn’t fair! I’m, I, how can I...

*Alopecia stands and takes the anger. As Violet begins to cry, exhausted, Alopecia holds her. Violet slowly recomposes herself.*

VIOLET: Ok. Ok.

*They exit.*

**Shift**

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

B: If you want to piss off someone with Alopecia, tell them

A: 'Oh you're so lucky'

C: 'You get to choose whatever hair style you want'

D: 'Imagine how much you must save'

E: 'Not having to buy shampoo and conditioner'

A: 'Never paying for a haircut'

C: 'And the time you'd save in the morning'

E: 'You really are very lucky'

B: They'll probably smile and say

A, C, D, E: 'yeah, absolutely'

B: When what they want to say is

D: "Fuckin ignorant bastard aren't ya?" (*Innocently*). What?

C: Some women choose to wear

D: Wigs

E: Scarves

B: Hats

A: Beannies

E: If walking around in a rainbow coloured wig makes you feel good about yourself, then do it

B: There are all sorts of wigs

C: Synthetic

A: Real hair

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

D: Virgin hair

B: Vacuum cap

E: Lace

A: The synthetic ones are kind of...

C: Shit?

#### **Shift**

5 (35): They get like, itchy, and they don't sit properly and if you get too close to the oven and then 'pitshaw', frizzing the front. Cos you're having a dinner party and getting something out of the oven and just the heat and, you know you could never volunteer to do barbecues at school or anything. I remember having a dinner party with the tea towel over my head so I could get things out of the oven.

1 (65): I won't wear a wig around the house here but I always have a scarf handy if someone's coming, so I wear a lot of scarfs, but when I go out always wear my wig because yeah, I just can't cope with it. Not wearing it. I just don't cope with it.

3 (30): No, I couldn't afford a wig, not a decent one anyway, so I just went with the bald thing

1 (28): I'm vain, I had to. I wouldn't come to town with no wig on, no way. I mean everyone knows everyone here too. Be different if you walked down the street in the city, wouldn't bother me cos I don't know anyone. I know that I don't like being judged and everyone here does it, its small town sport.

3 (35): I can't do anything spontaneously, I have to plan. I have to figure out if I can do that thing with a wig on or if it means using a hat, but then if we go inside and I have to take the hat off, I need a wig and brush in my bag and, yeah, I hate just randomly being asked to do something, cos it's not as easy as just whether I want to or not.

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

1: Cos of the wig, you know, I never swam. Never been in the water past me ankles, ever.

4 (25): I went swimming in a wig once. I got dunked, I lost it, and it was one of my/ it was one of my good wigs, whipped right off my head and Harry says he can always remember the look on my face when I bobbed up. I was horrified. Absolutely horrified, and it was down at Mooloolaba beach which was, and it was in the middle of the summer holidays, crammed with people, I was terrified honestly, it was, and I always remember this, I'm in the water, couldn't touch the floor, out of my depth, but it was between trying to put my hands on my head (*laughs*) and keep up, and I remember thinking, is it better to drown than to show my head? (*laughs*)

3: But the real hair wigs, Oh you wouldn't know yourself.

5: It's not heavy, you don't even feel like it's there

1: So they are cost about three and a half thousand dollars and they are worth every cent

5 (25): I was spending 5 and a half every two years at the best.

3 (30): I said to her, the lady in the wig shop, this is going to sound really weird but I feel like a real person again for the first time in ages. And you know, sitting there in the hairdressing salon where she actually cuts it and colours it and oh. I was just so happy.

1 (68): They want to sell you the short straight ones, you know I've been through that and I don't want to be short and straight.

4 (40): The wig it just, it makes me feel, like me again. Even pretty sometimes.

*All actors stare out with nostalgia.*

**Shift**

*Violet picks up a wig. Alopecia is standing in the shadows.*

A: Violet started losing more and more of her hair

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

D: Too much to hide with a beanie or a scarf

E: And started wearing wigs

A: Three completely different wigs, so people knew there was something going on

D: But it just got to the point where she woke up dreading putting on the wig

E: She really wanted to be able to go around without it on, but she was too afraid.

A: How many bald women do you see on the street every day?

D: In the morning she'd think

E: I can do this, today I'll just go to work without the wig

A: But she'd look in the mirror and think

VIOLET: Don't be ridiculous.

**Shift**

*The words 'Mirror Mirror on the Wall' is projected into the space.*

5 (35): I went through that, cos it just, ohh. You look in the mirror when you haven't got your makeup on or you're, you know, now that I've lost me eyebrows and eyelashes and no hair, it is, it's not you, it's a blank. It's like a canvas and you've gotta put yourself on, you know, how other people know ya.

1 (40): When my hair was falling out, that changing appearance in the mirror, was ghastly. It was just deathly you know and, everyday there was a bit more hair gone, and it became like this morbid ritual to look in the mirror.

4 (20): I say that to Alex sometimes when I get a bit down, you know, he goes 'oh you look really nice', I go, 'yeah it's all fake mate', and he says there's not a woman out there that doesn't put makeup on or dye her hair or, wear eyelash extension things and all that, and I said yeah I know but they still got, you know, what's there.

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

3 (20): When I look in the mirror when I wake up, I got no hair on, no makeup or anythin' like that, it's like, that is not me. That's not me. That's like lookin' at that cupboard, you know? It's just, just blank.

1 (25): There were times where I would just stare in the mirror and go 'you are worth nothing, no one's going to want you'. I mean I've had boyfriends before I had my hair done, you know, but, I think probably highschool, highschool probably my worst time.

3 (25): There were times there where I'd get so depressed I just wanted to pop upstairs take a couple of pills and just... But um, my family, I didn't want to do that to them, and I'm very stubborn, so I knew that basically just go to bed, cry it all out, get up in the morning and it will be a different day. But I do think if I didn't have the support of my family... I wouldn't be here.

#### **Shift**

E: You put on your wig and it's like your

All: normal

D: We met a girl who called herself Fiona

C: From Shrek

B: Princess by day, Ogre by night

A: For a lot of the women, the hair on their scalp is the least of their worries

E: Think about where you have hair

D: You know hair actually serves a purpose?

C: Your eyelashes have a function

B: To keep the crap out of your eyes

A: Without hair you get ear infections

E: Nasal infections

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

B: Cos there's no hair to protect all that

C: One lady said 'I was sad when I lost my hair, but I really mourned my eyelashes'

D: Do you have eyelashes?

*All lean in to the audience.*

All: Yeah, you do

*The words 'oh to have eyebrows' is projected into the space*

1 (30): The next big hair loss I had I lost my eyebrows and my eyelashes. You know it's funny, you think you've got to the stage where you're alright about it. I cried buckets over my eyelashes.

5 (30): I came home from having my face tattooed and I was shaky and exhausted. My partner said 'why are putting yourself through this?' He could see how much pain I was in and I said, 'because I had lost my face'.

4 (50): I've always been against tattoos, I absolutely hate them, but I had to get them done, it just, I had to think of them more/ they're not a tattoo, it's a cosmetic thing. It's a necessity for me, whereas a tattoo, I just, I mean everyone's got their own opinion, and well and good but for me tattoos are... But this is not an option for me, because without this, I just feel... unidentifiable I think.

3 (45): I want to try and lobby the health funds to get cosmetic tattooing as part of Medicare, you know, cos its \$600 to get it done, its bloody expensive, to have a face. As soon as you get those eyebrows on you feel your face, you've got your identity back you know, I'm me again.

4 (25): Originally when I first got 'em done they were the cosmetic tattoo that are like 400 bucks and they only last like 3 years and then you gotta touch it up again. It took em like a friggin' hour an eyebrow cos I'm sitting there and they're trying to do all these hair strokes all this crap. So then when they faded I actually went to my tattooist and said 'hey can you just, whip a line across, make em a bit darker' and he's like 'yeah no worries', you know, ten

## Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

minutes nnnnnnn, cos most like proper tattooists won't do your face, won't do cosmetics cos apparently it's a different needle and all that sort of stuff so that's why they can charge so much for lashes and eyebrows and that cos it's a different sort of procedure. I just said to him, 'dude, you've tattooed people's faces, just do that on my eyebrows and make em darker', 'ok no worries lie down', fifty bucks. You know?

1 (45): Someone said 'oh you can get them tattooed on' and I said you've got to be joking, how terrible would that be? And don't they look disgusting?

### Shift

*The words "the bald truth" is projected into the space.*

C: Some of the women we talked with did start going out bald

E: Wig free

D: Did you ever have that dream where you go to school or work, but you're completely naked, you're caught out in public with no clothes?

C: I have that dream except I'm not only naked, I haven't got my wig on

A: I'm doing this (*hands on head*) because that's more mortifying than this (*hands over pubic area and breasts*)

B: To take off your wig is like acknowledging that you are different.

E: And you realise that being bald in public is a choice

### Shift

*The following stories are all told by Actor 3. She removes her wig at the start of this sequence. The rest of the cast become the other roles.*

3 (55): I'm gonna go nude nut, nude nut I called it. It was fine, no one cared. You know the only looks I got were from little kids.

Kid 1: Are you a lady?

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

Kid 2: Mum, you can't even tell if that's a girl or a boy

Kid 3: Did you know you've got no hair?

3 (55): And I thought 'that's not so bad, I can deal with that'. I find that if I'm in a shop a lot of people let me go first, I think because they think I'm sick.

Shopper 1: 'You go first'

3 (55): Oh no I'm right

Shopper: No no, you go first

3 (55): Alright then. 'Thankyou'.

I remember the first time I went 'oh I haven't got cancer' and the look on this lady's face. I felt really bad cos I felt I'd embarrassed her, but I think it took me by surprise, and I said to my girls 'oh I've got to go find that lady and apologise to her' and they were just like 'leave it mum', but I thought, I felt terrible and I thought in the future I'd just smile and say thank you.

*New character*

3 (28): Shopping, that's really interesting. Cos it's like people feel less inhibited or something. I've had it/ so many times like,

Shopper 2: 'Oh you're looking really good, for what you're going through'.

3 (28): Um, thanks? Or one lady, at the checkout, commented on my groceries like

Checkout girl: 'good to see all this healthy food, but you know beetroot, you got to eat more beetroot for, that'.

3 (28): It's really bizarre cos I just forget so sometimes I don't really get what they're talking about. (*Remembers*) Oh one time this poor old lady, oh she said

Old lady: "did I see you at oncology yesterday?"

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

3 (28): and I'm like no, sorry, and I'm thinking but you were obviously at oncology yesterday, so we end up talking for the next ten minutes over the carrots. They're getting more used to me now at the local shops, but for a while there, take me half an hour just to get some milk.

#### *New character*

3: I'm often mistaken for a man. My friends are always shocked when I tell them that. Especially when I've travelled, cos I usually just wear fairly plain kind of clothes you know. We were in this airport where they have a separate line for the men and women, and I was lining up in the girls line, and this official person was at the front and started calling out

Official: Men this side, ladies that side

3: And I didn't think anything of it, and then she started really pointedly looking at me

Official: Men this side, ladies that side

3: And everyone's starting to look at me and I said 'oh, I'm a girl'

#### **Shift**

*Music. The words 'The Public' are projected into the space. Actors are talking to each other and responding to the stories (in contrast to previous where there is a lot of audience engagement), where there are bold lines it is two characters telling the story to the rest of the group.*

1 (50): We were going on this cruise and the other girl said 'What are we going to do if all your hair falls out on the trip?' and my friend said 'if that doesn't get you a sympathy fuck nothing will'.

3 (40): I wore it out three weeks ago and we'd had a fairly boozy night, and a bloke crossed the street, I was wearing that coat, you know I was sticking out like a sore thumb, a bloke crossed the street and kissed me on the lips and said 'You're gonna be alright darling, you're gonna be alright' and just kept walking.

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

- 4 (60): I remember going out one night with this guy, out to a nightclub and you know we all got a bit boisterous and I got pushed to the ground, and when I came back up I came up minus the wig, it had fallen off and I'd gone Oh God you know scrambling round. He asked me to marry him that night and I still don't know whether it was because he felt sorry for me or because he was so pissed he didn't notice.
- 1 (30): I've been beaten up over it. When I was working in the pub it used to turn into a night club at night. There's this chick I've never seen before and I usually knew everyone in there. I'd never seen her before and I'll probably never see her again, but I'll never forget her face. The whole time I was working, I'd be cleaning tables or whatever, and she'd just do this little snide remark like 'oh what are you wearing a wig for it looks stupid, what's the point?' And it was never to me but I could hear it, so that sort of happened a couple of times and then by the time I finished my work and was having a drink and sitting with my mates, I'd walked past and she said the same thing. She's like 'I don't even know why you're wearing that it looks dumb, like what's the point and blah blah blah' and I'm like 'you know what, it's really got nothing to do with you, you've been pissing me off all day, just shut the hell up'. So I was on my way to the bathroom when that happened and she followed me and as I opened the door she's grabbed my head and smashed it into the corner of the door, pulled my wig off my head and as she's done that/ cos it's been taped, like it ripped down the middle. So I was stuck at home for six weeks while I was having another one made, and then she's obviously realised 'oh crap she's bald', you know and shit herself and I've, you know just like ran into the toilets just crying and holding my hair and trying to put it back on and I'm like why can I not put it back on? What's wrong? you know. Then I realised she ripped it. My friend ended up coming in she's like 'what's wrong Bek what happened what happened?' and I told her and she's like 'don't worry I'll get her'. After this has happened she's just grabbed her by the hair thrown her on the ground, started punching her/ this is my good friend Lisa, and she's come back going 'don't worry Beka I got her back' and she came back with this clump of her hair that she's ripped out.

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

5 (35): I've been to gay night clubs with friends and it's the most hilarious thing, have you ever been to a gay night club? Oh, the girls love ya, I tell you, I could have been picked up so many times. It's just hilarious, everybody assumes that you're a dyke because you haven't got any hair. I'd go dressed to the nines, feminine, without any hair, and they'd just flock. So I thought if I never found a bloke, plenty of girls out there, except it wasn't really my leaning, but. You know. If you're ever feeling down and need a bit of lovin', go to the Wickham. We should go together! (*Music, they all laugh and run off taking the pillows/bean bags etc*)

#### **Shift**

B: Dating

C: Boyfriends

D: Girlfriends

E: Flirting

A: Biting your lip when you smile at him

C: And her. Actually, both of you

A: 'If you like Pina coladas and ladies with no hair'

D: Or, 'when do I tell him it's a wig?'

*The word 'Dating' is projected into the space.*

5 (45): Oh when would you? You don't want to frighten them off too soon, you don't want to lull them into this false sense of security either, so I don't know. I don't know. I'd be really, because Ian's witnessed it over time, going, he gradually got used to it you know, whereas just to present to someone, 'oh by the way', I have no idea how I'd....

1 (25): It goes two ways. Like a couple of times, cos I did a lot of online dating as well so, a couple of them I told straight away and they ran. So then, I said righto I'll wait cos all my friends and all my family love me, cos I'm Beka

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

and you know my personality and love me for me regardless. So I'm like I'll give you a month to see that me and then I'll tell you and if you don't accept it then you're not worth it, and if you do accept it then obviously you're like my friends and you like me for me and blah blah blah. That also takes up loads of time, you know, and if you give em a couple of months to get to know you and they're like, 'oh well kind of don't want anything to do with that', then you know, you've lost two months.

3 (60): He was horrified, my husband. It was just like, he couldn't believe it, you know.

4 (20): The first boyfriend I ever had I met when I was wearing that beanie and I didn't know if he knew I had no hair, I was like, he's never seen me without my beanie on, does he know there's no hair under there? So like the first conversation we had on the phone after he, when he asked me out I was like 'you do know I don't have hair', he's like, 'yeah, course', he's like, 'don't be an idiot', I'm like 'ok, just in case you didn't know', he's like 'I know, its fine'. Yeah, he was a good egg. We're still friends actually.

B (Husband): I always thought she was amazing

3 (wife): Yeah, but it wasn't like you were madly falling over yourself because I was so gorgeous

B (Husband): I know the next day that she was gonna be my wife

5 (35): He's been there right from when it first started fallin' out and always, always had a positive thing to say to ya. And you just go, oh shutup (*laughs*). Sometimes it's like, no, I look hideous. I appreciate what you're trying to say, but. Then poor fella, oh poor fella, then another day he'll, you know I'll come out and he'll go 'one eyebrows a bit higher than the other one', oh shut up, who's gonna notice? 'Just sayin, just letting you know', whereas if he didn't, 'what are you doing?, here I am..' oh poor fella, poor fella.

3 (28): I'm pretty confident now with my baldness, and I feel striking and even beautiful sometimes, but I had a lady ask me the other day, 'So, do you really

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

think someone's going to fall in love with you while you're bald?' I guess we'll see.

**Shift**

E: After about a year of Violet being ok with wearing the wigs

D: And then another 6 months of struggling to find it in her to take it off

A: Violet finally, finally went wig free

E: The final push she needed? That ultimate bit of strength?

D: Seeing photos of her Aunty at her funeral as she had battled through chemo

A: Bald, yes. But beautiful

*Music begins to play softly underneath. Violet takes a breath. Steels herself. This moment is reminiscent of the opening of the play. She removes her wig. Alopecia exits.*

*The music takes on a more upbeat rhythm.*

D: A month after Violet's big reveal she was at a party

E: Cowboys and Indians.

A: Violet was an Indian and this other guy was...

*Actor B (who was Alopecia) enters to play the Bartender.*

VIOLET: What are you dressed as?

Bartender: The only one who makes it out alive in old westerns. The bartender.

*The Bartender extends a hand and they start to dance. Moment. They kiss.*

VIOLET: That was my first kiss

**Shift**

*The words 'Looking forward' is projected into the space.*

#### Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

- 4 (30): I think it's important to try and be true to yourself, and that's hard as a kid. There are so many ways for society to inflict their social norms on you, and that's really hard to battle.
- 3 (28): You can't be on your own. We're not designed to be on our own. We're a herd animal.
- 1 (45): You know I genuinely think being content and happy and calm, it doesn't matter what shape or form that takes, whether that's single, on your own. Whether it's, you know, same sex marriage, if it's, you know? And I think I was very opinionated on all that stuff and now like I just think, oh, life's for living, whatever gets you through with a smile on your face, without hurting anybody else, you know?
- 5 (40): A lot people, the victims, aren't just a victim about Alopecia, they're a victim about every single part of their life and I think you have to come to a point in your life where you embrace all the failures and the crappy stupid decisions you made and go 'yeah, I own it, I made it, I own it and its, look where it's got me', you know. Ultimately I think everybody shapes up much better if they can come out the other side and go 'ok, that wasn't my most brilliant moment on this planet', but upward and onward, to the next mistake, as we go.
- 3 (40): I still have days when I feel miserable about it. I went to the doctor and she sat me down and I said 'oh I'm feeling really anxious, I feel really teary, I cried all day yesterday and I want to do it again today', and she said 'look out the window', and I was like, 'sorry?', and she's like 'look out the window' and she said 'what do you see?' and I said 'well its cloudy and a bit overcast'. And she said 'you know, not every day is a sunny day'. Oh. Right. Course it's not, you know. And I was like, that's all I needed, thank you. And I got up and I left and it was just like, it's ok to have a day every now and again when you feel crap. And you can have those days, and it's, if you string two or three or five or six together then you've got a problem, but the odd day, the odd moment, the odd, oh, longing. You know, that's perfectly... that's perfectly human.

Chapter Four: bald heads & blue stars

1 (25): It's gonna be shit. But you can still be beautiful, you just gotta find/you got to surround yourself with people who see that, and to hell with everyone else.

**Shift**

C: Our best insight came from students at a local primary school. Violet was there to watch a performance and as she was introducing herself a couple of the kids asked

B – as a student: Why is there blue on your head?

VIOLET: Blue? Sorry? (*Feeling head*). Oh you mean. Oh, well I have something called Alopecia which makes my hair fall out, but the blue bits are where I still have some hair. See? You can feel it's really rough here and smooth here

C: As Violet sat down to watch the play a little girl looked in awe at her head, as though it was the most beautiful thing, and said

A - as a student: But who made it into blue stars?

*Violet realises in this moment that her blue stars are beautiful. Music.*

*The End.*

## 5. Chapter Five: Verbatim Theatre process and form

In this chapter I explore the artistic practice of creating *bald heads & blue stars*. My creative premise for *bald heads & blue stars* is to explore what it means for women to experience their Alopecia both individually and as a community. The practice is positioned within a broader social premise which aligns with the values of Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis as outlined in Chapter Two. This process was documented through triangulated reflections and observations of practice in the form of journals and interviews, and this data is the primary reference material in Chapter Five and Six. The analysis of my process has enabled the naming of verbatim theatre practices, and has produced insight into the creative process and the articulation of new knowledge about the process, practice and form of verbatim theatre. Broadly, the process of creating *bald heads & blue stars* emerged as following a six stage process, which I name the Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model:

<i><b>Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model</b></i>	
<b>Community Immersion</b>	Building awareness of the project and its outcomes
	Active engagement with individuals and events from the focus community
	A commitment to support that community
<b>Listening for Aesthetics in the interview</b>	Interviewer: question preparation, storyteller awareness and informed consent
	Mutual Storyteller: story mirroring through active listening, dialogic listening, objects as prompts
	Engaged audience member: active listening and presence
<b>Artistic Transcription and Story Immersion</b>	Finding patterns, themes, contrasts and dramatic tension
<b>Playwriting: Translating stories through the dramatic languages into performance</b>	Collaborative process: Voicing Stories, devising through discussion, critical feedback, post-workshop processing
	Individual process: thematic engagement, translating the literal to the metaphoric, finding the form in the content
<b>Rehearsal and Performance</b>	Secret Stories
	Movement activities (weave/copy/riff/cut and gypsy sticks)
	Connection Soup

**Communication with community and Leading through Vulnerability**

Figure 4: Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model

This model of practice is the organisational structure for this chapter. Section 5.1 defines the practice of Community Immersion, where I outline how and why the immersion process occurs, its integrity to my ethics of practice and how it continues across the duration of the project. Section 5.2 explores the interview context and positions it as a place of performance. I extend the artistic practice of Listening for Aesthetics and outline specific strategies that help generate stories. Section 5.3 summarises my process of Artistic Transcription and Story Immersion where I engage with the stories from the community of storytellers and begin the translation process. Section 5.4 outlines the creative development workshops that were facilitated as part of the playwriting process and the activities that emerged as most beneficial. I suggest that playwriting in verbatim theatre is a process of translating through the dramatic languages, and I expand on this practice in 5.5. Section 5.6 focuses on the rehearsal and performance process and outlines the specific activities

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

and practices that enabled the actors to engage with the verbatim stories. I also reflect on the experience of how being both the playwright and actor enabled a deeper insight into the form of verbatim theatre. Section 5.7 explores the performance event through reflections from the actors around their experience of the audience, and through journal reflections from the student collaborators who were also audience members. Chapter Five concludes with a review of how my Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis was evident *in practice* across the process of creating *bald heads & blue stars*.

### 5.1. Community Immersion and communication

Fellow female alopecia baldy here :) what chu wana [sic]  
know for your play? (EC, 14/3/13)

Community Immersion is the first phase of the verbatim process and there are three facets to this practice: 1) building awareness of the project and its outcomes; 2) active engagement with individuals and events from the focus community; and 3) a commitment to support that community. This triangulated approach to the Community Immersion process is effective in generating awareness of and participation in the project, enhancing the playwright's authority to write about and with the community (Paget *Acts of Commitment* 177) as well as providing a framework for long term engagement with the Alopecia community. I therefore define Community Immersion in a verbatim theatre process as an ethical practice designed to introduce the artist to the storytelling community and the community to the artist.

My Community Immersion began in 2012 when I connected with the Australia Alopecia Areata Foundation (AAAF). I attended a support group meeting and contributed a story to their website (appendix S). To initiate the promotion of the project I contacted the President of the AAAF via email, explaining the project and the nature of the support and participation I was requesting from the organisation (J1, 14/3/13). In that initial communication I asked the President to send a short synopsis of the intended project out to their database of members, inviting people who were interested in participating to contact me for further information on the specifically created email address (myalopeciastory@gmail.com). I positioned myself in this

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

synopsis as a member of the Alopecia community, a theatre artist and a student researcher. A week later I publicised the project through my local newspaper *The Toowoomba Chronicle* (appendix B), and this resulted in my headshot on the front page. This article helped validate my membership of the Alopecia community and demonstrated my commitment to one of the key goals of the AAAF; to “inform the public and create awareness of Alopecia Areata” ([www.aaaf.org.au](http://www.aaaf.org.au)). *The Toowoomba Chronicle* also made a short film about the project, and this video and article were shared across their online network, resulting in replies from women at the Sunshine Coast (Australia), the USA and Canada who had all engaged with the article online.

After contacting ABC Southern Queensland local radio I was invited to promote the project on their breakfast program with David Iliffe, which was also documented on their website (appendix C). This then resulted in my involvement in David’s “Journey Series”, and subsequent monthly interviews following the project from April 2013 up to the performance event in August 2014. This enabled me to continue my service to, and support of, the Alopecia community’s awareness efforts. The impact of this promotion became evident through feedback about the radio program. I was contacted by a colleague who works in the rural community of St George who had heard the radio program and was following the story. David Iliffe also had a listener write in to say how much she was enjoying the journey series and learning about the condition and the theatre making process. This was “the most wonderful opportunity. So many people will feel a part of the journey, and David is talking about Alopecia on the radio at least once a month” (J27, 5/9/13). Community Immersion was maintained across the duration of the project through attendance at support group meetings run by the AAAF, and volunteering as a social media administrator for the Queensland AAAF facebook page.

As potential storytellers began contacting me I was able to start developing individual relationships, and this process of Community Immersion occurred predominantly via email. The initial round of email responses varied in both length and intent. Some were short indications of interest, such as, “Fellow female alopecia baldy here :) what chu wana [sic] know for your play?” (EC 14/3/13), through to providing lengthy details about their age, location, experience with alopecia,

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

extensive contact details and in some cases even photographs (EC 5/4/13). Many also conveyed how they responded to seeing the newspaper article or reading about my story; “[y]our photo is on my fridge. Today I feel less lonely and a little bit stronger” (EC 22/3/13) and “I wish I had your courage and could face going bald in public” (EC 17/3/13). One storyteller commented on the online video, and her observation implies that it was this media source that cemented her interest in the project as it allowed her to “put a face to the name...I think what you’re doing is wonderful! You are truly an inspiration and it makes me want to be a part of it all” (EC 3/4/13). The first two elements of Community Immersion, promoting the project to the general community as well as immersing myself in the alopecia community, enabled me to reach a much larger network of storytellers, to create moments of connection and empowerment, and challenge normative ideas of femininity. As a result of this practice I secured 15 volunteer storytellers, and the second phase of the process was interviewing these volunteers from the community which I discuss in Section 5.2.

The Community Immersion process was also personally challenging. Being on the front page of the local paper made me feel as though “I had ‘outed’ myself as a role model” which “impacts on and affects the process and my role in it. I am navigating the roles of ‘role model’, ‘artist’, ‘academic’” (J4, 24/3/13). Positioning myself within the Alopecia community with these three roles, and also within my hometown community, had consequences for me personally that I had not anticipated. I was recognised in public either by the photo or the radio interviews, and as I positioned myself in the media as confident it was challenging when I was having a ‘bad hair day’. Doing the ABC interviews and *The Toowoomba Chronicle* article gave me insight to what the storytellers might experience throughout the process. I was being edited and represented by these organisations and felt that “there was some inaccuracies in the information. She was transforming my story into an article, just as I will transform stories into performance” (J4, 24/3/13). This personal experience led me to ensure the storytellers received a draft of the play because I realised that there was “the very real possibility that they may want things changed” (J4, 24/3/13) just as I would have appreciated the opportunity to fact check the newspaper article.

Integral to developing individual relationships with each of the storytellers was the third element of Community Immersion; continued communication across the

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

duration of the project. A draft of the play was sent out to all storytellers on 7th January 2014, and this was a highly emotional experience; “I feel very nervous, excited yes, but also nervous... My heart was actually starting to race when I drafted the email to send out” (J42, 7/1/14). I was conscious of ensuring that the format of the play was comprehensible for the storytellers, who may not have had previous experience reading play scripts. Full words were used instead of acronyms, such as centre stage instead of CS (J42, 7/1/14), and detailed stage movements were included in order to convey a clear picture of what the play might look like when performed.

While it was made explicit throughout the process that the interviews were designed to provide stimulus for a creative and theatrical product, I was also conscious of maintaining transparency across the project in terms of my own artistic agenda. Maintaining open communication and sharing the progress of the project with the storytellers guarded against the possibility of mindlessly exploiting the community and their experiences, as cautioned by Watt (196) and Botham (*From Deconstruction to Reconstruction* 313). Updates were emailed during the rehearsal process, including photos of the cast and information about booking accommodation in Toowoomba (appendix T). The triangulated practice of Community Immersion continues across the duration of the project and I was conscious of providing multiple opportunities for the storytellers to contact me. This was an aspect of practice that the community of storytellers expressed they appreciated when asked in their surveys, stating that it allowed them to be involved in the entire process of the project and meant they felt like they belonged to the *bald heads & blue stars* community.

### **5.2. Listening for Aesthetics in the interview**

[S]ure, everyone whether they have alopecia or not should have the opportunity to share their story with someone who is interested in hearing it simply for the joy of engaging in someone else's life. (S1R9)

The intent of the interview in a verbatim theatre process is to generate stories that can be translated through the dramatic languages into performance. The practice of interviewing is the common feature in all verbatim theatre processes, however, as

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

stated earlier in Chapter Two, “more work should be done to trace the relationship between the site of the verbatim interview and the structure and content of the narratives that are told” (Stuart Fisher *That’s Who I’d Be* 199). More work is also required to explore the interview context and the playwrights’ role in generating stories. Extending on my MA research from 2012 I propose the entire context of the interview is a place of performance, and I have expanded the concept of Listening for Aesthetics to act as a framework for understanding the phenomena of this performance space. My 2012 definition of Listening for Aesthetics drew on Pollock’s assertion that the interview should be “[u]nderstood as performance” (3) and Paget’s suggestion that every phase of the verbatim theatre process is informed by an “awareness of theatricality” (*Verbatim Theatre* 324). Originally, I interpreted this to mean that the playwright was performing a role in the interview and that they were listening to the stories being shared through a theatrical lens. However, through practice I experienced a greater complexity to this key artistic practice. I will outline how in my role as playwright I transitioned between the roles of: 1) interviewer; 2) Mutual Storyteller; and 3) engaged audience member within the interview context. I detail specific artistic practices and strategies within each of these roles that I found effective in generating stories for performance. While each role is useful, the stories that are shared when the storyteller is positioned as a performer and the interviewer as an engaged audience member are the ones most often used in the next stage of the writing process. These stories are theatrically dynamic, a quality that emerged significantly during the creative development workshops and is explored in Section 5.4.

### **5.2.1. Interviewer**

My playwright’s role at the outset of the interview process aligns with the practices of a traditional interviewer, and this began in the preparation phase. My creative premise for the play was: what does it mean to experience Alopecia? While this may initially appear to be a broad question, it is specifically different to asking what Alopecia is or how it affects a person’s daily life. In contrast, what does it mean to experience Alopecia? explores the significance of this condition, how it expresses itself in the community members’ understanding of their identity, their physical body and their mental and emotional processing. Crucially, it asks people how they

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

process and understand their experience of Alopecia, and this complex process of wrestling with self-understanding became the tension that drove my theatrical and thematic exploration. From this premise I then brainstormed a variety of questions that might assist in prompting stories about experiences with Alopecia.

These questions were thematically connected; a number related to medical aspects of the condition, others about family and friends, and finally public versus private experiences. Rather than rote-learn the exact sequence of questions, I familiarised myself with the themes and decided on a starting point for each interview. While I still took along my list of questions, by the fourth interview I was asking the questions with the same phrasing/wording as previous interviews, demonstrating I had comprehensively memorised them and could deliver them “off the cuff” (RT4,18/4/13). This reflects Valentine’s practice where she describes thoroughly preparing in order to then let go of that preparation and be in the moment (*Personal Interview 9*).

Reading back through all the email communication that was exchanged with each storyteller prior to the interview emerged as a crucial aspect of preparation. This process, which I refer to as Storyteller Awareness, “reminds me who it is I’m meeting and how they found out about my story, and what they might have said in their emails so that I’m able to mention those things during our interview if it is necessary” (RT7, 24/5/13). Storyteller Awareness enabled me to get a sense of the storyteller through the way they introduced themselves in their initial email, their mode of expression, their ‘facts’ (such as their age, siblings, children and occupation) and a sense of their emotional relationship with their experiences. I initially began Storyteller Awareness to remind myself of the date, time and location of the interview, and to ensure I had the storyteller’s mobile contact. From this very practically driven agenda emerged the awareness process. It was not until I was preparing for the final two interviews that the value of Storyteller Awareness became kinaesthetically apparent for me. These were scheduled much later than the bulk of the interviews and I was feeling “out of practice” (RT9, 29/6/13). Familiarising myself with the storyteller’s communication and rehearsing the themes and scope of the questions I wanted to ask meant that “I have those words and that terminology right in the front of my mouth, in the front of my brain” (RT9, 29/6/13). In the lead

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

up to the final two interviews I felt quite nervous, however this practice physically calmed me. It also emphasised the theatrical frame of the verbatim theatre interview as the practice of Storyteller Awareness and interview preparation holds parallels to the practice of rehearsing before performance (RT9, 29/6/13).

Performing the role of interviewer conferred a degree of credibility to the process and also facilitated the formalities of the ethical components of practice. I was conscious of always mentioning the moment that the voice recorder was being turned on in an effort to maintain the transparency of my practice and convey that I wasn't trying to catch the storyteller out by secretly recording. I would ask if I could "pop on" (IT4) the recorder and placed it in the space. During the first interview it was evident that despite emailing detailed participant information and consent forms to the storytellers they still had multiple questions about the process (RT2, 27/3/13). As Valentine explains, informed consent is problematic because "there is a huge disparity between what people might understand you're trying to do and what you're doing" (*Personal Interview 4*). Re-capping the intent of the project and the process involved for the storyteller (identified in the transcript as ST) provided an opportunity for further questions to be asked about the project, and for me to respond in an individualised manner.

ST: So what's your play about?

SP: So I want to interview as many women as I can and talk about their experiences of having Alopecia and make the play about that

ST: Yeah

SP: So, to raise awareness on what Alopecia is [...] so my research is that I'm looking at a specific type of theatre and the outcome of my research will be creating a model so that other people can make theatre in the same way

ST: Yeah that's cool. (IT 9)

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

The questions I asked in role as interviewer were open yet targeted, and generally began with the storyteller's experience of being diagnosed with Alopecia. My previous immersion in the community had demonstrated that this topic was frequently discussed and perceived as a safe starting point. In the transition from interviewer to Mutual Storyteller (where we both shared experiences relating to alopecia, as well as broader experiences), I began to re-cap statements the storyteller made rather than ask them a direct question. For example, summarising that "you said your husband had always been supportive" (IT1) prompted the storyteller to expand on that theme in a self-directed manner. I often returned to the role of interviewer at the end of each meeting, closing with my thanks and gratitude through statements such as "[y]ou've just had so many amazing experiences, thank you so much for meeting with me" (IT8). I would then indicate that I would turn off the recorder to signal a close to the interview. The tone and mood would shift at this point as the "formality seems to be finished" (J16, 22/5/13). This practice was useful in transitioning the storyteller out of the performance context of the interview.

### **5.2.2. Mutual Storyteller**

At times the interview was similar to a conversation, with both parties sharing stories and commentary on the topics discussed. The practice of mutual storytelling helped develop the relationship with the storyteller and encouraged a greater depth in the content and emotion of the stories shared. Within this practice three strategies emerged as effective in encouraging the sharing of story: story mirroring through active listening, dialogic listening, and using physical objects as prompts.

Listening is a visible act, "in the listening process there are elements of reflection, interpretation and understanding which are visible in the confirmation and feedback" (Fredrikson 1173) to the storyteller. I experienced the reflection Fredrikson describes as a process of mirroring. In order to demonstrate that I was comprehending the intent of the storyteller I would offer stories from my own experience that mirrored the emotion and tension of the ones they had shared. Alternatively, when it appeared that the storyteller expressed they were not being clear enough I would tell a story that in some way mirrored the emotion or experience I assumed they had been trying to convey. The storytellers often responded with affirmations that the stories I shared aligned with their own, and I felt this strategy helped demonstrate that I was actively

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

listening, that I understood and that the storyteller was not alone in her experience. This practice served to validate and assure the storyteller, and was an element of practice that they commented positively on in their later reflections on the interview experience. Listening to a story “requires active participation by the listener” (Gargiulo 5), and in the verbatim interview this can sometimes mean sharing aspects of your own experience and self with the storyteller through mutual storytelling:

ST: It’s amazing how much it costs just to have hair

SP: I know, it’s crazy

ST: I’d never had long hair and it wasn’t until sort of, until I did this that I went ‘it’s pretty cool’, I mean like you, I read in your article that you, ever since you were three?

SP: Yeah, yeah, it was never this bad when I was that little though, I just had patches of hair loss. Um and then, in the last sort of four years it started just falling out falling out, and that’s when I started wearing wigs. And I had synthetic ones as well, and I thought that, you know the cheapest wig I had was ninety dollars, and the most expensive was two-seventy-five, and I thought that was crazy expensive. Met women who spent over two thousand dollars on real hair wigs

ST: Yep, yep, I didn’t realise quite how much it was until, I expected, my parents have said to me, cos you know they’ve done everything for me, they took me to nutritionists and they took me to, we tried everything, and they paid for all that, and that was a lot of money, and there’s four of us kids.  
(IT10)

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

Gargiulo states “a great deal of conversation is simply mutual storytelling” (5). At times in the interview there was a shift from active listening to dialogic listening, where the intention “is not to re-produce the other’s meaning but to pro-duce a fuller conversation text between you” (Stewart and Thomas qtd. in Turner 119). While the practice of active listening demonstrated an understanding of the storyteller, dialogic listening acknowledges the interviewer “as a collaborator, with whom new meanings can be created” (Turner 119). When we converse, both parties are involved and the stories become jointly authored in that site of performance, and this is reflected in my definition of verbatim theatre as shifting from interview to conversation to story. Listening for Aesthetics is a performance and includes an active/responsive element. As Turner (119) and Fredrikson (1173) each outline, listening is not passive. Through active listening the interviewer is reproducing or affirming the meaning of the storyteller and in dialogic listening they are coproducing stories and knowledge in mutuality. Within the Listening for Aesthetics framework the playwright is actively translating the story through the dramatic languages in their mind during the interview, and this thought process then influences how they respond to the story and contribute to the mutual storytelling.

This practice of active listening and story mirroring aligns with Smith et al.’s definition of empathy. “In everyday language, empathy is seeing from another’s point of view, putting yourself in their shoes, being on their wavelength” (142). Story mirroring became a way to make sure that I was understanding the experience of the storyteller. It also doubled as an opportunity to demonstrate different styles of storytelling and validate the experiences being shared. Empathy is not only felt, “it is communicated to that person” (Smith et al. 95). In the practice of story mirroring I was communicating empathy using the medium of the interview context.

SP:           What blood tests did you do?

ST:           She did blood tests for Lupus and she tested for  
                 um, I think she tested hormone levels, that’s  
                 another thing

SP:           Ok

ST:           And nothing came back out of the ordinary

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

SP: Yeah yeah

ST: And she just turned around said ‘oh you know your hair could all fall out and I couldn’t give you a reason why and tough shit’ basically, and I’ve gone, ‘see you later!’ And went somewhere else

SP: ‘Thanks for all your empathy’

ST: Yeah, so, and she was terrible, but then I went and saw other doctors. (IT 9)

In some instances I was able to use the storyteller’s photographs as prompts (RT2, 27/3/13) as they either had some on display in their homes, brought out old family albums to show how their hair-loss had progressed, or had emailed images through to me prior to our interview. This enabled a point of reference for the storyteller and reduced their need to describe the context of a story. In a similar manner, when I shared a story with them this provided a context for them to speak about their own experience without requiring them to explain the bigger picture. In this communal sharing of stories the playwright is “personally invested in the people they [have] interviewed” (Kaufman *Into the West* 18). This is a feature Kaufman highlighted in Tectonic Theatre Company’s process for *The Laramie Project* (2000). Further strategies within the Mutual Storyteller role included commenting “I was going to ask you about that” (IT5) in order to validate the direction the storyteller was taking, and going with the storyteller on tangents. Often these tangential discussions, which usually centred on children or pets, provided stimulus for further sharing. In contrast to Horin’s “forensic” (Wake *To Witness Mimesis* 114) interviewing practice in the development of *Through the Wire* (2004), storytellers were asked to expand on their version of their experiences through prompting statements that encouraged the storyteller to elaborate such as “[c]an you explain for me how that felt for you?” (IT12) and asking “and was that a thing, an issue?” (IT1), rather than critiquing the validity of those experiences.

The Mutual Storyteller role occasionally frames the context as a process of critical pedagogy. Collaboratively co-authoring the stories of our experiences enables us to learn, unlearn and re-learn, and the space becomes one where we can broaden the

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

horizons of our understanding. When I shared some of my Alopecia experiences, and in particular what tests or treatments I had heard about, the storytellers would sometimes state; “[y]ou saying that has kind of made me go ‘oh maybe I should be keeping an eye on that’” (IT1). They are vocalising their moments of learning or unlearning. Some storytellers expressed in the post interview survey that the process had prompted them to consider their experiences in a different way. Just as “cultural assumptions affect performances, and performances rewrite cultural assumptions” (Bennett 2) the performance of stories in the interview context influenced both parties understanding of the topic discussed. Due to the positive influence of Community Immersion some of the interviews began in role as Mutual Storytellers. As I had already met some of the storytellers at an AAAF support group dinner, this “impacted the way I was welcomed into [the] home and the ease with which the interview began” (J 5, 28/3/13). “I walked in and we hugged because we knew each other” (RT2, 27/3/13). Interviews that began from a point of familiarity were consistently more dynamic overall, with stories covering greater breadth and depth and the content often extending beyond purely experiences of Alopecia. This confirmed the importance of the Community Immersion process in developing relationships and the value of the practice in enabling effective interview outcomes.

In this project my membership of the Alopecia community undoubtedly influenced my ability to immerse in the community and to engage with the storytellers as we were exchanging similar experiences. If I did not have Alopecia my access to the community and the Community Immersion and Mutual Storyteller processes would manifest differently. As Valentine has expressed, how the interviewer relates to the storyteller “is unique” (*Personal Interview 10*), their artistic voice and presence is evident in the interview. Another playwright interviewing the women in this project would have elicited a completely different relationship and different set of stories, however they could still effectively use the Mutual Storyteller strategy in their practice.

### **5.2.3. Engaged Audience Member**

Facilitating the interview context to position myself in the role of engaged audience and the storyteller as the lead performer was the most successful way to explore the storyteller’s range of experiences. This role enabled the storytellers to have greater

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

control over the direction and content of the stories they shared. I will begin this section by briefly exploring Wake's analysis of the concept of listening in headphone verbatim theatre and how her discussion holds parallels for my articulation of practice. Secondly I will outline how the interview context can be framed through audience theory and two key elements that emerged within this role of engaged audience member; active listening (expressed in a different way to that in mutual storytelling) and presence. Finally I will describe how through this role I was able to better understand the theatrical qualities of the stories being shared, specifically in relation to dramatic tension.

Wake analyses the concept of listening "as both a practice and a theory" and how it may "shift our understanding of documentary, verbatim and testimonial theatre" (*The Politics and Poetics of Listening* 85). Reflecting on the limits and potential of listening, Wake posits three questions: "how do I listen? To whom do I listen? And when was the last time I really listened?" (97). The first two questions are ones I extend in my research to the interview in a verbatim process. While Wake's discussion is grounded in an analysis of Roslyn Oades headphone verbatim play *Stories of Love & Hate* (2008), her exploration of the layered and dynamic modes of listening is a useful framework for further understanding the listening that occurs across the verbatim theatre process. Wake coins the phrase 'ethical eavesdropping' to describe how the audience (and perhaps also the playwright in the interview) may be positioned on the border of a conversation, overhearing the dialogue between two or more characters/storytellers. In contrast to the concept of therapeutic listening, which Wake problematises in relation to verbatim theatre (90), 'ethical eavesdropping' creates a space for the playwright and audience to eavesdrop on a conversation with permission. This permission is granted implicitly through community immersion and explicitly through continued communication with the storytellers and a process of informed consent (93). Wake describes the position of eavesdropping as a liminal space; "purposefully positioning oneself on the edge of ones knowing so as to overhear and learn from others" (Ratecliffe qtd. in Wake 93). Wake's emphasis here is on the audience listening in performance to a dialogue, however the concepts of consent, liminality and learning through listening hold parallels to the practice of Listening for Aesthetics in the interview.

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1990) has been an invaluable text in the development of my understanding of the interview context as a place of performance. She explains that a performance is created through context not content, that performance occurs when there is an agreement between the performer and the spectator that what is happening is performance (11). In our interview context there was an understanding that the stories shared would inform the creation of a performance. Bennett further explains that the primary condition of an audience is that they recognise themselves as such. I became aware of my role as audience after the third interview. It emerged that my role:

was definitely to provide the desired responses to the story.  
So, to be shocked when someone said something terrible to  
her, to laugh at the appropriate time...to be the audience to  
her stories I suppose. (RT3, 17/4/13)

Bennett discusses the influence that both Brecht and Piscator have had on understanding the role and relationship of the audience. Piscator strove to “reconstitute the production-reception contract as a bi-directional discussion” (26), and one strategy he used to achieve this was to put actors in his audience to create discussion and intervention throughout the performance. In the interview context, I am putting myself in role as the audience, challenging existing modes of production and reception by creating spaces for the storytellers to be producers and for me to be the receiver. Bennett suggests that Piscator's strategy failed to liberate his audience as it was still the producer of the performance attempting to change how it is received (26-29). In my context I position myself as the receiver, and influence and partake in the product from this perspective. Across the process of developing *bald heads & blue stars* there were moments of performance in each of the interviews where I positioned myself as audience and receiver, influencing the performance of the storyteller through my physical presence and active listening.

Being a live audience member to the storyteller's experiences directly influenced the relationship, as well as the shape and structure of the stories; “the audience emerges as a tangibly active creator of the theatrical event” (Bennett 10). “Listening to them...laughing with them and sighing with them and just really sharing it” (RT6, 15/5/13) prompted the storytellers to add details and explore tangential experiences.

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

The storytellers also commented on the importance of presence, “how great it was to actually speak to someone...in the flesh” (RT6, 15/5/13) and that the interview made them feel connected, “less isolated” (S1R1), that it was “an enormous comfort to spend time with another” (S1R6). I discovered that “when stories are *told*, literally told to somebody else, another physical, responding person, the shape and rhythm of the story changes as well” (J21, 17/6/13). This led me to further explore the concept of presence, which is a state of existence or being present. It requires a body to be in a space and to feel that there is “intimacy and immediacy” (Lombard and Ditton 4) and that the context has not been mediated. Presence influenced the relationship building in the interview and also the shape and mode of the stories. My presence, physically being in front of a storyteller enabled me to demonstrate active listening in a combination of verbal and non-verbal ways. The storyteller could detect the movement of my body in the space and this influenced the space, their bodies and the way the stories were shared. The physical presence of the storyteller was also crucial to my practice as I read their kinaesthetic energy and attempted to read between the lines to get at the underlying meaning beneath the content and performance of their stories, to listen to what Rogers and Farson describe as the “total meaning” (5). This is a key extension to my 2012 definition and also influenced my findings on rehearsing verbatim theatre and connecting to the breath rhythm of the storyteller in performance.

Listening for Aesthetics is more than just paying attention to the energy of the storyteller; presence is a vital aspect of this practice. Fredrikson explains that the phenomena of presence can be understood in two ways: “being there” and “being with” (1170). While being with means being available and “at the disposal of the other person” (1171), being there is “not only a physical presence, it also encompasses communication and understanding” (1171). Fredrikson describes being there as an action, that presence in this category is an active phenomena and that being there, physically being in the same space as another person, provides support, comfort, encouragement and reassurance (1171). Being there is a crucial component of Listening for Aesthetics. Within this theory of listening the artist needs to kinaesthetically respond to the experience and presence of the storyteller. While Merlin has described the artist in the interview as a responsive listener (42) I extend

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

this definition to an engaged audience member. An audience actively listening to the storyteller's performance of self and story.

Rogers and Farson explain that active listening is predicated on genuinely respecting the speaker and "brings about changes in people's attitudes toward themselves and others" (1). Significantly, active listening "does not present a threat to the individuals self-picture. He does not have to defend it" (3). In contrast to critiquing the storyteller's experience the playwright is attempting to understand the point of view of the speaker. In role as an engaged audience member and through the practice of active listening they are listening for the total meaning, responding to feelings and noting the speaker's non-verbal cues (4-5). Strategies that indicated active listening in the storytelling context were: eye contact, the verbal affirmations 'mhm' and 'ok' and naming the emotion the storyteller was expressing in their story. Demonstrating active listening enhanced the depth and breadth of stories shared by the community of storytellers.

The skill of the storytellers in these moments became apparent. Early in the process I reflected that the storytellers were all proficient at "recounting the situations where events had taken place and they were retelling these, which lends itself to being represented through theatre" (RT3, 17/4/13). These storytellers still viewed their experiences as challenging, and understood their Alopecia as bringing tension to their day-to-day life. This tension provided the stimulus for their stories to be told in a traditionally dramatic way, following the Well-Made Play structure. This included a cast of characters and required sufficient contextualisation to enable understanding. When the tension was felt by the storyteller they covered these dramatic basics. In contrast, the sixth storyteller expressed that she did not experience her Alopecia with tension (IT6). She was very pragmatic and didn't perceive that it influenced her in a tangible or noticeable way. This relationship to her Alopecia experience meant that there was very little drama, tension or structure to her stories. She later expressed that her desire to be involved was solely to meet me, rather than to share her experiences. This echoes Wilkinson's experience in *A Day in December* (2010). She explained that when people were sought out to be interviewed rather than volunteering themselves "they didn't have a story to tell. Their narratives were no more than an interview...dictated by my questions" (125). Some anecdotes from this

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

storyteller were still included in the final performance text as they assisted in developing a contrast and complexity to the range of experiences from the Alopecia community. However they did not inherently contain the same level of dramatic structure as the other storyteller's stories.

Bennett cites Karen Gaylord's definition of the work of the audience, to be a "psychological participant and empathetic collaborator...ready to find meaning and significance in the events taking place on stage" (Gaylord qtd. in Bennett 148). This aligns to the work of the playwright in a verbatim theatre interview; they are looking for the dramatic meaning of the stories, and their potential for translation through the dramatic languages and into performance. Finding meaning and significance, collaborating and influencing the stories told, these are the actions of Listening for Aesthetics. The performance of the three roles of interviewer, Mutual Storyteller and engaged audience member frames the space for the storyteller and helps to position them as co-performers within the interview context. My experience of these roles in this process is that they are fluid. The stories with the most theatrical potential were shared when the artist was positioned as an engaged audience, however all three roles hold value and can be strategically implemented across the interview context for different purposes. I will conclude this section with a revised definition of Listening for Aesthetics.

Listening for Aesthetics is a framework that positions the interview as a place of performance and guides the practice of the playwright. When Listening for Aesthetics the playwright is oscillating between the roles of interviewer, Mutual Storyteller and engaged audience member. They are present in the place of the interview and they pay attention to the energy and dramatic action of a storyteller's performance. The playwright is responding in an improvised manner to these stories, employing strategies such as active listening, story mirroring and naming. They position themselves as audience to the storyteller's performance and are listening between the realms of the actualised context and the creative possibilities to enable translation through the dramatic languages and into performance.

Once the interviews are completed, the next phase of the process is to transcribe the interview transcripts and begin the creative development process.

### 5.3. Artistic Transcription and Story Immersion

Spent a few hours listening to the second interview and just making notes on what kind of stories were told...I think I'll have to listen to each story a few times. (J16, 22/5/13)

I began a process of what I call Artistic Transcription (J26, 14/8/13). This involved listening to the recording of the interviews and transcribing the stories that were appealing aesthetically or provided stimulus for content exploration. Artists have individualised practices when it comes to the transcription process. Some artists describe transcribing recordings in their entirety, such as Wilkinson for *A Day in December* (126), and others such as Burton (*Personal Interview* 2012) outlined a process of listening to the recordings and making a note of the time and content of stories that stood out as meeting his overall premise for the work. I view the recordings as subjective representations of experience co-authored by the storyteller and playwright in mutuality. This may not reduce or remove the authenticity of the stories, however it did frame the way I engaged with the recordings in the transcription process.

Initially I slowed down the playback of the recording and attempted transcribing on my first listen. However I found that when I slowed the audio track it distanced me from the stories and manipulated their dramatic shape (J14, 20/5/13). I adapted the Artistic Transcription process to include an initial listen of the recording and then on the second listen began to transcribe. This meant I could engage with the stories aurally rather than textually, and to allow the spoken qualities of the stories to provide stimulus for artistic impulse (J14, 20/5/13), which I documented in a column on the interview transcript document (appendix N). It is at this stage of the process that my practice reflected the methods of writing previously outlined in Section 2.5 of the Literature Review. I was distilling the recording by only transcribing the storyteller's voice and not my own. I was editing by choosing not to include some of the tangents in the stories. For example, during the third interview we were at a café and interrupted mid story by the waiter bringing coffee. We engaged with the waiter and then continued with the story, and I chose to omit this tangential discussion from the transcript. I was framing through my inclusion of brief notes explaining the context or summarising the background of a story. I rarely made notes in the Artistic

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

Transcription about the delivery of a story, its tone, speed or emotion. These elements in the recording may have influenced my choice of story to transcribe, however I then chose not to include these elements in the next stage of the writing process.

My skill at Artistic Transcription improved across the process and “as I listen to more and more interviews I’m more easily able to differentiate the ‘fluff’ or general chatter from the material that is clearly related to the experience of Alopecia, or has an aesthetic, dramatic, intriguing quality to it” (J23, 23/6/13). The act of listening to the recordings was crucial in the refinement of my premise for the script, and as this agenda became more explicit (influenced by the material I was engaging with) the process of Artistic Transcription also became more focused. It was evident that decisions were being made in this phase of the process that would have significant impacts on the shape and content of the resulting performance.

After completing the Artistic Transcription I began a process of Story Immersion. This entailed reading back over the stories and becoming familiar with the emerging themes, common threads and moments of tension, contrast or discord. I found that:

...there are some stories that are whole and complete little pieces, little moments that are complete in themselves, and there are other ‘one liners’, simple single sentences that are interesting or convey opinion. (J26, 14/8/13)

The first stage of Story Immersion began on a storyteller by storyteller basis, and I was reminded of the specificity of each character. I then chose to sort and collate the stories into themes, which served to distance them from each individual storyteller and also influenced the resulting structure of the play. These themes generally reflected the themes of the questions I had prepared prior to the interview, as suggested by Stuart Fisher (*That’s Who I’d be* 199), however there were a number of unexpected themes that emerged. Specifically, the relationship between the storyteller and their reflection in the mirror, their experience with losing facial hair and the ensuing foray into cosmetic tattooing. There was also a greater complexity within the themes of challenge and depression than I had anticipated. While immersing myself in story I documented the performance ideas that emerged from

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

this stimulus in the artistic impulse column of the transcript document. These ideas reflected Kaufman's description of 'moments' and rather than being solely ideas for text or dialogue they were performance ideas, drawing on the full breadth of the dramatic languages and the means of expression available in a theatre context. For example:

The character alopecia coming and taking pieces of something away from another character. When they come for the eyebrows and eyelashes this causes the most heartache. (IT2)

Changing between scenes of interview, with birds and dogs and music in the background, cutting to acted out scenes or theatricalised moments. So perhaps the 'signal' that it is more direct speech, interview style, is the sound track. (IT5)

The next phase of the process involved organising a series of creative development workshops in order to further explore the stories and seek inspiration from the perspectives of others, specifically others with experience in translating ideas into performance.

### **5.4. Creative Development: Workshops and playwriting**

[W]e needed to really immerse ourselves in the stories before we could start imagining them theatrically. (J31, 23/9/13)

I facilitated five creative development workshops with second year undergraduate theatre students at USQ in 2013. The students had experience participating in collaborative devising processes within their course work and had some experience with critical reflection. Their involvement in these workshops were a learning experience for them, and I began the first workshop by explaining the concept of performance writing and facilitating warm up activities (J31, 23/9/13). We discussed how the workshop and devising process may develop, having "communication about communicating, [which] may be an essential part of facilitating a productive dialogue" (Turner 117). Understanding what occurs in a creative development

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

workshop is “made more problematic by the difficulty of our ever really being able to gain an objective insight into a collaborative process” (Turner 109), however I sought to address this through the reflective journals each collaborator completed after participating in the workshops. This section describes the creative practice that occurred within this collaborative context and draws on data from the students (who I refer to as collaborating artists) journals. Four key practices emerged across the creative development workshop process: 1) Voicing Stories; 2) devising through discussion; 3) critical feedback; and 4) post workshop processing. Overall the creative development process enabled me to better understand the theatrical qualities of story and specifically enhanced my ability to differentiate between reflectively told stories and those told in active present tense; a discernment which enriched the quality of my playwriting.

### **5.4.1. Voicing Stories**

Prior to the first workshop I collated all of the stories into a single document and started reading these aloud. “I connected so much more to the shape of the story, the rhythm of the telling and the emotion that was being conveyed” (J26, 14/8/13) when the stories were spoken rather than read. Listening to myself read helped bring the stories to life and was the first stage of voicing and performing them. I anticipated that the workshop would build towards more active elements, and I even pre-planned to encourage the students to try their ideas “out on the floor, improvise it or direct it” (J20, 20/9/13). What resulted was a workshop structure that always began with a brief check in, before we all took turns reading the transcript and voicing the stories. One collaborator reflected that “[w]e didn’t get anything up on its feet which, for me at least, felt good because it gave us a chance to sort of get to know these 2 women” (CAJ 1, 23/9/13). This voicing then led on to discussions about the content of the stories and specifically to the elements that connected with, or conversely challenged, the collaborators.

The collaborating artists expressed that finding moments of personal connection to the stories and discussing why some of the stories were challenging was a valued aspect of the workshop. They were “affected by their stories” (CAJ 2, 23/9/13) and wanted to discuss the stories that resonated personally with them (CAJ 3, 23/9/13). We discussed Alopecia as a condition, and one student reflected that “the people who

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

have it have no more control over it than they do another person” (CAJ 4, 25/9/13). Responding to the content and exploring the stories challenged the collaborating artists to consider what one referred to as “the journeys people have” (CAJ 5, 25/9/13) in new ways. Particularly confronting was “the sadness, the ideas of what is normal and how they don’t fit their own image of what is normal” (CAJ 5, 25/9/13). Exploring the emotion expressed by the women was a repeated theme across the collaborator’s reflections. Before the play began to take on a performance shape the collaborators expressed that “people need to see this performance/play because there is a wonderful message of self acceptance [sic]” (CAJ6, 25/9/13). “[O]ne of the biggest things we discussed was identity. It is really interesting how much hair and the eyebrows and stuff can define an identity...I suppose I just take it for granted” (CAJ 7, 2/10/13).

Learning which aspects of the stories were most engaging for the collaborators provided insight and dramaturgical direction for the playwriting process. Their personal reflections indicated which stories may hold wider resonance for an audience, for example, “when they talk about being two different people, when they wake and see themselves and [then] when they’ve done [their] hair and makeup, I can relate and I don’t even have alopecia” (CAJ 8, 2/10/13). The practice of responding to the voiced stories was influenced by my membership of the storytelling community and the collaborators commented positively that this meant I could answer their questions and help them “further understand” (CAJ 10, 4/10/13) the stories. The content in the stories and the themes across the interviews were the focus for the first two workshops, and some of the collaborating artists spent time in their journals recapping the stories and how they reacted to or engaged with them. However, overwhelmingly the practice of ‘devising through discussion’ was the most documented across the collaborating artists’ journals.

### **5.4.2. Devising through discussion**

This practice was akin in some ways to Kaufman’s Moment Work and performance writing (Brown 51), but without the preparation and actualisation of the concept. Rather, the collaborators were devising and co-devising through discussion. One collaborator described the discussion as an attempt “to illustrate these stories on stage” (CAJ 5, 25/9/13). This notion of illustration, to show the meaning or truth of

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

something more clearly, encapsulates the intent of our verbal devising process; to show the meaning of the storyteller's experiences through the dramatic languages. One collaborator listed some of the verbally devised ideas from the fourth workshop; "a soliloquy [sic] like integration of action with monologue, a physicalisation of some stories, straight monologue, side-by-side description with depiction" (CAJ 13, 4/10/13). Interestingly this is a list of conventions, whereas other devised moments were staging related. For example, "a group of people talking in the background then someone stepping out of that into the light to talk" (CAJ 14, 4/10/13), relates to the use of symbol. "A bald manequin [sic] how it also represents fashion" (CAJ 14, 4/10/13) and "the idea of the OHP trying to draw on their own 'image' what they wanted to look like, what they think is beautiful" (CAJ 5, 25/9/13) refers to the use of props and objects in the creation of meaning. The rhythm and tempo of the scenes was also discussed; "include more short sentences or one worded sentences" (CAJ 12, 4/10/13).

Devising through discussion highlights the points of connection in the stories and begins the process of verbally illustrating their translation into performance.

It allows for ideas to be created in tandem, for example [student] mentioned having a person just totally rocking out to Pink, and then I suggested that this could be followed by someone knocking on the door and we see the fear return to that person who isn't wearing a wig etc. These ideas develop in dialogue. (J31, 23/9/13)

The student in this example described the process as "offering strong images... [which] built on other people's ideas" (CAJ3, 23/9/13). These ideas developed in dialogue and through the discussion. The practice aligns with Turner's description of "dialogic listening" (110), which is a concept Turner borrows from communications theory to describe an element of Hare's collaborative writing practice. Dialogic listening

highlights the productive and mutual qualities of communication between people. Whereas in 'empathic' listening you at-

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

tempt to ‘lay aside yourself’, in ‘dialogic’ listening you remain present and acknowledge your own position and responses. (110)

One of the key strategies of dialogic listening is to mutually discuss metaphors, to encourage “each other to share and build on these metaphors” (115), as demonstrated in the example above.

Theme based stimulus enabled a greater opportunity for devising through discussion. In the first workshop I took in all the transcribed stories from two storytellers and we spent a lot of time connecting and responding to the content; trying to get to know the people. My collaborators did not view the stories as stimulus for the creation of fictional characters, but rather wanted to try and understand or get to the ‘truth’ of the character they perceived to be represented in the stories. In contrast, when I took in themed stories (stories from all 15 storytellers relating to a similar experience), the collaborators responded to the material as creative stimulus and began creating and devising fictionalised moments (J32, 25/9/13). In workshops four and five I brought in a more structured draft of the play and this resulted in a clear shift in the workshops, and one reflected in the journals, from verbal devising to critical feedback.

### **5.4.3. Critical feedback**

As the stimulus that I brought into the workshop space changed so did the role of the collaborators. Rather than contribute unique ideas and illustrations, building on the ideas discussed (CAJ 3, 23/9/13), the discussion shifted towards providing feedback and critical responses to the drafted scenes. The change in stimulus positioned the collaborators more as prospective audience members rather than co-creators of performance. However, as the collaborators were seeing some of their ideas made manifest in the script, their sense of ownership was evident in their later feedback and reflection; “we agreed on the text...we loved the Violet and Alopecia moments” (CAJ 12, 4/10/13). The use of *we* across the collaborators’ journals reflects the investment and ownership of the collaborators to the project. Their feedback centred on structure, and perhaps this was due to the decision to have only two characters that develop and grow across the duration of the play. They reflected on the

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

placement of certain moments: “the ‘crying’ scene was great in the middle of the play” (CAJ 12, 4/10/13);

the three stories that are simply told by an actor on a chair are very powerful and disrupt the fast pace... These moments need to slow it down and come back to the bare essentials of what theatre is: stories. (CAJ 16, 6/11/13)

and

combining elements into ‘themes’ or ‘scenes’ really aided in the progression of the work which I feel layered with the Violet and Alopecia throughline and added connectivity to the work. (CAJ 18, 6/11/13)

The workshop space became a place for critical questioning, and we discussed the ethics of representing characters with Alopecia; “using a bald cap would almost be like blackface in this context” (CAJ 15, 4/10/13). The final workshop provided an opportunity for the collaborators to ask questions of the play and its content. Overall they responded positively to the characters of Violet and Alopecia, describing them as “real characters and it is beautiful, how they grow and change” (CAJ 19, 6/11/13). Although many reflected that there needed to be greater depth to their story, asking “where does she go from here? What does she have to learn?” (CAJ 17, 6/11/13) and suggesting that “Violet’s story resolved too quickly and easily, almost between scenes” (CAJ 21, 6/11/13). Structurally they responded that “the whole thing ebbs and flows beautifully” (CAJ 19, 6/11/13), however the ending needed work as I had not yet answered that seminal ‘so what?’ question; “what solution do sufferers of Alopecia want?” (CAJ 20, 6/11/13). The feedback, stimulus and provocations of the workshops provided a wealth of material for me to go away and work on individually. I refer to this practice as post workshop processing which converged into playwriting.

### **5.4.4. Post workshop processing**

While the workshops always resulted in a myriad of possible directions for the play, as one collaborator reflected, “[i]t really depends on what Sarah wants from the

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

story...” (CAJ 16, 6/11/13). In the post workshop phase some clear decisions needed to be made. The collaborators had explored how different decisions about dramatic action could all equally result in an entertaining play, but with very different meanings. I found myself wrestling on occasion with how to meet my premise through my dramaturgical choices. While the workshops were never as physicalised as I had originally thought they might be, the mental processing and imaginative thinking that resulted from the workshop was highly active. There was a cyclical nature to the creative development, in that I would bring in stimulus that would prompt Voicing Stories and devising through discussion, which in turn became the stimulus for further writing. “It’s almost like sharing the stories has unlocked my imagination” (J32, 25/9/13).

The workshop process was validating for some of the choices and provided provocation and challenge to others. The thinking-time between workshops was a vital part of the process, as I then made decisions that informed what stimulus I would take to the next workshop. Post workshop processing was also a time to return to my premise, to review and re-immense in the stories that had been transcribed, and to take kernels of ideas from the workshop and let them grow in other areas of the play. After the fifth workshop I felt “like I have got as much as I can from this style of workshop, and that I need more time to work on it individually” (J34, 4/10/13). The creative development workshops were an invaluable aspect of the process and enhanced my ability to understand the dramatic nature and structure of the verbatim stories.

It was only through the process of Voicing Stories and then devising through discussion that the performative nature of the stories became apparent. In my interview with Yana Taylor she reiterated that the form is evident in the content (*Personal Interview*). I didn’t really understand what she meant at the time, but now I kinaesthetically understand that some stories’ structure and tone lend themselves to certain ways of being performed. In the workshop process we learned that reflective stories, those that were personal contemplations about self and identity, were more difficult to work with in our practice of devising through discussion, and this may have been due to a lack of apparent dramatic action (J33, 2/10/13). Some of the stories were more suited to being delivered in longer monologues through direct

address, and others were inherently dramatic, and lent themselves to translation through the dramatic languages. Being able to differentiate and acknowledge the components of a reflectively told story, and one with active present tense, was a skill of discernment that emerged throughout the workshopping process and influenced my choices in the next phase of the process: playwriting.

## **5.5. Playwriting: translating stories into performance**

I really have no idea how I'm going to shape this play...my head is whirling with all the possibilities. (J26, 14/8/13)

There are a variety of terms used within the academic field to name the verbatim theatre playwriting process. However, these terms do not convey the complexity of verbatim theatre playwriting practice and rarely acknowledge it as a creative pursuit. Playwriting in a verbatim theatre process is translating stories through the dramatic languages and into performance. In this section I explore my playwriting process in *bald heads & blue stars*, and contribute to the available lexicon for discussing the process of this practice. I appropriate the meaning of the phrase “dramatic languages” from the Queensland Studies Authority’s Senior Drama Syllabus (2013). The dramatic languages are the elements of drama, skills of performance and the conventions of forms and styles (7). The dramatic languages intersect with the playwright’s purpose for the work and their chosen style in order to convey dramatic action and meaning (4). They are the languages available to the playwright, and reflect Kaufman’s definition of performance writing as they encompass all the modes of communicating meaning available in performance. The verbatim theatre playwright has chosen their style (verbatim theatre) and as such there are a number of conventions traditionally associated with this that act as indicators of how meaning will be shaped in the play. The verbatim theatre playwright’s practice is a process of translating spoken stories into performance through the dramatic languages.

In the process of writing *bald heads & blue stars* I struggled with and learned a great deal about the playwriting process. In particular I learned to shift ideas from the literal to the metaphoric (J37, 14/11/13), to position my voice as the playwright, and

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

to wrestle with the worth and value of my ideas (J33, 21/10/13). These learnings and findings were (for me personally) an incredible expansion of knowledge and artistic practice, wrought with emotion and the tension created by the practice-led nature of the research and the ever-looming opening night. In this section of Chapter Five I describe the key stages in my playwriting journey and articulate the practices that were most effective in the translation process.

### **5.5.1. In the beginning**

In a similar approach to Wilkinson for *A Day in December* (2010) I began by looking for themes and patterns across the stories (RT14). These themes were often those reflected in the questions I had prepared for the interviews, however others emerged across the stories that did not originate in my planning. Thematic engagement stimulated ideas around scene titles that would give the audience an insight to the themes about to be explored. Two examples were “Decisions, or a Bandana for Bamaga” and “Diagnosis, or bloody useless doctors” (J32, 25/9/13). Choosing to structure my engagement with the stories thematically had a direct impact on the resulting structure of the play, particularly as I never returned to the stories on a storyteller-by-storyteller basis. Exploring the themes, or as Wilkinson describes the common threads in narratives (129), meant exploring diverse experiences of a similar event, such as buying your first wig or getting an eyebrow tattoo. Each storyteller illustrated their experience of these events in a unique way, giving insight to their social and cultural context and sharing their perspectives of the world. The thematically grouped stories became windows into the diversity of human experience; rich stimulus to explore the human condition. As I considered how these stories could be shared collectively, the convention of juxtaposition emerged from the content. By placing completely different experiences of a similar event sequentially I could emphasise the diversity of experience while also demonstrating one of the core values of critical theory; that truth and knowing are contextual and changeable. Juxtaposition also crucially adds a layer of dramatic tension.

While these thematically grouped and juxtaposed stories were entertaining I was searching for “some sort of throughline” (J32, 25/9/13), something that would give the play momentum and allow it to grow. I was reassured by Ackroyd and O’Toole’s discussion of Wilkinson’s playwriting process, that “she was initially stumped by

discovering that...the data did not fit with the conventional three act play. There were no entrapments, no denouement and worst of all, no hero” (71). I wrestled with structure, choosing whether to write “a digestible, receivable piece of theatre that is in a known format” (RT10) or what I perceived to be the more radical option of “not taking the audience on that recognisable journey with a character” (J37, 14/11/13). Returning to my creative premise for the play and my core beliefs about theatre became the guide for my decisions. I was exploring what it meant to experience Alopecia, and theatre is about a kinaesthetic sharing of experience. Theatre also requires tension, and tension is friction; movement. By choosing to embody Alopecia as a character (J32, 25/9/13) I was enabling interaction and the physicalisation of the storytellers relationship with the condition. I needed something to give the play momentum, and so the characters of Violet and Alopecia were born.

### **5.5.2. Violet and Alopecia: translating the literal to the metaphoric**

Violet and Alopecia became the recurring characters, and I slowly began to write scenes for them across the play. These scenes were linked to the thematic stories and Violet’s character was drawn from multiple stories across the interviews and my own experience. The play’s shape was emerging, “the Violet and Alopecia scenes spliced with verbatim relating to themes” (J36, 6/11/13) and while the script was starting to develop a rhythm, I was concerned that it may not work for a full length play. I momentarily considered removing the characters of Violet and Alopecia (J37, 14/11/13), however as I continued to layer them throughout the play they became more and more integral to the overall work. The structural form was emerging and solidifying through the practice of writing. Their scenes were literal at the outset, “I say everything that I mean. Then I come back and take bits out, understanding that in theatre you can show what you mean through metaphor and performance” (J38, 18/11/13). They were becoming shorter “but they are more layered and richer” and more frequent. Through the inclusion of Violet and Alopecia, the structure of the play had become a convergence of the linear and the cyclical.

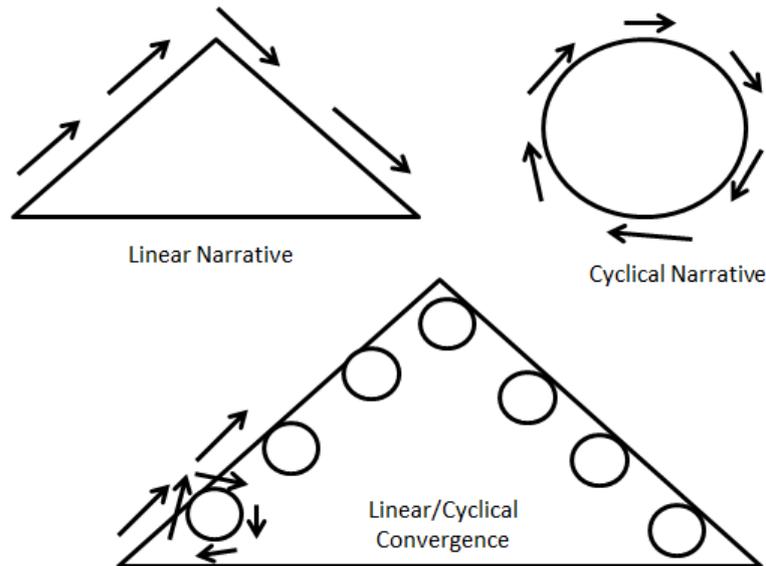


Figure 5: Converging Linear and Cyclical Narratives

As I was writing in further Violet and Alopecia scenes I realised that I had been writing towards two related yet separate resolutions; Violet accepts her Alopecia, and Violet is loved. “The only reason it matters that we have Alopecia is because we feel less beautiful or loved” (J36, 6/11/13). I had thought initially that I was writing towards the former. However, through engagement with the stories and a return to my positioning in EVTP I realised that my version of ‘truth’ is that women with Alopecia are beautiful and worthy of self-love and the love of others. This parallels Wilkinson’s discussion of seeking a reconciliation narrative in her playwriting process for *Today We’re Alive* (2014) but finding instead an acknowledgement narrative (*Today We’re Alive Forum*).

### 5.5.3. Feedback

On the seventh of January 2014 I emailed a draft of the script to the storytellers that I had interviewed for their review and feedback. I was “very nervous, excited yes, but also nervous” (J42, 7/1/14) sending the draft script off to them, hoping that I had captured the emotion of their experiences. I also became very conscious of the agenda that I had written into the work, and wondered how the storytellers might respond. In my email to the group I explained some of the script formatting:

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

For those of you who have not read a play script before, the writing in italics or in brackets () generally refers to stage directions, or specific movements that I want the actors to make. (EC, 7/1/14, 10:07am)

I also encouraged them to give me feedback, “advice, first impressions or suggestions that you have”, to let me know if they would like any of their stories edited or removed and if they felt that I had missed any key aspects of the Alopecia experience. They had the option of conveying feedback to me via email and also via an anonymous survey. Within two hours I had received my first response: “It’s weird to think part of your life is going to be immortalised in a play...I got goosebumps reading the lines that came from my mouth, some time ago” (EC, 7/1/14, 12:03pm). This storyteller also conveyed how she envisioned Alopecia: “I imagine Alopecia to be a bit like a wicked fairy who taps people on the head with her wand and a clump of hair comes out in that spot” (EC, 7/1/14, 12:03pm).

Mostly the responses conveyed that they loved it, “can’t wait to see it on stage” (EC, 7/1/14, 5:50pm) and that I had “hit the nail on the head with the craziness of this ridiculous condition” (EC, 10/1/14, 5:23pm). One storyteller conveyed:

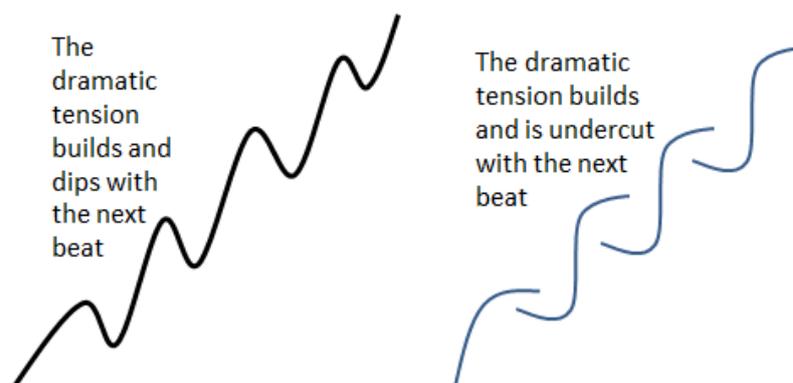
I’m not sure how to read a play so I just read it like a book haha. Everything that’s been said is great, however it may just be the way I read it? But I think it’s sounds a bit too bogan. Especially my lines lol it’s written exactly how I’d say it and I think it should be a bit like how a normal person talks if that makes sense. Less “like” and less “you know” you know? Hahahaha. [sic] (EC, 9/1/14, 8:24am)

I replied with an explanation as to why I had kept in the ‘likes’ and ‘ums’ and that “when the actors are rehearsing it, it should just sound like a normal conversation” (EC, 9/1/14, 9:16am), and then offered that “I can absolutely go through your stories and take those kinds of bits out if you’d like, that would be totally fine!...how you want them told is really important”. She later replied that it was fine and to leave it as it is. I received similar feedback from another storyteller, who explained that she doesn’t like “the word LIKE being interjected into every sentence. I tease my kids

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

when they use it” (EC, 9/1/14, 12:47pm). This storyteller was also concerned that I had not included enough positive Alopecia experiences, particularly those associated with “the positive side of ‘coming out’ wigless” and “no leg/armpit shaving and no hairy black spiders on the top of the thighs while wearing swimmers”. I thanked her for the suggestions, and explained that from the 15 women I had interviewed only three of them were happy to go wig free in public, although “I would love to help more women out there feel comfortable in their own skin and see what they perceive as ‘imperfections’ in a more positive light” (EC, 9/1/14, 1:44pm). I was thrilled with the overall responses, and intrigued by how many commented on the inclusion of expressions such as like and um. Despite having explained that the recorded interviews would become script, and explicitly saying that some stories would be included “word for word” (IT2), they were still surprised to see these aspects of conversational language included.

I also received feedback from the director David Burton, who is an established professional playwright and author. He provided dramaturgical advice across the lead up to rehearsal, particularly in relation to placing the point of climax and removing some of the narration at the end of scenes. Where initially the dramatic tension followed the image on the left in figure 6, with Burton’s feedback I learned to undercut the scenes and the rhythm became more demonstrative of the image on the



right.

*Figure 6: Building Dramatic Tension*

Burton also suggested that I consider writing Alopecia as a male character, and that this actor could then also perform the other male roles through the performance (J51, 7/4/14). I had always considered Alopecia a female character, as it was something

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

described by the storytellers as belonging to them. I was surprised by the changes in scenes when I wrote with a male character in mind. Particularly the climax, where Violet confronts Alopecia with all the hurt and pain she has suffered due to his presence. The scene went from cold, still and restrained, to physical, heated and violent. It was evocative and created a very different dynamic, as demonstrated through the two contrasting versions below:

### Script Draft 7th January 2014

*Violet and Alopecia enter from opposite sides of the stage and there is clearly tension between them. There are lots of pauses between the lines, lots of looks shared between them, lots of emotion, enhanced by the drumming.*

VIOLET: Seriously, we need to talk. Look. You being here is really tough. And you're everywhere. You've started sneaking into all these places you've never been before. *(This makes A smile mischievously, but that pisses V off. The following word is spoken with real heartache and anger.)* Stop! *(The drumming stops as well)* It's not a joke! You're suffocating me. I can't do anything without thinking about where you are and what you're doing. Are you ever going to leave? Please. I'm seriously asking you, are you here to stay? Why can't you just let me go. *(A is avoiding eye contact)* Look at me!! Are you ever going away?

*Long pause. A shakes her head. V cries, then slowly recomposes herself. They exit awkwardly.*

### Rehearsal script

*Violet and Alopecia enter and there is clearly tension between them. There are lots of pauses between the lines, lots of looks shared between them, lots of emotion.*

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

VIOLET: We need to talk. Look. You being here is really tough. And you're everywhere. You've started sneaking into all these places you've never been before. *(This makes Alopecia smile mischievously, but that pisses Violet off. The following word is spoken with real heartache and anger.)* Stop! It's not a joke! You're suffocating me. I can't do anything without thinking about where you are and what you're doing. Are you ever going to leave? Please. *(Alopecia is avoiding eye contact, and Violet starts to get physical with him)* I'm seriously asking you, are you here to stay? Why can't you just let me go. Look at me!! Are you ever going away?

*Pause. Alopecia shakes his head. Violet lets her anger and anguish out on Alopecia, pummelling on the chest and shoulders in her despair*

VIOLET: Why? Why? You bastard! Why are you doing this to me! It isn't fair! I'm, I, how can I...

*Alopecia stands and takes the anger. As VIOLET begins to cry, exhausted, Alopecia holds her. VIOLET slowly recomposes herself.*

VIOLET: Ok. Ok.

*They exit.*

During the final two weeks leading up to rehearsal “as a playwright I have sort of stopped work. We decided that the next stage of editing would occur on the floor in the rehearsal space” (J55, 11/6/14). The practice of playwriting and the feedback I received from Burton across the process provided opportunities to learn more about the form and conventions of verbatim theatre.

#### **5.5.4. Writing with conventions in *bald heads & blue stars***

Theatrical conventions indicate to an audience how time, space and presence will be shaped within the world of the play. They assist in contextualising and translating the dramatic action and meaning for the audience, and different forms have their own historical tradition of conventions. In Section 2.6 I outlined the most prominent verbatim theatre conventions discussed within the field, and emphasised the minimal discussion surrounding the function of these conventions and how they shape the dramatic action of a verbatim play. I began to address this through an investigation of three Australian plays, and this section provides further depth by analysing the use of conventions in *bald heads & blue stars*; which in contrast to the three previously analysed event based plays, is topic based. *bald heads & blue stars* incorporates the traditional conventions of verbatim theatre: direct address; monologues; and narration, however also adds complexity through meta-theatricality and the combination of linear and cyclical narratives. Through writing I realised that re-staging experiences in the present tense can occur through two separate conventions: “mimetic realism” as outlined by Wake (*To Witness Mimesis* 106), and a convention that I name Character Narrated realism. Each of these conventions and their function in the play will now be explored.

In the teacher’s notes I wrote to accompany the 2014 production at Artsworx, I described the performance as centring on the characters of Violet and Alopecia.

They meet when Violet is three years old, and the audience is taken on the journey of Violet’s relationship with Alopecia. *bald heads & blue stars* weaves the stories of 15 women throughout this central narrative, exploring what it means to lose some or all of your hair (Peters 2014).

Through this synopsis I have established two conventions; composite characters (Ackroyd and O’Toole 62) and the interconnection of linear and cyclical narratives. There are three meta-theatrical worlds in *bald heads & blue stars*. In the first world the actors take on the role of meta-theatrical storytellers, guiding the audience through the play and providing vocal captioning for the scenes between Violet and

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

Alopecia. The second world comprises the diverse community of women who were interviewed, with collections of verbatim stories providing cyclical thematic moments that cut through the linear narrative. The third world, which follows the story of Violet and Alopecia, is foreshadowed at the outset of the play with the entrance of Violet and a foretelling of a major event in her journey with Alopecia; removing her wig and embracing her baldness (Peters *bald heads* 2). The second beat moves swiftly into direct address, with the actors providing heavily didactic information about the definition of Alopecia, the process of interviewing women from across Queensland and explaining to the audience that each of the female actors would be playing the character of Violet throughout the play. This meta-theatrical layer provides the connection between the two main composite characters and the themed verbatim stories, as the actors provide narration and exposition.

In the second world the conventions of fragmentary language (Young 81), parallel storytelling (Ackroyd and O'Toole 70) and monologue (Watt 194) are apparent. These cyclical moments of verbatim stories provide colour, diversity and tension to the events in Violet's journey. The audience sees Violet in grade five observing a game of handball. She wants to join in, but she's worried that if she plays her hair might shift and people will be able to see one of her bald spots. After this moment there is a shift to the second world of the play:

5: Oh God, I can't imagine how you dealt with having this as  
a teenager

4: Kids can be just so

3: Brutal

4: High school was

3: Challenging

1: You just don't feel like you fit in with everybody else

5: I had a great group of friends

4: It wasn't that big a deal

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

### *Engage with the audience*

- 4 (30): So much of your life is... we are told it's all about looks and you can't really/ if you're being honest, it is about looks. You know I, I suppose through my adolescence, particularly, I got by on being smart and funny and a bit of a ring leader and, you know, through the years of teasing I just toughened up. I just became tougher than everybody else and/ although I was still a good girl, you know, but in order to deal with the teasing I just got smart mouthed and I just you know, used to just say...
- 3: *Stands out to the side, defiantly looking at the audience* 'oh can't you think of anything else, you know, "bald eagle", hello',
- 4 (30): you know, and I just give them other suggestions instead of, you know, I would just retaliate with how stupid their teasings were and I'd give them better ideas. (11)

Fragmentary language is evident in 4's monologue about being teased at high school. These moments provide insight about the kinds of experiences high school aged people with Alopecia may face, without requiring Violet to be the sole vessel responsible for conveying a singular journey of experiences. The second world contextualises Violet's journey, demonstrating that she exists within a broader community of experiences. These moments also function to provide tension and allusion. A number of stories are shared about anxiety and the experience of panic attacks (18). This moment concludes with the harrowing revelation that for one of the women interviewed, her experiences had brought her to the brink of suicide:

- 4: 'Your skin looks clear today, your lipstick's a nice bright colour, your teeth are nice and clean, your eyes look nice and white'. All that "positive affirmation in the mirror" stuff, it's not usually me. But I physically had to go out of

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

my way to do that. Because I (*pause*) I know what it's like to feel suicidal. I knew where the line in the sand was.

(18)

The play then shifts directly to the climax between Violet and Alopecia, where she describes him as suffocating her. Finally, she confronts him with her worst fears:

VIOLET: Why can't you just let me go. Look at me!! Are you ever going away?

*Pause. Alopecia shakes his head. Violet lets her anger and anguish out on Alopecia, pummelling on the chest and shoulders in her despair*

VIOLET: Why? Why? You bastard! Why are you doing this to me! It isn't fair! I'm, I, how can I...

*Alopecia stands and takes the anger. As VIOLET begins to cry, exhausted, Alopecia holds her.*

Juxtaposition functions as an emotional convention in the play. I would build the dramatic tension of a moment, and through guidance from Burton, learned to undercut that build with a juxtaposing rhythm or narrative in order to enrich the emotional complexity of the play and the experience for the audience. Juxtaposition and "comic timing" (Ackroyd and O'Toole 70) are two conventions that work well together when providing a reprieve for the audience from the heavier emotions of a play. The following moment comes directly after the climax between Violet and Alopecia, providing the reader with an opportunity for the preceding scene to settle and for them to transition into a new emotional experience:

B: If you want to piss off someone with Alopecia, tell them

A: 'Oh you're so lucky'

C: 'You get to choose whatever hair style you want'

D: 'Imagine how much you must save'

Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

E: 'Not having to buy shampoo and conditioner'

A: 'Never paying for a hair cut'

C: 'And the time you'd save in the morning'

E: 'You really are very lucky'

B: They'll probably smile and say

A, C, D, E: 'yeah, absolutely'

B: When what they want to say is

D: 'Fuckin ignorant bastard aren't ya?' (*Innocently*) What?

(19)

The third world of the play aligns with Wake's definition of "mimetic realism" (*To Witness Mimesis* 106) through its representation of experience rather than reflective re-telling. For example:

*Violet is sitting on the stool. Alopecia is wary of the doctor as he looks at Violet's head. Doctor moves away.*

ALOPECIA: What's going on?

VIOLET: Dunno

ALOPECIA: Your head doesn't hurt does it?

VIOLET: Nuh, don't think so

*They watch the others talking*

VIOLET: Come on, let's play

*Violet convinces Alopecia to play. Dr comes over and inspects Violet's hands, totally ignoring Alopecia. (6)*

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

Wake differentiates between “mimetic realism” and “diegetic realism” and suggests that there can also be a combination of the two (106). I name this Character Narrated realism, where monologues are spoken in direct address while simultaneously having lines of dialogue or interactions with other characters re-enacted around them. In Character Narrated realism the character is narrating their own story, whereas in mimetic realism the story is witnessed by the reader or audience. The following is an example of Character Narrated realism:

*The following stories are all told by Actor 3. She removes her wig at the start of this sequence. The rest of the cast become the other roles.*

3 (55): I'm gonna go nude nut, nude nut I called it. It was fine, no one cared. You know the only looks I got were from little kids.

Kid 1: Are you a lady?

Kid 2: Mum, you can't even tell if that's a girl or a boy.

Kid 3: Did you know you've got no hair?

3 (55): And I thought 'That's not so bad, I can deal with that'. I find that if I'm in a shop a lot of people let me go first, I think because they think I'm sick.

Shopper: 'You go first'

3 (55): Oh no I'm right

Shopper: 'No no, you go first'

3 (55): Alright then. 'Thank you'. (25)

Manipulating these two conventions towards the end of the play enabled me to use them to help enhance the narrative. Violet has become more confident in her bald appearance and attends a party where she connects intimately with another party

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

goer. Whilst initially appearing to be the convention of mimetic realism, the moment then shifts to Violet speaking in direct address to the audience for the first time.

VIOLET:           What are you dressed as?

Bartender:        The only one who makes it out alive in old  
                          westerns. The bartender.

*The Bartender extends a hand and they start to dance. Moment. They kiss.*

VIOLET:           That was my first kiss. (30)

This emphasises the importance of this moment in Violet's personal journey and connects her story to the audience directly, rather than behind the fourth wall convention of mimetic realism. Analysing the conventions of the play prompts a consideration of why certain conventions have been included and their impact on the narrative.

Salverson questions the difference between artistic playwriting choices and political or ethical playwriting choices, asking if the two can be separated or whether one is always inherent in the other. She suggests that writing about a community can be problematic, as the playwright may end up romanticizing the community's stories and denying "the multiple realities and contradictions present in those who testify" (6). This can collapse individual identities and experiences into a unifying but oppressive whole. In *bald heads & blue stars* have I looked for the unifying themes at the detriment to the multiple realities and contradictions of the Alopecia community? In a scene about tattoos the majority of the characters discuss the value of having eyebrows and eyelashes tattooed on. They express strongly that it improves their sense of identity and is essential to their personal wellbeing. To create contrast and humour I chose to end this series of pro-tattoo stories with an anecdote from a storyteller who finds them disconcerting. After one character says "[a]s soon as you get those eyebrows on you feel your face, you've got your identity back you know, I'm me again" another contrasts with "[s]omeone said 'oh you can get them tattooed on' and I said you've got to be joking, how terrible would that be? And don't they look disgusting?" (24). My goal in this scene was to create tension between the

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

characters and the ideas on stage. This inclusion highlights the contradicting opinions within the community, however was potentially driven by a dramatic agenda rather than an ethical one. How might the qualities of effective dramatic action parallel ethical practices of representation? When the outcome benefits both the playwright's creative intentions and the ethics of practice it is an easy decision to make. Salverson's assertion of ethical practice in this instance equates to complexity and contradiction; both positive aspects of performance. What happens when an ethical practice leads to uninteresting theatre and the interests don't align? The ethics of playwriting practice, particularly the use of conventions and the representations of a community, is beyond the scope of this research project however a significant topic for future research.

### 5.6. Rehearsal and performance

And I think there is absolutely value in allowing participants the opportunity to tell their stories, in whatever form that may be. But if they tell their stories and we put that on stage, it is simply 'Verbatim'. When we shape those stories into performance it is 'Theatre'. (J59, 25/7/14)

The final phase of the project was to produce *bald heads & blue stars* for the four performance season with Artsworx at the University of Southern Queensland. Being a member of the Alopecia community, the playwright, one of the actors and the researcher made this project particularly unique, and while this positioning enabled a magnificently rich perspective to explore my research questions about verbatim theatre, it also created challenges in balancing these roles. Burton expressed one of these challenges as having a "living breathing in-the-room playwright" (RT17, 8/8/14), and how this impacted the rehearsal context. My personal challenges included balancing my responsibility to the community of storytellers, my own artistic agenda and the challenge of what I would in hindsight refer to as Leading through Vulnerability. Positioning myself as an actor in the production enabled me to engage with the script from a completely new perspective; to ask different questions about its interpretation and to explore its shape and narrative in a tangible and embodied way. Most importantly, this position enabled me to experience what a verbatim text feels like on the body, to kinaesthetically understand the conventions I

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

had written into the work and to feel the anxious excitement of performing a story back to the community from which it came. Acting in *bald heads & blue stars* has enabled insight to the unique characteristics of rehearsing and performing verbatim theatre. Specifically, my findings relate to: 1) Actor's perceived responsibility; 2) Rehearsal strategies; 3) Rhythm and breath; and 4) Audience positioning.

These findings contribute to the field currently pioneered by UK based academic Tom Cantrell with his work *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (2013) which explores four productions from the perspective of the actors "to identify the ways in which they adapt current rehearsal and performance techniques and invent new strategies in the service of playing real people" (1). This work, alongside Paget's series of works on "Acting with Facts" from 2002 and 2007, speak directly to documentary theatre and docudrama. There is some discussion, and I would add assumption, in the academic field that verbatim theatre falls neatly into a broader definition of documentary theatre. However, I assert that in an Australian context the term verbatim theatre is often used by both artists and academics to refer to a significantly different agenda and set of working practices than that of documentary theatre. Yet I agree with Paget that the borders are porous, and that these texts are useful points of reference, especially as they speak directly to the phenomena of acting within these genres. In this section I am uniquely contributing an Australian based case study to the field that extends on the findings currently discussed by Cantrell and Paget.

### **5.6.1. Actor's perceived responsibility**

The actor's body is the most tangible reminder in a verbatim play that what we are watching is fiction. Paget explains the actor's body is "always both more and less than the real individual" and their body "emphasises the structuring absence of the Real Person Subject" (*Acting a Part* 32). This was particularly true in the case of *bald heads & blue stars*, where four out of the five cast did not noticeably have Alopecia. I discussed with the community of storytellers how the actors might portray being someone with Alopecia. They were more vocal about the actors' understanding of what it is like to be stared at in public, or to feel physically trapped in their homes, rather than wanting them to physically represent the condition through shaving their heads. Despite this, the actors still wrestled with the idea that their bodies did not reflect the women whose stories they were telling. This was one

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

of my first surprises in the rehearsal process as I was adamant, like other Australian playwrights Valentine, Millar and Wilkinson, that this was a play and that I had written my artistic agenda into the translation of the stories. However, saying this did not lead to instant freedom for the cast to explore the stories as they would if it were a traditionally fictional text, and the actors felt a weight of responsibility.

Early in the process the cast expressed being “concerned about misrepresenting the women...they want to get it ‘right’ and not offend anyone” (J62, 11/8/14). One actor reflected

I know that there is some trepidation amongst us ... that we might interpret the emotional message behind the text incorrectly and in turn, risk offending these women. It’s probably the nature of verbatim though that makes us quite anxious at times. This will be a bit scary when they are actually in the audience.... (CAJ 26, 11/8/14)

Another commented that “I am really feeling the challenge of being a young woman, a young woman with goddamn long hair, telling all these stories” (CAJ23, 31/7/14). Canton suggests that sometimes the community subjects of a play (the storytellers) are approached differently by the actors in their interpretations of the community as characters. The actors may employ a psychological acting approach to portraying their stories, and conversely a more stereotypical and two dimensional approach when playing the other roles (54). This was evident in the context of *bald heads & blue stars*, with a different approach to performing the stories from women with Alopecia compared to when we were performing the roles of doctors, friends and general public. Wilkinson states that since some characters are only performed briefly they can be “sensitive to caricature” and that “interpretations need to be anchored in reality” (143). Our cast had a heightened sensitivity, one actor commented “[t]his is a story that needs to be told. I’m excited to be a part of that” (CAJ 22, 30/7/14). While Wilkinson warns against caricature, it is also important to not be weighed down by that anchor of reality. This is performance, and Burton as director often encouraged us to find the weird in each moment, “don’t fear the ridiculous – people are ridiculous” and to be fearless, to “run with our impulse and commit to it, to follow it through, not self-censor mid movement” (J64, 16/8/14). It

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

was Burton and his approach to the rehearsal process that enabled the actors to move beyond the fear of offending and into a place of exploration and experimentation that enabled us to connect authentically with the stories.

### 5.6.2. Rehearsal strategies

Three strategies emerged across the rehearsal process as being effective ways in to the text; Connection Soup, Secret Stories and movement activities.

Merlin describes how their rehearsal process for *The Permanent Way* (2003) began with actioning, discussing what each character is doing to the others in the scene and expressing this as a verb. She describes this process as “a sure fire way to access the heart of a play in an extremely precise and consistent manner” (43). In the context of *bald heads & blue stars*, we found actioning was only useful in our scenes between Violet and Alopecia, as theirs was a physicalised and tangible relationship that changed across the time and space of the play. We found a process of creating Connection Soup responses to our reading of the themed stories; we would brainstorm words that summed up what we perceived each theme to be about and these then provided “the key to how the play will connect with the audience” (J58, 21/7/14). This activity proved highly effective, as it prompted a discussion on the emotion and tension of the stories, beyond the specific experiences being described. None of the other cast members could relate to the experience of female hair loss, however, to use Stanislavski’s phrase, they had stores of “emotion memory” (177) related to ideas of difference, beauty, desire, fear and conformity. Our Connection Soup activity connected the intent of the stories to the actors’ own inner emotional landscapes and assisted us in constructing authentic performance. Cantrell concludes that while a Stanislavskian vocabulary and method provided a “useful frame” (*Playing For Real* 178) it is a limited one, and specifically in relation to emotion memory. The actors in his case study “distanced their work on their subject from their own emotions and experiences” (179). In contrast, a lot of our interpretation process was focused explicitly on the search for emotional connection.

Merlin describes interviewing a mother for Hare’s *The Permanent Way*. In Hare’s process the actors conducted the interviews and then performed stories to Hare that they “deemed sufficiently theatrical or dramatically provocative” (41) and he then

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

wrote the play based on their performed stimulus. Merlin describes how the “inherent drama of the interview became apparent when at one point the mother’s inner tempo-rhythm broke through the façade of her emotional containment” (42). Merlin realised that the challenge in authentically telling this woman’s story would be in the manifestation of the “inner/outer conflict of atmospheres and rhythms” (43). We referred to this inner/outer conflict as Secret Stories, “searching for the ‘secret’ that the story holds” (J60, 29/7/14). The women interviewed would often tell a story as if it were no big deal, with lots of laughter, “continually pushing down the real emotions about the experience” (J60, 29/7/14). Burton incorporated exercises where we had a secret and a set task. For example, mine was that I was at a job interview and realised that I’d met the interviewer before; I’m trying to see if he remembers while also doing the interview. Practising this ability to perform the double agenda became really important, and we explored the

two stories going on at the same time – the one they are telling through the words, and the one that is just behind and under the words, the one that is hinted at. Sometimes this second story is fairly implied in the words, sometimes it comes down strictly to our interpretation as actors. The words story and the secret story. (J60, 29/7/14)

One of the actors described the “subtext and surface level performance are both very different beasts” (CAJ 24, 2/8/14), and explained how the exploration of movement had been crucial in their exploration between these two stories;

[m]ovement finds itself in the cracks of the play, in between the words and silences, it is what we do not wish to speak about, it is what we wish we could speak about, but cannot. It is the abyss in between the emotions of the characters, the whispers of extreme angst, the yelps of pure elation. (CAJ24, 2/8/14)

Cantrell (2011) and Merlin have both used the Stanislavski method in their analysis of acting in verbatim theatre, however neither author has explored in depth the concept of Stanislavski’s tempo-rhythm, or the pace, pattern and timing of a

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

character in performance to frame their discussion. I suggest that the concept of tempo-rhythm is a useful framework to understand how we as an ensemble were able to effectively position our audiences through direct address. Benedetti explains that when people are engaged in a collective task “a common tempo is either consciously or unconsciously established to promote efficiency” (80) and that creating a unity and consistency in tempo and rhythm will “make it easier for the audience to follow the action” and they will become “emotionally affected by it” (81).

We spent a lot of time as an ensemble creating this unity, exploring movement, becoming aware of the breath, our collective energy and timing. This was achieved through the activities Gypsy Sticks and Weave/Copy/Riff/Cut which “really set the tone of collectivity, connection and freedom for experimentation” (J57, 19/7/14).

This enabled us to start

developing our physical language as a group, and at the same time considering how what we learn in this physical play space can be transferred or applied to that text, our characters and our relationships in the world of the play. (J57, 19/7/14)

Both of these activities require the actor to kinaesthetically listen to the ensemble, to fluidly oscillate between being responsive and active to offers, and develop an awareness of the body and its energy and breath in the space. Gypsy Sticks begins with the ensemble all holding long thin sticks between their palms, as indicated in the figure below.



Figure 7: 'Gypsy Sticks' example

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

We were then required to move around the space while ensuring that the sticks were not dropped. Burton provided direction for our pace, whether we were to maintain eye contact or not, and to provide stimulus for the intention of our movement.

Sometimes we would work in pairs and other times as a whole ensemble, increasing the difficulty of the task. The cast reflected that “it is helping to HAVE TO connect physically, which I think will help a lot to connect through text” (CAJ23, 31/7/14).

Weave/Copy/Riff/Cut begins with a square marked out on the floor in the rehearsal space. Burton provided a word to act as the stimulus for the intention of our movement, such as comfort, fear or ecstasy. One of the ensemble then steps into the square and creates a repeatable movement inspired by this word; this is the weave. The remaining ensemble can then choose to step into the space and either directly copy the movement, riff from it or cut it. Riffing off the movement means to create a slightly different version of the same movement. The new movement should maintain a noticeable connection to the weave, but perhaps changes the size, tempo or mood of the original. If an actor chooses to cut the weave they are entering the square with a movement that is completely and entirely different to the weave, yet still inspired by the stimulus word provided at the outset. While acknowledging the dynamic of the entire ensemble, actors can choose to leave and enter the space as desired. The activity requires “listening and responding. I find that through movement we create a medium of infinite possibility, a transcendent and universal language; nothing is explicit, and everything is” (CAJ24, 2/8/14). These activities helped develop the ensemble’s awareness, and as Sellars-Young explains, “awareness is the primary creative tool of a performing artist” and increased awareness of the actor’s body and the ensemble increases their “perceptual capabilities” (1). There were three meta-theatrical worlds in *bald heads & blue stars* and the two movement activities described above helped us establish the different tempo-rhythms of each of the worlds. They were also integral to the third finding around our exploration of breath.

### 5.6.3. Rhythm and Breath

Sellars-Young acknowledges that “although respiration is involuntary, it is influenced by an individual’s mental/emotional state” (8). This means that if an actor can control their breathing patterns they can replicate emotions in their interpretation

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

of texts (9). What emerged in our exploration between breath, movement and text was a realisation that within the text remains the echoes of the rhythm of breath that the storyteller used to originally share the story with me in the interview context. While I have then translated their stories through the dramatic languages into performance, the stories themselves began not as text, but as spoken words, influenced and shaped by the breath and rhythms of the storyteller, and traces of this remain after translation. Sellars-Young states that “breath is the beginning” (9) for exploring characters, and what we discovered in our rehearsal process was that this breath began not in the actor’s body, but in the interview process.

Rodenberg proposes that “[g]ood writers consciously or unconsciously hear and write each character with a different breath rhythm in mind” (38). Due to the interviews in a verbatim theatre process, these breath rhythms are already evident, powering the voice of the storyteller as they share their experiences in the interview. Wake recounts a conversation with an actor from headphone verbatim play *Stories of Love & Hate* (2008). Mohammed Ahmed conveyed in this discussion that when performing headphone verbatim “[i]t is not enough to listen word for word; you have to listen breath for breath. There is no other way in which to reach that person’s rhythm” (*The Politics and Poetics of Listening* 97). In my role as actor I could feel in rehearsal when I had ‘got it right’ as playwright – when I captured the breath rhythm of the storyteller in my translation and could interpret it breath for breath. Rehearsing the monologues taught me more about the power of punctuation than any of the time I spent poring over written drafts. It also reminded me as playwright to never completely tell a story, which is a hazard you face in verbatim theatre as the stories are usually completely *told* during the interview. I was reminded to leave some of the story to the other languages of the theatre and allow the meaning to be created in the space between the actor and the audience, to be understood by the audience in their bodies, through their breathing. Those moments of response where the audience has a sharp intake of breath, or commiseratory ‘oh’, just as I heard myself doing in the interviews themselves; that is the stories of the play being understood in the audiences’ bodies and through their breathing.

Burton reflected that “[w]e worked more and talked more about the comedic moments – to get the shape of it and the freshness of it and the speed of it”. He felt

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

that “the tragedy would take care of itself – if we cry too much we stop the audience from having the experience”. It became really important to find “moments where you can get a breath in verbatim theatre, because it’s emotional and intense” (RT23, 8/9/14). The breath Burton is referring to here was not for the actors, but rather for the audience. We were asking a lot of them, and it was important that we acknowledged this and gave them space to experience the emotion of the stories for themselves, and to take a breath. This manifested in moments of humour that literally allowed the audience to sit back, take a break from the emotional engagement and breathe differently. As one actor explained “[t]he show was definitely humorous and often quite light, but it isn’t a comedy, and it provokes thought and LISTENING – the audience had a big job, to listen and take everything in” (CAJ 30, 5/9/14).

We were connecting with each moment in the verbatim stories, and learned to embrace conveying a short piece of experience rather than a character’s journey. Paget states “naturalism, with its emphasis on ‘throughline’ for the performer, is unforgiving of interruption and documentary theatre is a theatre of interruption” (*The ‘Broken’ Tradition* 229). We learned to embrace this interruption and make it an inherent feature in the rhythm of the work. Particularly in the introductory moments to each new scene, with the emphasis on short staccato lines. Rather than create a rhythm of turn taking, we created a rhythm of interruption, with each voice interjecting within the line before it.

### **5.6.4. Audience positioning**

Cantrell suggests that “at present there is no analytical vocabulary for describing the process” of portraying real people on stage (*Playing for Real* 167), despite his research with actors suggesting that “playing a real person is qualitatively different from portraying a fictional character” (168). While I don’t completely agree with Cantrell’s binary of real versus fiction here, his suggestion that there is something unique about performing a verbatim based character was evident within our process. I extend this uniqueness to not only the stage action, but also the audience interaction. *bald heads & blue stars* required a unique awareness of the audience and their experience of the play. We were constantly re-positioning the audience, asking them to perform different roles throughout the show. Rodenberg suggests that “[a] receptive, listening audience member is almost as creative as the actor” (346) and

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

that “the more receptive an audience, the better the acting” (347). As stated earlier there were three worlds in *bald heads & blue stars*. The first world involved the actors talking directly to the audience, acting as narrators and guides to their story. We spoke directly to our audience and we spoke about the play. The second world was themed collections of stories from diverse characters, and finally the third world was the story of Violet and Alopecia. We had to learn how to position the audience’s reception of each of these worlds.

When speaking in our narrator roles we were positioning the audience to acknowledge that they are in a theatre, watching a play. It enabled us to “facilitate the audience’s access to information, and to encourage trust”, to look the audience “straight in the eye and [ask them] to hear rather than to overhear” (Izod et al. 202). This positioning acted as what Duggan would describe as an “authenticity effect” (150). It ironically reminds the audience that this is theatre, while simultaneously creating an atmosphere of authenticity through stated connections with the world beyond the play. While the scenes between Violet and Alopecia were often introduced, they then shifted into the realism fourth-wall convention, positioning our audience as witnesses to Violet’s journey. We are positioning them not to hear us but to *overhear* us. Finally, in the themed collection of verbatim stories, each character positioned the audience as their own person. Perhaps positioning them in the role of an empathetic and engaged close friend, directly addressing them in this role and asking them to go beyond hearing and over hearing, to a space of mutual sharing. By casting the audience in this role, they can

hear voices that address them directly as if they were part not just of the original interview but of a profoundly human *conversation* ... a kind of proximity is achieved by means of this closeness to the fact of the interview. (Paget *Acts of Commitment* 188)

The textual convention of the work directly influenced the performance conventions required, and in the case of *bald heads & blue stars*, the shifting worlds of the play meant actors had to be skilled at not only changing the way they interacted with one another, but also at re-positioning the audience.

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

Paget suggests that verbatim theatre has

more flexible expectations of actors. Actors need to master direct address techniques and also effect rapid transformation of time, place and character of the kind unknown and unnecessary to naturalistic theatre. (*New Documentarism* 137)

I would extend this to suggest that direct address requires an ability to position audiences and frame their role in the production in a number of diverse ways. Rodenberg's directive that "most people need to be trained in how to listen" (81) is applicable not just to actor training, but the very art of acting in verbatim theatre. Often verbatim theatre asks not only the actors to go through transformations, but that the actors' performance of direct address 'acts on' the audience and repositions their role. "Theatre is an art of bodies witnessed by bodies" (Shepherd 73), and in the case of *bald heads & blue stars*, it is also *about* bodies. The plays "rhythm works on an audience. It does so through the agency of the performer body rhythm which stimulates response in audience bodies" (Shepherd 85). This was reflected in Burton's advice to us the morning before our first performance. He said:

I love you guys but what you need to know is that now, none of this is about you, it's not about you anymore, it is all about your audience... It is us taking them on a journey, it's about their experience of that journey, how well do they understand what we're talking about...hold their hand and take them on a journey. (RT20, 28/8/14)

The importance of the audience and our ability as actors to position them effectively was a key theme that emerged across the other actors' reflections. One commented that:

The shared experience of the performance season was where the life-blood of the stories came. I know that's a fairly blain taint comment because all theatre relies on an audience. But verbatim theatre is different, it's audience are it's storytellers [sic], and the storytellers draw together disparate communities of people to share in this new dialogue. (CAJ29, 2/9/14)

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

When the stories were first told they were shared. There was a teller and a listener and this influenced the sharing of the stories; they were co-authored. It became apparent to us in the performance season that it was only when we had an audience that we really understood the stories. They were transformed by the presence of the audience and we needed a co-author of the work in performance just as there had been in the process. This brings us to the final phase of the process; the reception of the performance by the audience.

### **5.7. Audience reception**

There was a magical feeling, we were being let into something... a performance that had it all; it made us want to laugh when we cried, giggle at the sense of humour and just ball our eyes out at certain moments because there was such a great connection between the performance and the audience...what a beautiful story...thankyou for letting us in.  
(CAJ 38, 1/9/14)

I have divided performance reception into two categories; firstly the actor's experience of the audience and their reflections on discussions they had after the shows, and secondly the reception expressed by some of the collaborating artists who were members of the public audience. These collaborating artists had contributed to the creative development workshops and were invited to complete a short reflection after attending one of the public performances. The reception and perceived impact for the community of storytellers is explored separately in Chapter Six.

#### **5.7.1. Actor's experience of the audience**

The performance instigated discussion and the sharing of personal experiences. The foyer was lively and noisy after each performance, with many audience members vocalising times in their lives when they had felt a similar way to the emotions shared in the performance. Burton reflected that:

...it was very joyful. It was a very joyful experience...there was more laughter than I was expecting, I didn't realise that we were as funny as we were...it was unifying...it validated

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

how much it has an emotional impact for a lot of people.  
(RT23, 8/9/14)

In conversations with me after the performance people described the show as “warm”, “a big theatre hug” and “connecting” (RT21, 29/8/14). Post-performance conversation emerged as a common theme across the other actor’s reflections:

One of the biggest responses I will take away from this process came from chatting to the women who flew from Melbourne – a part of the alopecia foundation. Who responded with “now we have a language... a dialogue... not only to discuss Alopecia but identity, self-perception, suppression, mental illness, how we obtain support, etc.” This was reinforced time and time again – where friends, family, strangers would approach me and feel comfortable enough to discuss what the play meant to them – and how they related to it.  
(CAJ29, 2/9/14)

These conversations highlighted for one actor the powerful possibilities of verbatim theatre, as she:

...had a few family members and friends open up to me about how they could relate to it in regards to their own battles that they go through with diseases, image, physical restrictions etc. That was overwhelming in a way, because to me – that was a HUGE part of why I felt the show was important, and knowing that it spoke to people who didn’t have alopecia was important to me... I’ve never experienced anything like that before – the post-show function was emotional and uplifting. And made me go ‘ah...verbatim...ok... I get it now’. (CAJ30, 5/9/14)

The performance itself came from conversation and it prompted conversation:

I remember when people would come up to me and talk to me about it, they always had a story of their own, a story of

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

their own so, you could even say that, that enabled them to have their own verbatim performance to me. (CAJ31, 10/9/14)

The stories co-authored in mutuality in the interview became performance, which became the stimulus for further co-authored sharing of stories.

Dolan discusses that one of verbatim theatre's "challenges is to invite audiences into this mutual exchange of respect and care" (*The Laramie Project* 119) that should be developed throughout the process of creating the play between the artist and the community. One actor's reflections echoes this theme exactly, explaining:

The characters grew so much because their stories were being listened to and better – responded to. It was a feeling that surpassed the 'entertainment' aspect of performance and felt as though the stories were received and transformed because of the audience that were listening. The space between us and them felt incredibly intimate and safe. Which is how I believe the interviewing process felt for the women. So being able to recreate that with a multitude of bodies in the room listening to the 'private space' of an individual felt like such a gift to give. (CAJ29, 2/9/14)

However as one actor explained, it took "a good 10-15mins [before] people started to understand the rhythm of the piece" (CAJ 31, 10/9/14). The opening scenes of the play teach the audience how to make meaning from the performance and act as a guide to the structure of the narrative.

### **5.7.2. Audience reception**

The feedback received from the collaborating artists in the audience confirmed the importance of having Violet and Alopecia to act as a through-line to the work:

...the reoccurring interactions between Violet and Alopecia made it personal – they were the story we really connected to throughout the actual narrative. They're [sic] story was like

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

the first stepping stone or drop that then started the ripple and cause for further similar stories to interject. (CAJ38, 1/9/14)

Describing the verbatim stories as ripples that stem from the Violet and Alopecia scenes indicated that they echoed and extended on those moments. Violet also provided a point of connection for the audience to identify with; “the cowboys and Indians scene melted me. It was just so genuine. I felt like I was actually there, in the moment, and that was happening to me! I felt like I was that girl” (CAJ35, 3/9/14). “If I was to choose one scene that captured everyone’s attention and heart, it was the dance moment which led to the kiss. Beautiful” (CAJ33, 1/9/14).

They also commented positively about the combination of comedy and drama, joy and sadness; “[d]uring the audience laughed and cried (sometimes that line was blurred) and were even a few gasps and vocal noise in moments of horror or pain which says they were deeply engaged” (CAJ37, 1/9/14). “I laughed so hard I nearly peed a few times, then at other moments I was fighting back the tears...I feel so much more educated about Alopecia...[and] really appreciative of life and family as I walked out of the theatre” (CAJ35, 3/9/14). “It made me feel happy and sad, and slightly enraged. I left in tears from the beautiful performance and story I was allowed to witness” (CAJ33, 1/9/14).

The values of EVTP are evident in the audiences’ responses; “[i]t made me think about me losing my hair, how that would affect me how it affected the women portrayed. Society’s construct of beauty in women” (CAJ34, 2/9/14). This production challenges normative representations of femininity and beauty by positioning unconventional images of female beauty in the public realm, which is “particularly important in contexts where public discourses are dominated by an omnipresent media” (Chou and Bleiker 569) that censors diversity and resists inclusion. Finally, as Bennett suggests, “a performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product” (167). The following statement encapsulates the meaning and usefulness that *bald heads & blue stars* had for this member of the audience; “this show is all about learning to love yourself and be strong and happy. And I felt so empowered and inspired to really live life without caring what others think” (CAJ35, 3/9/14).

Valentine is often asked

if having the ‘real people’ who have inspired the work [in the audience] makes it harder and truthfully the short answer is yes. Oh yes. Oh deary me, yes. They have trusted you, trusted you to tell their stories and represent their complexity and dimensionality. (*Alex Buzo Lecture*)

On closing night seven of the 15 storytellers were in the audience with their families and friends. In that performance the space between the audience and stage was electric. We could hear the storytellers responding, saying ‘Oh that’s me!’ while we performed. It was an exhilarating experience. The community of storytellers’ responses to the performance are discussed in detail in Section 6.3.

## **5.8. Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis *in* practice**

I want to transform understandings of beauty and strength to encompass more non-normative inclusions and, ridiculously idealistically, to help people feel empowered, strong, beautiful and worthy. (J41, 2/1/14)

The discourse of EVTP was the foundation for my practice in this project. As such it is evident throughout my findings on process and form discussed in this chapter, and validated through the impact findings in Chapter Six. I will conclude this chapter by briefly highlighting specific examples of EVTP in practice that emerged from the case study data. During the interview process some of the storytellers expressed that sharing their story prompted them to re-think their experiences or the way they felt about them; “you’ve just made me realise how far I’ve come” (IT1). This storyteller “has a transformed understanding about her situation” (RT2, 27/3/13) that is reflective of Wink’s definition of critical pedagogy where dialogue “creates and recreates multiple understandings” (41). She has expressed being able to see beyond the minutia of her experience and view it from a different perspective. The interview also became a place for naming those experiences, often for the first time. We gave

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

words to describe the confusing mix of emotions and thoughts that accompanied the storyteller's experiences (J13, 17/5/13).

One of the major principles in critical pedagogy is the recognition and naming of social processes, particularly those that promote social injustice and hegemony. The majority of the storytellers described experiences where they felt socially and emotionally oppressed due to their Alopecia. They voiced anger and hurt at the perpetuation of those oppressions through sexism, stereotyping in the media and normative ideas of beauty and femininity within their communities. Burbules and Berk state that critical pedagogues "take sides" (1). While I did not seek to contradict or question the storytellers experiences, through my questions and the content of the stories I shared I intentionally aimed to foster a critical thinking context where experiences could be named, explained, reflected and potentially re-understood. A discourse of possibility was evident in the interviews, with storytellers considering what alternative experiences might be like for them; what if they stopped wearing their wigs? What if they had lost their hair in high-school? What if they felt beautiful without any eyebrows or eyelashes?

The first principle of EVTP is evident in the practice of Community Immersion, particularly the third principle of this practice; a commitment to support the community of storytellers. This occurred through attending support group meetings, volunteering as an administrator on the AAAF facebook page, and responding in a timely manner to all communications with the storytellers. The first principle of EVTP focuses explicitly on the goal of a community being heard, visible and empowered. While this is explored in detail in Chapter Six, one of the most prominent examples of demonstrate this theory in practice came from the mothers of one of the storytellers. When we were introduced after the performance I noticed that she was crying. She explained that seeing *bald heads & blue stars* had given her and her daughter the opportunity to discuss their experiences in a mutual way, to acknowledge their past hurts and to move forward together (RT22, 31/8/14).

The second principle of EVTP was evident in the data collected across the rehearsal period. Collaboration and dialogue were embraced, "everyone having a say in the blocking thus far has proven, I think, to be very effective and helpful" (CAJ23, 31/7/14). Despite experiencing challenges during production week with last minute

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

changes to the script, “what was most inspiring was the way that everyone felt like they had equal voice and equal input” (CAJ29, 2/9/14). “I felt very grateful to be able to express how I felt, and to offer solutions and ideas – I wouldn’t have been able to do that in just any room with other people” (CAJ30, 5/9/14). The rehearsal process was evidently built on mutuality and collaboration.

Across the rehearsal process our director placed an emphasis on sharing personal experiences and creating a community within the rehearsal room. This aligns with the first principle of EVTP. At the start of each rehearsal we had a ‘check in’ process where “we discuss how/why we are feeling that way but only if we want to, then we each set an individual goal for the rehearsal as well as being mindful of [the director’s] overall goal for us as an ensemble” (J63, 14/8/14). The process was both supportive and artistically challenging (CAJ23, 31/7/14) and an emphasis placed on “finding the humour in the stories and ourselves...it’s ok to laugh” (CAJ28, 15/8/14). The words “ensemble”, “group” and “participation” were common features in the rehearsal room lexicon, the “structure and use of time is sometimes prescriptive but at other times responsive to our moods, our bodies” and we always began and ended the rehearsal in a circle. Burton referred to this as “nesting” (J63, 14/8/14).

Elam analyses the role of a male director in a feminist production and warns that if “the male director places too much emphasis on his interpretation, on his own ideas for the play, he risks suppressing the play’s own voice” (290). Rather than impose an interpretation or vision, Elam suggests the male director “must look for implicit and explicit signals within the text as to interpretation and concept” (290). Burton navigated a balance between his own vision and the casts collaborative input. In an interview half way through the rehearsal process Burton explained:

I’ve tried very hard to set up an atmosphere where everybody has an equal voice in whatever moment we’re doing and creating...and sometimes you, you add as playwright and sometimes you add as actor and sometimes you add as Sarah being an audience member, as does everybody else. And I think that’s important...when we’re in the room everybody’s just in the room. (RT17, 8/8/14)

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

The third principle of EVTP is manifest in the script and performance. Particularly, in the opening moment of the play Violet removes her wig: “*Violet enters. She is clearly a bit nervous, but determined. She removes her wig, smiles, confident in her beauty in this moment*” (Peters *bald heads*). This is the very first scene in the play, so the gravity of her action and what it means for this character to perform this act of revelation has not been explored. When the same action is echoed towards the end of the play, the audience has witnessed how society’s normative and oppressive ideals have impacted Violet and the broader Alopecia community. The second time she removes her wig the audience is presented with an *idea* that challenges those oppressive ideals. If Violet can transform her understanding of beauty and femininity, there is potential for the audience to do so as well.

### **5.9. Conclusion**

Verbatim theatre is a complex theatrical process and form. This chapter has detailed the artistic practices of the playwright and collaborating artists in the process of creating *bald heads & blue stars*. These practices are situated within the theory of Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis, and therefore are influenced by the dynamic agenda of this theory. The practices fall within a five stage process of creating verbatim theatre, the EVTP Model:

<i><b>Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model</b></i>	
<b>Community Immersion</b>	Building awareness of the project and its outcomes
	Active engagement with individuals and events from the focus community
	A commitment to support that community
<b>Listening for Aesthetics in the interview</b>	Interviewer: question preparation, storyteller awareness and informed consent
	Mutual Storyteller: story mirroring through active listening, dialogic listening, objects as prompts
	Engaged audience member: active listening and presence
<b>Artistic Transcription and Story Immersion</b>	Finding patterns, themes, contrasts and dramatic tension
<b>Playwriting: Translating stories through the dramatic languages into performance</b>	Collaborative process: Voicing Stories, devising through discussion, critical feedback, post-workshop processing
	Individual process: thematic engagement, translating the literal to the metaphoric, finding the form in the content
<b>Rehearsal and Performance</b>	Secret Stories
	Movement activities (weave/copy/riff/cut and gypsy sticks)
	Connection Soup

**Communication with community and Leading through Vulnerability**

Figure 8: Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis Model

Community Immersion and continued communication with the community of storytellers is an ethical practice designed to open dialogue between the theatre artist and the community. This practice includes supporting that community and helping to raise awareness about the complex and sometimes contradictory stories that emerge from within it. The performance of these stories begins in the interview. Crucially, the interview begins with informed consent, a practice designed to enhance the transparency of a playwright’s intent for working with a community. Within the context of the interview the playwright may oscillate between a number of roles, including interviewer, Mutual Storyteller and engaged audience member. Each of these roles differently influence the interview context and position the storyteller.

After the interviews are completed the stories are transcribed. Artistic Transcription and Story Immersion are opportunities for the playwright to engage with the interview material both aurally and textually. When listening to the recordings and

## Chapter Five Verbatim Theatre process and form

choosing what to transcribe, the playwright may begin to document their impulses; ideas for performance based on a triangulation of the material they are hearing, their premise for the play and their own aesthetic sensibilities. Story Immersion is the practice of looking for patterns, themes and dramatic tension in the interview material.

The fourth phase of the EVTP Model is playwriting; translating stories through the dramatic languages into performance. If working collaboratively a playwright may find Voicing Stories, devising through discussion and receiving critical feedback effective practices. When working individually, the EVTP Model emphasises translating the literal to the metaphoric and searching for the form in the content. These two practices inform theatrical experimentation and the potential of innovation in the playwriting process. In the final phase, rehearsal and performance, the EVTP Model suggests Secret Stories, movement activities and Connection Soup are effective strategies for creating ensemble awareness, connecting with the breath of the stories and findings points of relatability and connection.

The findings presented throughout this chapter are testament to the depth and complexity of the triangulated data inducted across the case study. Drawing from diverse perspectives, and connecting with the documented practice of other artists and the broader academic field, these findings significantly contribute to verbatim theatre's field of knowledge.

## 6. Chapter Six: Impact

Being involved in this verbatim theatre project has had a significant social and emotional impact on the storytellers from the Alopecia community. To investigate this impact the storytellers were surveyed at three key junctures in the verbatim theatre process as outlined in Section 3.1; firstly after the initial interview, secondly after reading a draft of the play and finally after seeing the live performance. Paget acknowledges that “it is always difficult, of course, to demonstrate specific ways in which the arts lever social change” (Paget *Act of Commitment* 176), however the longitudinal approach incorporated into my impact research has enabled the induction of case study specific examples of transformation and social change within the storytelling community. Overwhelmingly the data supports Stuart Fisher’s suggestion that a verbatim theatre process, when created in reciprocity, has a positive impact on the storytellers. Specifically, my research indicates that transformational self-awareness, enriched interpersonal communication, community connections and the perception of consciousness-raising were all positive outcomes experienced by the storytellers as a direct result of their involvement in this process. In this chapter the responses to each survey are analysed and the implications for artistic practice are explored. My research provides an insight into the complexities, depth and breadth of this impact that extends on the work of Stuart Fisher and Gallagher et al. and provides a strong foundation for exploring these phenomena in further research.

### 6.1. Survey One – The interview

The focus of the first survey (appendix K) was to explore the storytellers’ response after sharing their personal experiences in the initial interview and how the practice of the playwright in this space impacted them. I received fourteen responses (from a possible fifteen), and thirteen storytellers indicated that the reason they initially contacted me to be involved was to help me with my project, followed closely by a desire to raise awareness about Alopecia (eleven out of fourteen) and thirdly because they wanted to share their own stories (nine out of fourteen). The responses focused on the theme of consciousness-raising through enhanced understanding, a value that converges with my discourse as an artist and the EVTP. Only four of the women indicated that their involvement was driven by an interest in theatre, indicating that

## Chapter Six: Impact

verbatim theatre has the potential to engage those who may not normally attend or be involved in theatre to be introduced to this experience. Understanding that in a verbatim theatre project you may be interacting with people who find theatre and theatrical literacy a foreign entity is a crucial learning for my practice as a playwright.

I wanted to learn how participants were feeling leading up to the interview, in that space between responding to my media release through the relative safety of an email and meeting me at our mutually chosen location. When asked ‘how were you feeling in preparation for the interview?’ the following table shows the overall responses to each emotional adjective (they were given the opportunity to circle as many as they felt applied to their situation):

Nervous	9
Excited	8
Concerned	1
Interested	5
Anxious	2
Curious	5
Self-conscious	5
Confident	5
Other	0

*Table 1: Survey One, Question Two*

Nervous was clearly the stand out emotion, although this was generally in conjunction with a number of other positive emotions as well. This has implications for the practice of the playwright and the way they manage the opening moments of the interview as the storytellers are experiencing a mix of positive and negative emotions. Storytellers were then asked how comfortable they were in telling me their story. Eleven out of fourteen indicated they felt very comfortable, and three out of

## Chapter Six: Impact

fourteen responded comfortable. When viewed in combination with the responses to question two, this is a very positive outcome and implies that elements of my practice in the interview (as previously explored in Chapter Five) were successful in facilitating the pre-interview nerves and excitement into a place of ease and comfortability.

I then sought to gauge how important it was to the storytellers to have the opportunity to tell their stories to a wider audience. I had assumed that the response would be important or very important, as participants were aware of the outcome of the interview (a public performance) before volunteering to be involved. Ten out of fourteen storytellers indicated that this was very important, two out of fourteen rated it important, and another two out of fourteen conveyed it was not very important. Initially, I read this data as conveying that some people may place higher value on the one-to-one storytelling in a verbatim theatre process above the resulting performance. While this may be the case, I have learned from this early foray into data analysis that it is easy to take numbers out of context. One of the storytellers who answered 'not very important' to this question consistently conveyed disinterest in the final outcome across all responses in the surveys. Yet the other storyteller indicated an interest in theatre and raising awareness in her response to question one, and later states "I hope my Alopecia journey may help someone else along the way" and "I think the more we can raise awareness, the better" (S1R14). Therefore, the data has reminded me to analyse both vertically and horizontally, and that having three surveys across the project improves the validity of my overall findings.

I assumed that it would be important to the storytellers to be kept informed throughout the play writing process, and six out of fourteen indicated this was very important and six out of fourteen rated it important. These responses prompted me to continue my dialogue with the storytellers across the project. For example I sent out an email when I had chosen a title, another when Artsworx accepted the proposal for my play to be a part of their season and again with the link to the website when tickets went on sale and the marketing image was released. Importantly, only thirteen of the fourteen women who completed the first survey answered the open questions, which reflects Fink's warning about self-administered surveys and attrition (58). I then asked if the women found personal value in sharing their stories, and eleven out

## Chapter Six: Impact

of thirteen answered in the affirmative with themes of connection, self-reflection and building awareness the most prominent responses:

Absolutely. I think sharing my alopecia story connects me to others who are also going through similar experiences. (S1R1)

Found it therapeutic to put my story into words esp with someone who has been thru [sic] similar experiences. (S1R9)

Yes I did. Very few people know about my condition and it was very liberating to talk about it so comfortably. (S1R11.

Absolutely. If anyone can take a piece of what I've been through and benefit, why not! And sharing with Sarah who is so confident and warm and open, was great. What a lovely human being she is :). (S1R7)

These responses indicate that the interview created a “place for discussion where there has mostly been silence” (Gray et al. 141). Significantly the answers indicate that the women felt they had learned something positive about themselves after sharing their stories:

It reminded me to be thankful of the hair that I do have. Showed me how strong I am and how much my husband has supported me. (S1R3)

As with every time I tell my story new things come up and I discover more about myself. (S1R10)

It made me more aware of other people's story about alopecia and made me feel more confident about myself knowing that there are other people going through the same thing. (S1R13)

As discussed in Chapter Two, Leffler critiques the interview process and the possibility that it promotes a discourse of confession (348). This is something I sought to avoid by having the storytellers contact me if they were interested in being

## Chapter Six: Impact

involved. The data reveals that rather than a discourse of confession, the storytellers experienced a discourse of connection, self-awareness and a desire for outreach. As suggested by Anderson and Wilkinson, the verbatim theatre process celebrated listening to community stories, an act which values that communities' identity and builds individuals self-esteem (15), and this was experienced by the majority of the storytellers in my process. Correlations can also be drawn to literature on narrative therapy to help validate the value of involvement in a verbatim theatre interview. Smith et al. explain that narrative therapy:

...is based on the idea that telling stories is the main way in which people make sense of, and communicate, their experience... They are, therefore, heavily influenced by our family, social and cultural contexts. There are always alternative stories that can be told about a single event. (191)

This idea that we can re-think or re-story our experiences was evident in the storyteller's response to question seven, where they were asked if the interviews affected the way they thought about their Alopecia experiences. Four out of thirteen indicated that it hadn't, while nine out of thirteen responded that it had altered their personal view:

Some of the things that Sarah shared with me about her personal experiences made me open my mind with certain aspects of alopecia. (S1R6)

It made me realise that I have come a long way in my acceptance of my alopecia. Meeting Sarah was very inspiration [sic] as she is such a courageous lady. (S1R14)

Two women also conveyed that thinking about their experiences can be a confronting and sometimes challenging task:

It brought forward a lot of stuff I haven't had to think about in a while, which at the time seemed a bit confronting but later I thought about why I felt that way and realised how far I have come. (S1R3)

## Chapter Six: Impact

I have had some reservations afterwards that I shared too much... but real emotions make good stories. (S1R12)

Once again the theme of connection emerged:

It made me feel less isolated. It made me feel more positive about it. (S1R1)

It did actually. It was the only chance I've had to speak to another person who actually has alopecia, currently, and I didn't feel so alone. (S1R7)

Not really sure. All I know is that I got to talk about my experiences with someone who (for the first time) REALLY understood. (S1R11)

Smith et al. explain that expressions such as offloading (S1R1) or finding talking therapeutic (S1R9) is indicative of the concept of catharsis, “the idea that expressing emotions is healing in itself” (45) and that the value is amplified when followed with reflection and clarification. All thirteen of the women responded affirmatively that they would recommend others be involved in an interview like this. When asked to explain why, a number highlighted the value of sharing life experiences and used the lexicon of stories and sharing:

Yes, I think finding a voice for your story, even as it evolves, is a very large part of accepting and understanding yourself. (S1R10)

Sure, everyone whether they have alopecia or not should have the opportunity to share their story with someone who is interested in hearing it simply for the joy of engaging in someone else's life. (S1R9)

Definitely... I think talking brings out suppressed issues and helps people find new ways of thinking about problems... problem shared is a problem halved. (S1R12)

## Chapter Six: Impact

Yes. I felt like it was an enormous comfort to spend time with another who deals with alopecia in their every day life.

(S1R6)

I was very interested to see if being involved in the interview had provided opportunities for the storytellers to extend their dialogue on Alopecia with others. Eight out of thirteen indicated that a lot of their friends and family already know about their condition or that they “don’t have a problem with sharing” (S1R2). For three of the women they reflected that the interview as an event in their day enabled them to discuss their experiences with their family:

It was an opportunity to talk about it again, just a little, with my husband and daughter. (S1R1)

I have shared about my experience with the interview which lead to further discussion re the condition and recruiting others to the Hair Off Liberation Army (HOLA). (S1R9)

Yes it has. I have participated in 2 other PhD studies and I think the more we can raise awareness, the better. I am more open and have discussed my feelings and alopecia journey more openly with my family. (S1R14)

Due to the unique nature of this research I decided to include a final ‘catch all’ question at the end of each survey to open up the data to be directed by the storytellers. This question was phrased to encourage the women to respond to both the interview and to the project as a whole. It’s also important to highlight here that the surveys were all written in third person, asking the storytellers about Sarah rather than about me. This purposeful phrasing was designed to enable the participants to embrace the anonymity of the survey and not feel as though they were directing their responses directly to me. I was overwhelmed by the storytellers’ generosity in their responses:

For the short time I spent with Sarah, I found her an absolute delight to be around. She is a very warm person, which makes it easy to open up to her and share my story. I felt like

## Chapter Six: Impact

this interview was my opportunity to give back and hopefully at the end of the day contribute to a greater awareness of alopecia in Australia and how it affects us emotionally and socially. I think it's wonderful what Sarah is doing and feel grateful to be a part of it. (S1R6)

I think the project is exciting, and Sarah should be very proud of herself as she is a remarkable lady :) I was very keen to finally meet her :). (S1R7)

I'm excited to be involved and see the end result. I think it's a very unique idea to do this for alopecia and I think that exposing our minority in public will help with all people accepting those that are different. (S1R10)

Sarah is a lovely easy-going person and was very easy to talk to. I think it's great that she is working on such a personal project. (S1R13)

Burns, writing on the healing possibilities of storytelling in therapy, states that “while stories themselves have a special power to communicate, there is also a uniqueness and affinity in the relationship that bonds storyteller and listener” (3). I felt this affinity throughout the interview process, as previously discussed in Chapter Five, and these responses support the importance I have placed on Community Immersion and the skills of the interviewer in a verbatim theatre process. After two of the interviews I received unsolicited feedback in the form of text messages:

I'm so glad to have met with you today. I actually feel very happy and light, like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Thanks so much for that. Who would have thought sharing my story would have such an effect. (qtd. in J18, 24/5/13)

These indicate that the storytellers had positive experiences in the interview. The following response left me very emotional and feeling a weight of responsibility for the women, their stories and for my artistic practice:

## Chapter Six: Impact

Meeting Sarah was a very positive experience for me and I'm looking forward to seeing the play. Being able to find humour in any situation is a good thing. I found Sarah very inspiration [sic] and wish I had her courage. I am finding my baldness easier to embrace since I met her. (S1R14)

Smith et al. state that “the ability to accept ourselves unconditionally is essential for being mentally balanced and for experiencing joy” (273). If our interview encouraged this storyteller to take another step towards accepting her appearance then I perceive this as a highly positive impact. The responses to the final question suggest that the women felt I had appropriately empathised with them. Smith et al. describe empathy as being able to see a situation from another’s point of view, “putting yourself in their shoes, being on their wavelength” (95) and being sensitive to another’s moment by moment expression of self. The women indicated that they felt I understood their experiences and the expression of those experiences, and as demonstrated through their responses across survey one, this is highly influenced by my own membership of the Alopecia community.

### **6.2. Survey Two – The script**

The focus of the second survey (appendix L) was to ascertain how the storytellers responded to reading a draft of the play, and only nine out of fifteen completed this second stage of data collection. I was interested to know if the storytellers had read a play before, and whether I had provided enough introduction to theatrical literacy. Five out of nine storytellers responded that *bald heads & blue stars* was the first script they had read and all nine felt that they understood the format of the play. This indicates that the pedagogy applied in my email communication when introducing the play was effective, and also supports the finding that verbatim theatre is a unique way to engage people in theatre who may not normally have the opportunity to do so.

At the outset of the interview I had explained what my artistic intentions were for the stories and my approach to verbatim theatre; that some of their experiences may be re-told word-for-word and others may be used as stimulus for creating characters and scenes. However I couldn’t be sure that how I explained the artistic process would transfer seamlessly to what they expected, which is why I asked them about this in

## Chapter Six: Impact

question four. Seven out of nine storytellers responded that the script had turned out either as they expected or that it exceeded their expectations:

It was easy to read and quite self-explanatory. It was what I expected. (S2R7)

I would say it's turned out even better. I like that it's very visual and light hearted at times. (S2R8)

In regards to sharing our stories, Sarah has done what I expected. Used our language and tales to make up suitable situations for her characters to describe. The format of having Alopecia as a character was interesting and not something I expected, but a great idea. (S2R9)

These answers respond to the inclusion of stage directions and this was something I had explicitly set out to incorporate. I wanted to paint a clear theatrical picture in order to give a sense of what the play might look like when performed. The storytellers also commented on the inclusion of Alopecia as a character. Rossiter et al. discuss an ethnotheatre performance titled *The Work of Talk* (Beck and Paget 1993) where cancer is personified as a character. They hypothesise that:

...the emotional impact of this metaphoric presentation of cancer as a character may be far more significant than could be evoked by written text or verbatim enactments of data that are more realistic. (136)

As is explored in the responses to survey three, the inclusion of a characterised Alopecia in *bald heads & blue stars* was one of the most enjoyable elements of the performance for many of the storytellers as it enabled a metaphoric and therefore highly accessible and engaging representation of their experiences.

Table two depicts the variety of emotion felt by the storytellers when they read their own experiences written into the play:

Excited that people will hear these stories	7
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## Chapter Six: Impact

Excited that people will learn about Alopecia	5
Surprised about what I had said during the interview	5
Reassured to see others have had similar experiences/feelings as me	5
Worried about what people will think when they see the play	1
Informed because I learned something new about Alopecia	1
Vindicated because our stories are important and should be told	4
Nothing in particular	0
Other	<p>“People need to know more about this Alopecia” (S2R3)</p> <p>“I found it a little daunting to realise how awful my speech patterns are when I’m excited and seeing that I talk way too much. I was also surprised to feel a little uncomfortable actually reading about my experiences” (S2R4)</p> <p>“surprised that what I said was used!” (S2R6)</p> <p>“I actually wasn’t quite sure I recognised which parts were me specifically” (S2R8)</p>

*Table 2: Survey Two, Question Five*

One of the other responses here parallels the experience documented by Gray et al., that when the storytellers have the opportunity to read a draft of the script this can be “distressing at times” (143) or as the storyteller phrases, it made her “feel a little uncomfortable” (S2R4). Gray et al. state that these experiences “reinforced for us the importance of providing openings to discuss issues” (143) throughout the project,

## Chapter Six: Impact

and my data confirms that this should be included as a strategy to alleviate distress for the storytellers. While I invited the storytellers to give me critical feedback via email I also wanted to give an anonymous opportunity for them to offer advice on what should be added or removed from the play. Four out of nine didn't respond to the question and two out of nine indicated that they wouldn't change anything. The other three suggestions were:

...[tired] of reading about women going for chemo, and the first thing they say its going to be terrible losing there hair. But there hair grows back! [sic] (S2R3)

I would add more of the positives about having alopecia which could help others with alopecia as well as inform those without it that one can live a happy and fulfilling life without hair (membership to the Hair liberation army available at the door!!! :). (S2R7)

I feel like we perhaps needed to touch a bit more on the transition of learning to accept we have Alopecia and the steps we've taken towards being comfortable with it. I guess that is my biggest challenge as an individual. (S2R9)

The latter two both informed changes to the script, particularly in the story arc of Violet and the experiences that lead her to going wig free. Interestingly, this request for more balance between positive and negative experiences was also feedback received by Mitchell et al. in their member checking process for *I'm Still Here* (202). Providing an opportunity for feedback and seeking out their advice may enhance the extent to which the storytellers feel included in the process and have ownership of the work. In the last response provided above the storyteller states "we" should include more on the transition phase, indicating that she perceives the project to be a collaborative one. When asked to sum up what the play is about, the responses centred primarily on women with Alopecia sharing their stories, and secondly on the impact this condition has on people's lives and the concept of being taken on an emotional journey:

## Chapter Six: Impact

Raising awareness of alopecia and hopefully, educating the general public about alopecia and what it is like to live with. The play also provides shared alopecia experiences and uses humour in these endeavours. It is a good blend of the light and dark sides of alopecia. (S2R4)

...empowering alopecia sufferers so that our experience is not that we 'suffer' our condition but rather embrace it individually and as a bunch of exceptional, beautiful and creative women. (S2R7)

The play is mix of many people's stories of their experiences having alopecia. It is told from a realistic point of view with an insight into the various emotions and interactions that make up the life of someone with alopecia. (S2R9)

Table three below indicates how the storytellers felt about their involvement in the project at this juncture. Importantly no one indicated they felt upset, angry or regretful. Thankfully, the storyteller who indicated previously that they felt uncomfortable reading their stories was also the storyteller who added a comment in the 'other' option and indicated that despite these feelings she was still pleased to be involved:

Excited	6
Nervous	2
Upset	0
Amused	4
Saddened	2
Empowered	5
Angry	0
Happy	6

## Chapter Six: Impact

Confused	1
Regretful	0
Nothing in particular	0
Other	‘A little surprised at my reaction but pleased to be involved’ (S2R4)

*Table 3: Survey Two, Question Eight*

The following answers were in response to the catch-all question that closed the second survey, and once again the storytellers were generous with their praise. Noticeably, their responses emphasised excitement and anticipation for the performance event, and not solely a positive response to their own experience (as was the emphasis in the final responses to survey one):

I'm hoping my friends will know what I'm going through, so when I feel sad they will understand. (S2R3)

Sarah is an inspirational and courageous young woman. Her warmth and enthusiasm made it very easy to open up to her. Her studies and play are a great way of raising awareness and understanding about alopecia. Hopefully increased awareness will lead to increased research. (S2R4)

I hope the venue is large enough to accommodate all my friends and family 'cos they all want to come. [sic] (S2R7)

It brings me great joy feeling like I have contributed in a small way. It's motivated me in wanting to do more in terms of raising awareness. I really look forward to meeting with the other women and to see you again. (S2R8)

### **6.3. Survey Three – The performance**

While verbatim theatre is often praised for its democratic potential and for its empowering of marginalised stories or validating of oppressed identities, Chou and

## Chapter Six: Impact

Bleiker raise an important question; “[w]ho are the people actually attending these productions? Are they really those who are marginalised within society?” (573). For all of its lofty goals, to what extent is verbatim theatre accessible, engaging or available for the very people it wishes to empower and validate? Due to the dispersed nature of my community of storytellers the live performance was not an accessible option for many of them. Of the fifteen women interviewed only seven were able to see the live performance in August 2014, and of these seven only five completed the final survey (appendix M); one third of the total population of storytellers at the outset of the project. However, as will be demonstrated through their survey responses, these five women did find the performance highly engaging and a validation of their experiences and identity. They also each brought a number of family members with them (one storyteller brought fourteen people to the show), so in response to Chou and Bleiker, the people attending this performance were the community involved in its creation. Through partnership with the AAAF the performance was filmed and copies of the DVD made available. However Chou and Bleiker’s provocation is a pertinent point for critical self-reflection on behalf of the playwright in a verbatim theatre process; have I done enough to share the performance with the community from which it came? By what scale do I measure ‘enough’?

Of the five storytellers who completed the final survey, three gave the performance a ten out of ten and two gave it nine out of ten. Table 4 depicts how the storytellers described the performance:

Entertaining	5
Boring	0
Educational	3
Engaging	4
Slow moving	0
Humorous	5
Sad	4

## Chapter Six: Impact

Though provoking	4
Confronting	1
Insulting	0
Professional	4
Good representation of the Alopecia experience	5
Poor representation of the Alopecia experience	0

Table 4: Survey Three, Question One

While two of the five women said they loved everything about the performance, three took the opportunity to express which sections they enjoyed the most:

We not f\$%king stressed!!! [sic] has had me laughing all week! I loved the humour and then the fight between Laura and alopecia. (S3R1)

The combination of light-hearted humour and tense sadness has been one of the most frequently praised aspects of the performance, followed closely by the personification of the condition of Alopecia as a character:

...[i]nteractions between the performers esp [sic] with the character of alopecia. Looking out for my stories and engaging and identifying with the others ladies stories and knowing the process that we all went thru [sic] together yet apart. (S3R3)

While Stuart Fisher has explored the identification that occurred between the storytellers and the actors (*That's Who I'd Be* 200), this response indicates that the storyteller was identifying with the content of the play, with the knowledge that these stories emerged from the same process they themselves had been engaged in “together yet apart” (S3R3). However I suggest that the survey data indicates that the identification in my case study had similar effects to those experienced in Stuart Fisher’s; the identification “was a positive, even therapeutic aspect of the project”

## Chapter Six: Impact

(*That's Who I'd Be* 200). One storyteller expressed “identifying with the other ladies stories” (S3R3). This echoes the first phase of Ryan’s theory of consientization, when you realise that your own experiences “resonate with the experiences of others” (Ryan 95).

Staging Alopecia as a character made the intangible frustrations and challenges of the condition a tangible bodily force that visually and physically had an impact on the other characters:

I enjoyed the confronting scene where the girl is screaming at Alopecia. I felt it would truly demonstrate the desperate feelings that those with alopecia deal with, but people don't see. (S3R5)

This response reflects Rossiter et al.’s suggestion that “the act of theatricalizing data allows for a whole new form of interpretation and analysis, one that uses theatre's fantastic, imaginative possibilities” (136). For the majority of the women interviewed their daily routine involves a painstaking process of hiding and covering their Alopecia, so the act of making it visible was both a liberating and confronting experience; highlighted by the response to which part of the play they enjoyed the least:

The fight between alopecia and Laura [actor] was gut wrenching - although I didn't cry - many did. (S3R1)

It took me a while to 'get' the tussle scene between alopecia and violet as the performance prior to that had been mainly verbal without much physical but once I got it I could identify with the struggle. (S3R3)

Interestingly some of the women have used the actor’s name in their responses, as opposed to the name of the character. This may be due to our artistic choice of having all four female actors play the role of Violet at various stages throughout the play, or alternatively indicate that some of the storytellers spoke with the actor after the show and therefore developed a sense of familiarity. One of the cast reflected in their final journal that they spoke with three of the storytellers who:

## Chapter Six: Impact

had very positive feedback, and told me some of the stories that were theirs, and just opened up a little bit about their lives – basically just had a chat, which was awesome and very special. I've never experienced anything like that before – the post-show function was emotional and uplifting.  
(CAJ30, 5/9/14)

For one storyteller it was the intense authenticity of some moments that were least enjoyable:

The parts I enjoyed least reminded me of embarrassing moments I have experienced with alopecia. People praying for me, asking stupid questions etc. Have [sic] said that, those embarrassing moments were really well explained! (S3R5)

The moments she refers to here were sections of the play that were performed in the present tense, rather than stories told from a reflective past tense perspective. This meant that the emotion, interaction and mood were designed to recreate those of an embarrassing moment on stage. This response suggests that the awkward and unsettling emotions attached to the real life version of these experiences was authentically rendered in the performance. This echoes Leffler's discussion on an aesthetics of injury (351) and the storyteller's response here suggests that the pain of the experience is not only felt when a storyteller performs their own stories (as suggested by Leffler (350)) but also when these stories are witnessed in the performance of others. There are also echoes to Gallagher et al.'s warning about the use of naturalistic re-creation in verbatim theatre and the potential that literal representations of difficult life experiences can be traumatizing for storytellers in the audience as they may be forced into re-feeling the emotion of the initial incident (38). While the storyteller's response in S3R5 does not convey a sense of having been re-traumatised (particularly as she qualifies the scene reminded her of similar events, they were not directly based on the specificity of her experiences) it is interesting to note that the scene on which she is reflecting was a naturalistic re-creation. This may provide insight and awareness for playwrights in their practice of translation.

## 6.4. Participant impact: Transforming perspectives

The storytellers expressed that the performance prompted changes in how they perceive their personal experiences, stating “I have come a LONG LONG way in my ability to cope” (S3R1), “hearing others experiences has give [sic] me a less alone feeling” (S3R5) and “I am now more confident to go about as a ‘bald lady’” (S3R4). Burns states that stories can “alter the way we think or feel about something” and can also alter “something in our mind-body processing” (xix). Smith et al. extend on this, suggesting that these impacts are explained by the philosophy of social constructivism “which proposes that meaning is [instead] shaped by a society of a culture. People create their personal identity by identifying with some of the stories which exist in their family and broader culture” (191). Viewing the verbatim theatre performance provided a unique opportunity for the Alopecia community to witness stories from their broader culture.

As described to the storytellers at the outset of the interview, my intention as playwright was not to create a mimesis of the storyteller on stage; the director and cast had creative license to interpret the characters and monologues, exploring them theatrically. Stuart Fisher suggests that the ‘strangeness’ of seeing your story theatrically interpreted can give “an almost uncanny glimpse of their own lives from another perspective” (*That’s Who I’d Be* 202). One storyteller commented that being involved in the project influenced how she thought about her experiences however that this was “only after seeing the play. Answering the questions and talking about it didn’t change my perspective greatly, but hearing others experiences has give [sic] me a less alone feeling” (S3R5). Gray et al. suggest that the value of the live performance of experience has advantage over textual representations of experience because theatre “sustains connections to bodies, emotions and the full range of sensory experience” (138). Rossiter et al. extend this argument suggesting that theatre is particularly adept at interpreting, translating and disseminating health related knowledge as both the fields of health and performance “revolve around complex questions of the embodied human condition” (131). As all verbatim theatre deals with human experience, and all experience is embodied I extend on Rossiter et al.’s argument beyond solely health related content and suggest that the impact of

## Chapter Six: Impact

verbatim theatre on audiences is because of the similarity and proximity of form and content. Verbatim theatre is an actual embodied experience about actual embodied experiences, and this contributes to its transformational potential.

Being involved in this project has created a sense of belonging for many of the storytellers, as expressed through their discourse on connection and “that I was not alone in how I feel. Really comforting actually” (S3R2). In Vikki Bell’s introduction to *Performativity & Belonging* she states that “the term ‘belonging’ allows an affective dimension – not just be-ing, but longing” (1). It implies not only finding a sense of self (identity) but also identifying with others. It is “an achievement” as “one does not simply or ontologically ‘belong’” (3), belonging is an effect of our understanding and performances of self. Verbatim theatre places a variety of performances of self on stage and when shared, influence a public and community’s consciousness, resulting in one storyteller stating she finally felt “[u]nderstood” (S3R5) and another that she “felt heard” (S3R2). The verbatim theatre performance shares what Fortier describes as “practices of group identity” and “marks out terrains of commonality and delineates the political and social dynamics of ‘fitting in’” (42). While for some the sharing of experiences and common practices of group identity was emancipating, for others it conjured a range of mixed emotions:

Well I experienced a whole range of emotions from sadness fear, anxiety esp knowing my family were now more closely aware of what I had been thru- [sic] a point that I had always try to protect them from my pain to a greater extent so as to not feel worse about everyone grieving on my behalf. (S3R3)

The performance and the act of witnessing provided the catalyst for discussion for many storytellers, which was something we talked about after the show and I reflected on that evening. I described in my audio reflection how one storyteller had introduced me to her family. I had given her mum a big hug as she was crying and:

I was like ‘you right?’ and she said ‘I’m, I’m making up for all the time that I didn’t feel I could cry before’. And she said ‘you know, because we were going through it and you couldn’t just sit down and cry about it, you had to get through

## Chapter Six: Impact

it. But now, seeing the play, I've realised all the things my daughter has gone through, and now I get to cry about it, so thank you'. (RT22, 31/8/14)

The performance had created a space and more importantly a time for genuine dialogue, providing an opportunity for the storyteller and her family to talk and feel things they hadn't previously felt able to do. This is an incredible interpersonal and emotional outcome of the project. Working within the EVTP theory of practice, I had set out to include the community of storytellers throughout the process, as demonstrated throughout Chapter Five. This inclusivity was reflected on by the storytellers; "I feel part of the show and proud of you – me and everyone..." (S3R1), "I have been thrilled to be involved and I think the effect on my family as well as helping me to deal with some of those deeper issues about my body image" (S3R3) and "I felt proud to be a part of something that will hopefully help people become more aware" (S3R5). Raising awareness about Alopecia and transforming understandings about female beauty were two key values underpinning my agenda and influencing my practice in this project. One storyteller commented that "[m]y cousin who is a GP feels she is so much better equipped in her practice" (S3R3) and another reflected "[w]e feel the performance has great potential not just for alopecia awareness but for anyone a bit different and that's most of us let's face it. Could be a great medium for discussion about other insecurities" (S3R3).

The performance gave one of the storytellers hope that "these experiences can be explained and demonstrated" (S3R5). I suggest that this is mostly due to theatre as an embodied form; it is itself an experience and as Burns suggests, "it is primarily through experience that we learn" (31). This storyteller has conveyed a realization that it is possible to authentically share her experiences and that this may in turn lead to greater public understanding; "what was invisible becomes visible" (Feldhendler 94) through theatre. The potential impact of viewing stories from your community "lies within the dynamic of seeing and being seen, in the recognition of the self and the other, and in the subsequent expressions of desire for change in everyday life" (Feldhendler 94). The demonstrability of the experiences is again linked to Rossiter et al.'s connection between the qualities of lived experience and the embodied mode of performance (132).

## Chapter Six: Impact

Overwhelmingly the storytellers felt that the play authentically captured many of the realities of the Alopecia experience and one reflected that:

The performance was amazing. I'd love the cast to travel to other cities to perform it because I feel they really captured the emotion and feeling - and I think that was largely due to Sarah's involvement. The translation of our stories was beautifully done, maintaining the raw emotion but ensuring it was eloquent. I loved it, great work! (S3R5)

This validates for me the importance of Community Immersion as an intrinsic and vital element of the verbatim theatre process and in this case study that immersion was additionally facilitated as I also have Alopecia. I expand on this with greater detail in Section 6.6.

### **6.5. Implications for practice**

For the community of storytellers who collaborated to create *bald heads & blue stars*, involvement in this verbatim theatre project has had a significantly positive social, emotional and personal impact. Specifically, my research indicates that transformed self-awareness, enriched interpersonal communication, community connections and the perception of consciousness-raising were all positive outcomes experienced by the storytellers. The data collected across this project has also highlighted findings for artistic practice in a verbatim theatre process. For example, the survey responses indicated that storytellers feel a mix of emotions at the outset of the interview, and the playwright should be prepared to facilitate feelings of nerves and excitement. The storytellers may have limited experience in theatre and theatrical literacy, and this should be taken into consideration when explaining their involvement in the project and in the explanation of the script format if playwrights intend to facilitate a process of member checking and collaboration. If the playwright's goal is for the community of storytellers to feel involved in the process, as it was in this project, then it is important to instigate avenues for open communication.

## Chapter Six: Impact

This continued development of a trusting relationship between the storyteller and the playwright not only cultivates a sense of ownership and inclusion for the community, but also enables the playwright to take artistic risks in their work. For example, after reading the draft of the script I had two storytellers express concern about how their stories may be understood in the script. This concern was expressed via direct emails between the storyteller and myself. One storyteller was worried about how she might be perceived by audience due to her word choice and phrasing:

I think it's [sic] sounds a bit too bogan. Especially my lines lol it's written exactly how I'd say it and I think it should be a bit like how a normal person talks if that makes sense. Less 'like' and less 'you know' you know? Ha ha ha. (EC 9/1/14 8:24am)

The other had reservations that she had told me such a personal story. I responded that we could edit the stories or remove them if they would prefer and on both occasions the storytellers replied that they would like the stories to remain, but they just needed to let me know that they were a little surprised or challenged by the way their stories had been included. One storyteller reflected:

It's weird to think part of your life is going to be immortalized in a play. That other people are going to be saying things you have said. I got goosebumps reading lines that came from my mouth. (EC 7/1/14, 12:03pm)

Overall, as long as I knew how they felt they trusted that I would 'look after' their stories. I believe that this was only possible due to the Community Immersion and continued communication that occurred across the project. These two key strategies develop trusting relationships between the playwright and the community, and enable space for the playwright to experiment with her/his translation of the stories.

A further implication for future practice was the valuing of the place to connect and discuss post-performance. The night the storytellers attended was curated to include a closing night function and I made a short speech of thanks. One storyteller stated "[t]he mingling time after in the lobby on sat night was invaluable. I would love to meet up with those ladies again. I think we should have a bald heads and blue stars

## Chapter Six: Impact

reunion” (S3R3). Dolan’s suggestion that verbatim theatre brings together people who might otherwise not have spoken (*The Laramie Project* 113) is evident in this case study. For some of the women attending the performance this was only the second time they had ever met another person with Alopecia. This project and performance has enabled connection within the Alopecia community as well as dialogue with those beyond it, as epitomised by the following response, “sharing stories and hearing others stories helps bring us all together” (S3R4).

Further findings for practice include understanding the impact and resonance of naturalistic recreations. The dramaturgy of writing a storyteller’s experience into a present tense scenario with realistic aesthetics should be approached with an awareness that this has a different emotional gravity and impact when viewed in performance by the storytellers. Being aware of the kind of impact the performance may have for the storytellers can inform a playwright’s decision making process, and my research has provided unique insight into this practice and its impact. The findings of this research demonstrate the value and positive impact of verbatim theatre in areas of identity, awareness and community, and that this impact is particularly pertinent to verbatim theatre as it is an embodied experience about embodied experience.

### **6.6. Personal impact**

Through analyzing the impact of this verbatim theatre project on the community of storytellers I am conscious that I am included in this community, albeit in a unique and privileged position. My stories, some of which were shared and created with the other storytellers in the context of the interview and became embedded in the interview transcript material, and others which provided stimulus for the plot points in Violet’s journey, are from my own lived experience. I too have experienced the positive impacts expressed by the storytellers across the survey data through involvement in this process. Acting in the production had added another layer of impact, enabling fascinating insight into the impact on storytellers who perform their own story. The anonymity afforded by the verbatim theatre process was liberating as I performed some of my own stories unbeknown to many of the audience. I too was able to discuss elements of the Alopecia experience through the removed frame of theatre, which enables a critical distance and provides space for reflection.

## Chapter Six: Impact

Performing in the play also resulted in what Wake refers to as “slippages”, where the audience conflates the actor with their character in a verbatim theatre performance (*To Witness Mimesis* 111). This was amplified in my project as I was the only actor with Alopecia and therefore the only representation of female baldness. I experienced interactions post-performance with audience members who assumed that *all* the stories I told were my own, despite the stark variety of ages and personalities I played. Even my brother commented on a particular story and apologised that he never knew I had been through that experience. I hadn’t, it wasn’t my story. In a way these responses were flattering in my role as actor as it implied a resonance and authenticity in my performance. Being the only actor with Alopecia I was perhaps “forced to function, almost by default, as a signifier of authenticity” (Wake *To Witness Mimesis* 116), my body became the one credited with having gone through the experiences shared. This was alluded to by one of the storytellers, as discussed earlier, as she suggested that the quality and integrity of the performance was “largely due to Sarah’s involvement” (S3R5). This implied that my position as a contributing storyteller pre-disposed me to work with the stories in a respectful way. While this position of insider has undoubtedly been beneficial to the creative process, my visibility as a member of the Alopecia community has also been a challenge.

I embraced the role of signifier in this project and performance, and through sharing my journey I aimed to enact Wake’s description of political mimesis. By modelling on stage my political activism (for I firmly believe the political and the personal are intrinsically linked) I hoped that “audience members [may feel] able at least to attempt these actions off stage and, in doing so, to join the sensuous struggle” (Wake *To Witness Mimesis* 119). Evidence of political mimesis (and by extension, the successful enactment of my theory of practice) has emerged across the storytellers’ survey responses as well as in the reflections of the collaborating artists who completed audience response journals.

I had not anticipated the multifaceted ways that this project would impact my personal Alopecia experience and identification. In part I perceive this is due to the choices I made in my interview practice; to position myself in a non-critical role as audience to the others’ stories, not questioning their values and discourses. This meant that when I interviewed storytellers who associated their Alopecia with

## Chapter Six: Impact

ugliness I didn't overtly seek to contradict them. I "started feeling a bit down, and I think it is related to the interviews, particularly the last two women talking about how they don't find themselves attractive due to their alopecia and would hate to be trying to find a relationship. This affects me personally I think" (J10, 19/4/13).

Rogers and Farson caution that active listening "carries a strong element of personal risk" (8) as when we truly understand the perspective of the speaker:

...we risk coming to see the world as [she] sees it...and start thinking in someone else's terms...It takes a great deal of inner security and courage to be able to risk one's self in understanding another. (8)

I felt after some of the interviews that I was feeling sad, almost that I was taking on the other person's view of the world and their thoughts about the ugliness of their Alopecia. Fredrikson extends on this caution of personal risk, explaining that hearing and listening are two separate things, "to be able to listen, the listener needs to silence themselves" (1173). Sometimes, being the active listener meant holding my tongue and not responding to points made by the storyteller. While some mutual storytelling (and therefore the sharing of my point of view) occurred in these interviews, I chose the performance to be the context for my own personal and political positioning of the Alopecia experience.

The practice of this project meant that I travelled well beyond my local community. In my hometown I have become a familiar and somewhat normalised presence. Travelling to other regions and cities resulted in new interactions with the general public. When I was in Mackay for an interview I used the local taxi service and both times the drivers were intrigued by my baldness and asked me directly about my hair. One driver "was talking to me about Ayurvedic massage and how that oil can help promote hair growth, he said that I was beautiful, but you could be more beautiful with hair" (RT6, 15/5/13). I was experiencing similar interactions to those described by the storytellers. The practice of the project heightened my awareness of my own experience and I began documenting Alopecia related incidents. For example:

...[o]n my way back from the airport I was stopped by a man who was going to ask me a question and then placed his hand

## Chapter Six: Impact

on my arm and said ‘oh, you’re a girl aren’t you’, quite surprised, and then asked me if I knew anything about cars. (J13, 17/5/13)

Despite sometimes resulting in my own personal wrestling, the interview process was also extremely rewarding. The value of being physically in the same space as the storyteller was something I keenly felt and “even though I’ve driven 6 hours return trip to conduct a one hour interview, it still feels completely worthwhile” (J10, 19/4/13). The impact on the community of storytellers, their valuing of our encounter, my own expansion of knowledge about Alopecia, and the kinaesthetic knowledge about the stories in performance that was developed through the practice of the interview were all embodied experiences that impacted on me personally and positively.

Further learnings about my practice as an artist emerged across the rehearsal process. After our first cast reading Burton kept returning to the statement that our central goal was to create entertaining theatre, and that this trumped other aspirations for the work. I felt that “it is possible to hold multiple agendas within myself at the one time”. I want the play to be entertaining:

... and respectful, and collaborative, and community oriented, and challenging societal norms etc. Clear goals might be easier to deal with, but I am learning to be comfortable in my tangled, messy, sometimes confusing and conflicting agendas. (J53, 29/4/14)

Rather than a hierarchical agenda, my goals for the work were multiple and fluctuating, cyclical and converging rather than linear and tiered. This level of awareness about my theory of practice *in* practice has emerged from the practice of the research in this project and is a significant personal learning.

Finally, my balding body became central to the practice and to the resulting product. My ‘insider’ status to the Alopecia community influenced my practice in the interview and the facilitation of Community Immersion more broadly. The poster promoting the show was an image of my head (appendix O) and across the period of

## Chapter Six: Impact

promoting the performance I oscillated between a sense of pride and then a sense of doubt and insecurity.

I also have to remind myself of the strength of my convictions – in relation to the poster. It is an image of my bald head, but also my neck. There are freckles, a mole, I'm overweight – and yet I think it is a striking image. Whenever I feel uneasy about it being plastered around town, I actively remind myself that beauty is in everything, and that I am representing a non-normative image of beauty – and that this is so much more important than any doubts I have. (J55, 11/6/14)

I hope to transform understandings about beauty and female identity and have discovered that I am Leading through Vulnerability, which is a daunting task. Leading through Vulnerability means being transparent about the liminality and impact of decisions made throughout the creative process; openly discussing how different choices will influence us each individually and the project as a whole. By sharing moments of fear or uncertainty and then finding ways to collaboratively move forward, Leading through Vulnerability also means modelling resilience. Just as Heddon describes verbatim theatre as a form grounded in “potential” (7), so is the practice of Leading through Vulnerability. Support from the community of storytellers was the most encouraging. In response to the initial call out for participants where I had appeared on the front page of the local newspaper, one storyteller emailed “I am 40 next year and have lived with Alopecia nearly all my life. Your photo is on my fridge. Today I feel a less lonely [sic] and a little bit stronger” (EC 22/3/13, 12:51pm). Embracing these fluctuating emotions, and learning to lead through vulnerability has been a key learning for my own creative practice.

## 7. Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The story of my research began with a passion for storytelling, theatre and community. It became a journey through the crucible of practice as I navigated the potential of the verbatim theatre process. This practice has enabled new knowledge and the creation of a language through which to discuss, practice and critique the verbatim theatre process.

### 7.1. Significance of the research

The core findings of my research emerge from practice. I name and define practices within my verbatim theatre process, explore their impact on the performance, and on the community sharing their story. These findings emerged from the practice and are specific to the creation of *bald heads & blue stars*. However, through triangulated data induction and reference to the broader academic field, they hold relevance and applicability beyond this context. This section summarises the core contributions to knowledge made through my research.

A playwright's intentions for their practice will influence the choices they make across a creative process, and I have articulated this as a theory of practice. Engaged Verbatim Theatre Praxis (EVTP) is influenced by critical theory, critical pedagogy and feminist theatre practice. It is a theory of practice that acknowledges the liminal space of potential. EVTP is a decision to practice and to create theatre inspired by a community's verbal stories in a way that:

1. values listening to and sharing personal experience and authentic community stories so that people are heard, visible and empowered through connection and community;
2. embraces collaboration, dialogue and experimentation with theatrical languages and conventions throughout the process of development to create innovative performance;
3. challenges normative and oppressive ideals, broadening our consciousness and transforming our understanding.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This is the theory of practice underpinning my choices and decisions as a playwright throughout this research, and has therefore informed the key finding: the articulation of an EVTP Model. Playwrights, educators and community arts practitioners now have the opportunity to use and adapt the model and its strategies in the creation of their own works, understanding how each practice functions and their potential impact on a community and on collaborating artists. Naming these practices provides a language around the artistic process of verbatim theatre, contributes to the knowledge and understanding of theatre making and provides an entry for further research and critical engagement. Beyond the significant contribution of the EVTP Model, my research provides examples of how to structure practice-led research and templates for data induction.

### **7.2. Core research outcomes**

The EVTP Model begins with Community Immersion, a practice designed to introduce the focus community to the playwright and the playwright to the focus community. There are three elements to this practice: 1) building awareness of the project and its outcomes; 2) active engagement with individuals and events from the focus community; and 3) a commitment to support that community. The Community Immersion process provides the opportunity for the playwright to facilitate interviews with the community of storytellers. The intent of the interview in a verbatim theatre process is to generate stories that can be translated through the dramatic languages into performance. It is a site of performance where stories are co-authored. During the interview the playwright is Listening for Aesthetics, and this listening occurs across the three roles of interviewer, Mutual Storyteller and engaged audience member. In each role the playwright may use a number of strategies to develop the relationship and prompt the sharing of stories. The role of interviewer involves question preparation, Storyteller Awareness and informed consent. In role as a Mutual Storyteller the theatre artist may practice story mirroring through active listening, dialogic listening and use objects as prompts.

Finally, one of the key characteristics of the engaged audience member is their physical presence. While each role serves a function within the Listening for Aesthetics framework, when the playwright can position themselves within this site of performance as the engaged audience member the stories shared are more

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

theatrically dynamic. They demonstrably contain multiple elements of drama and align with the playwright's intentions for the resulting performance. One of the greatest skills of the verbatim theatre playwright is to perform the role of audience.

After an interview is completed the transcription process begins. Within the EVTP Model, this is called Artistic Transcription and involves listening to each of the interview recordings, choosing stories to transcribe and making notes about aesthetic impulses. The choices are based on how the stories align with the premise for the work, their dynamic qualities in relation to the elements of drama or their ability to engage or surprise. Once transcribed these stories form the basis for Story Immersion, which involves reading through the stories in search of patterns, themes, contrasts, and the crucial element that drives all performance: dramatic tension.

The EVTP Model can be collaborative in the writing process or individual. When working collaboratively, the practices of Voicing Stories, devising through discussion, critical feedback and post workshop processing prove effective. These are underpinned by metacommunication and open discussion about how devising will occur in the workshop. While I thrive in collaborative environments, it was still necessary to shift from a place of open possibility to one where I made individual decisions, and post workshop processing is vital in shifting from a collaborative to an individual writing mentality.

Whether working collaboratively or individually, playwriting in a verbatim theatre process is translating stories through the dramatic languages and into performance. Three features of this translation process emerged: thematic engagement; translating the literal to the metaphoric; and finding the structural form within the content. Choosing to group the stories into content based themes during the Story Immersion phase influences the resulting structure of the play. My playwriting translation process began with impulses relating to the themes in the stories, for example diagnosis, social experiences or falling in love. Within these themes I sought out and translated the tensions into performances. The greatest tension that permeated each story was between the storyteller and their Alopecia. I wrote an embodiment of this tension by creating a physicalisation of the condition as a character. This process led to the writing of scenes that would provide a linear narrative to converge with, and compliment, the thematic stories. Translating spoken stories through the multitude of

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

dramatic languages and into performance is a complex process worthy of further research and understanding. These three features of my practice provide some insight to this artistic process.

Crucial to the EVTP Model is continued communication with the community of storytellers. This will manifest uniquely depending on the community and the project. For *bald heads & blue stars* it meant sending a draft of the script to each storyteller and providing an opportunity for feedback, questions and discussion in either a direct or anonymous format. This aspect of the model is an opportunity to keep the community actively involved in the process and enrich the script through expert feedback about the content of the work. Like many of the practices outlined in the EVTP Model it is a practice with potential. It holds the potential to be an ethical practice where the playwright genuinely connects with the community, however it is also potentially risky for the playwright, as storytellers may respond negatively to the work, disagree with representations made, or request to have their contribution removed.

The research revealed new understandings about the form and conventions of verbatim theatre. In relation to the theatricalisation of stories, Wake has differentiated two common approaches: “mimetic realism” and “diegetic realism” (*To Witness Mimesis* 106). I have contributed to this differentiation through naming and defining Character Narrated realism. Each convention functions differently within the script and also in performance. When rehearsing a verbatim play the actors face unique challenges. Some of the strategies that we found effective in the rehearsal process were Secret Stories, movement activities such as weave/copy/riff/cut and Connection Soup. These activities responded to the written conventions of the play and enabled us to find our rhythm and breath as an ensemble. They worked as effective ways in to the meta-theatrical worlds of the play. Across rehearsal and performance the most prominent skill we learned was audience positioning. This involved facilitating the audience’s role across the performance and guiding them through the worlds and conventions of the play.

The impact of the EVTP Model on the community of storytellers was positive and empowering. My research indicates that transformed self-awareness, enriched interpersonal communication, community connections and the perception of

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

consciousness-raising around the topic of Alopecia were all positive outcomes experienced by the storytellers. The data highlighted implications for the playwright's practice, specifically around facilitating the interview, explaining the theatrical process and maintaining communication with the community of storytellers across the project. Viewing *bald heads & blue stars* was an opportunity to discuss experiences and emotions with their broader community of friends and family, and the storytellers described the joy of feeling visible and acknowledged.

### 7.3. Future research

I stated in the introduction that this research is a step towards increased knowledge and understanding. I acknowledge the limitations of my research, such as the specificity of the case study context, the influence of my position within the Alopecia community on the process, and the broad and open questions on the storytellers' surveys. Throughout this project areas of future research became apparent; how audiences receive verbatim theatre performance; further understanding on how playwrights translate stories; and the ethics of representation. In addition, the EVTP Model would benefit from being tested, expanded and critiqued in multiple contexts. Contrasting models and theories of practice for event based plays would continue to enrich our knowledge and understanding of the process and impact of telling community stories through verbatim theatre.

My future research in verbatim theatre will continue to be practice-led. In March I will travel to St Jean Pied de Port in France and will spend 40 days walking the 880kms of the Camino de Santiago across northern Spain. I want to learn how a theory of practice will change and develop in a different project with a different premise and agenda. I want to discover different ways to navigate Community Immersion and extend on the complexities and nuances of the Listening for Aesthetics framework. I seek to explore, through practice, how a playwright navigates the ethics of representation when interviewing international communities and translating their stories into performance.

## **7.4. Concluding statement**

The EVTP Model is an accessible, shareable and practical contribution to knowledge designed to enable theatre artists and communities to share stories through performance. I am humbled by the opportunity this research has provided to collaborate with practitioners and members of the broader community, to enrich my own skills and further ignite my passion for storytelling, theatre and community. I look forward to the next chapter of my research story.

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## 9. Appendices

### 9.1. Appendix A: Email to AAAF database

The original message that was emailed to the AAAF database and used to promote the project through social media:

Hello! My name is Sarah and as part of my PhD research I am writing a play about the female experience of living with Alopecia. I would love to interview other women to hear their stories and help build awareness on the trials and triumphs of living with Alopecia. The more stories we share the greater the understanding within the wider community. If you would be interested in being involved in this project please contact me on [myalopeciastory@gmail.com](mailto:myalopeciastory@gmail.com) and I will get in touch with more information and details. Thanks so much and I hope you are having a glorious day!

## 9.2. Appendix B: Article in *The Chronicle*

**MODEL CHASES TITLE — LOCAL BEAUTY TAKES ON COMPETITORS AT GOLD COAST: P. 7**

# The Chronicle

FRIDAY, MARCH 22, 2013

**My life as bald woman**

**LIFE WITHOUT LOCKS:** Because of the autoimmune condition, alopecia, Sarah Peters has been bald for nearly all of her life. The PhD student is trying to find more women with alopecia to document their stories. Story: P. 4

PHOTO: NEV MADSEN

**HEAPS INSIDE TODAY**

**WHAT NOW FOR THE LABOR PARTY? STORIES, PAGES 2, 37**

**CARNIVAL PARADE CHANGES**

thechronicle.com.au

## 9.3. Appendix C: Interview with ABC Southern QLD

The screenshot shows a web page for an interview with Sarah Peters. The page layout includes a header with the program name 'Breakfast with David Iffe' and broadcast times. The main content area features the article title, date, and a list of social sharing and utility links. The article text discusses Sarah's experience with alopecia and her current work. A video player is visible at the bottom of the article, showing a 'LIVE' indicator and a portrait of Sarah Peters. A search bar is located in the top right corner of the page.

**Breakfast with David Iffe**  
5:00am - 6:15am  
6:30am - 7:45am

**Sarah Peters: My Alopecia Story**  
05 April 2013, 10:47 AM by David Iffe

For most people, a lot of our self esteem when it comes to their appearance comes from their hair.  
Women spend a small fortune and wear the tread off their car tyres trying to find the right hairdresser.  
And some men will spend thousands to halt the progress of premature balding.  
So what is it like to lose all your hair?  
It's something we usually associate with cancer patients, but what if it wasn't that?  
What if Mother Nature just dealt you a cruel blow and you didn't have hair, or you developed a medical condition which made it all fall out.  
How would you cope with that?  
I had a fascinating chat with Toowoomba PHD student Sarah Peters this week on the show.

Sarah is in that precise situation because she suffers from an autoimmune condition called Alopecia.  
She's currently writing a play and looking for other women in the same boat who can lend their stories and experiences to the production.  
If you'd like to contribute your story, you can email Sarah at [myalopeciastory@gmail.com](mailto:myalopeciastory@gmail.com)

[More about David](#)  
[Contact Us](#)

[Podcast](#)  
[Subscribe to Blog](#)  
[Print page](#)  
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[Permalink](#)  
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**Mornings**  
with Belinda Sanders

[Frequencies](#)  
[Podcasts](#)  
[Contact the station](#)  
Call 1300 747 222

0:00:00

## 9.4. Appendix D: Timeline of data induction

### Timeline of data induction

<b>2013</b>	
February	RT 1
March	Journals 1-5 IT 1 RT 2
April	Journals 6-11 IT 2 – 8 RT 3-5
May	Journals 12-19 IT 9 – 12 RT 6-8
June	Journals 20-21 IT 13 – 14 RT 9
July	Journals 22-23 IT 15
August	Journals 24 – 26 Survey One Responses (14/15)
September	Journals 27-32 Creative Development Workshop 1 - 2 CAJ 1 – 6
October	Journals 33-35 Creative Development Workshop 3 - 4 CAJ 7 – 15
November	Journals 36-39 RT 10-12 Creative Development Workshop 5 CAJ 16 – 21
December	Journal 40 RT 13-14
<b>2014</b>	
January	Journals 41-45
February	Journals 46 – 48 Survey Two Responses (9/15)
March	Journal 49
April	Journals 50-53 Cast reading RT 15
May	Journal 54
June	Journal 55
July	Journals 56-60 RT 16 CAJ 22 – 23
August	Journals 61-66 RT 17 – 22 CAJ 24 – 28 Four Performances 28 <sup>th</sup> – 30 <sup>th</sup>
September	Journal 67 Survey Three Responses (5/7) RT 23 CAJ 29 – 38

## 9.5. Appendix E: Early Journal Framework

Journal Number		Reflective Transcript Number	
Date		Feedback Number	

### Communities speaking: Creating Collaborative Verbatim Theatre

Research Question	<i>What was done and by who?</i>	<i>How was it done?</i>	<i>Why was it done? Concerns/challenges?</i>	<i>What needs to happen now?</i>	<i>Related theory</i>
<p><b>1. Document and examine the praxis of the enabling artist in the transformation of living story into performance.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is my role in the process?</li> <li>• How do my choices (artistic/organisational/methodological etc) affect the shape of the script?</li> <li>• What methods do I use throughout the process, and how do I adapt these as necessary?</li> <li>• How does my story affect the shape of the play?</li> </ul>					

## Appendices

<p><b>3. Explore the collaborative development process and pedagogies used to transform living story into performance.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How are characters shaped?</li><li>• Where is the tension found?</li><li>• How is narrative created?</li><li>• How do the playbuilders affect the shape of the play?</li><li>• How are decisions made in the playbuilding process?</li><li>• How does the use of a fluid group of collaborators affect the process?</li></ul>		
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### 9.6. Appendix F: Journal Framework Three

Journal Number		Reflective Transcript Number	
Date		CAJ Number	

***bald heads & blue stars: A theory, method and impact of Verbatim Theatre practice***

<b>Artist Notes</b>	
<b>Researcher Notes</b>	

## 9.7. Appendix G: Journal Framework Four

Journal Number		Date		Collaborating artists Reflective Transcript Number	
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***bald heads & blue stars: A theory, method and impact of Verbatim Theatre practice***

Research Questions	Critical Reflections
<p><b>VT Practice and process</b>                      What methods and practices do the collaborating artists (director, actors, tech team etc) use in this process?</p> <p><b>VT form</b>                      What is the practice of rehearsal teaching me about the possibilities of the VT form?</p> <p><b>Playwright's practice</b>                      What am I learning about the practice of the playwright/facilitating artist, both their role now during rehearsals, and in hindsight?</p>	
<p><b>Values/philosophy</b>                      What's prioritised or important?</p>	

Appendices

<p>What underpins the decisions/choices made in the practice?</p>	
<p><b>Impact</b> What impact does the verbatim nature of the work have on the artists? To what extent do I learn about the impact on the interview participants?</p>	
<p><b>Research Notes</b> What else is happening in the rehearsal process that might be pertinent to the data? Personal un-coded note section</p>	

## 9.8. Appendix H: CAJ framework – creative development workshops

Collaborative Artist Journal (CAJ)

Journal number	
Date	
Name	
Workshop collaborators	
<p>Individual responses will remain anonymous, however you can choose to be credited in any resulting publications for your contribution to this research.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Please circle: Yes    No</p>	
<p>Sarah's Research question:  <b>What methods are used by the creative collaborators in a CVT process?</b></p>	
<p>1. Reflect on what the group did in the workshop today. (What activities were conducted, scenes workshopped, discussion had, text explored etc).          Describe these activities and their outcomes in as much detail as possible.</p>	

## 9.9. Appendix I: CAJ framework – Rehearsal

Collaborative Artist Journal (CAJ)

Journal Number	
Date	
Name	
Rehearsal participants	
<p><i>These questions are designed to frame your journal reflections or provide stimulus for reflection. You don't need to respond to all questions, and feel free to write beyond the scope of these if you would like to. Thankyou 😊</i></p>	
1. How are you going? Check in	
2. How are you feeling in relation to a) The ensemble b) The process and our progress c) The stories/narrative of the play	
3. What are some of the rehearsal processes that you have found useful and effective?	
4. Do you think there is anything unique (that we are doing, or about how you are feeling) that is specific to this being a verbatim play?	
5. Anything and everything....	

## 9.10. Appendix J: Reflective Transcript Framework

RT number	
Date of recording	
Date of transcription	
Participants	
Location of recording	
Related IT No.	
Related Journal No.	

Transcript:

## 9.11. Appendix K: Survey One

Q1: What prompted you to get in contact with Sarah?

1. I wanted to help her with her project
2. I wanted to share my story
3. I wanted to hear her story
4. I'm interested in theatre
5. I think it's important to raise awareness about Alopecia
6. I'm not sure

Other: *(Please specify)*

Q2: How were you feeling in preparation for the interview? *Please tick all that apply*

1. Nervous,
2. excited,
3. concerned,
4. interested,
5. anxious,
6. curious,
7. guarded,
8. self conscious, confident,
9. other: *Please specify*

Q3: How comfortable were you in telling Sarah your story?

- Not very comfortable
- Comfortable
- Very comfortable

Q4: How important is it to you to have the opportunity to tell your story to a wider public audience?

- Not very important
- Important
- Very important

Q5: How important is it to you to be kept informed throughout the play writing process?

- Not very important
- Important
- Very important

Q6: Did you find personal value in sharing your story? Please explain

## Appendices

Q7: Did the interview affect the way you think about your Alopecia or your experiences?

Q8: Would you recommend others be involved in an interview like this? Why/why not?

Q9: Has being involved in this interview resulted in you discussing your experiences of Alopecia with others? If so, could you describe the type of discussion (positive/negative/memories etc)

Q10: Is there anything else you would like to say about your interview with Sarah or your involvement so far in this project?

## 9.12. Appendix L: Survey Two

Q1: Is *bald heads & blue stars* the first play script you have read?

Yes, No

Q2: Did you understand the format of the play script (the way the play was set out, with italics, brackets, some words in bold etc)?

Yes, No, Mostly

Q3: If you answered 'Mostly' or 'No' for question 2, which parts of the format required further information?

Q4: Sarah explained a little bit about Verbatim Theatre and the process of writing this play when you met to have the interview. Has the play script turned out the way you expected it to? Please explain.

Q5: How did you feel about seeing your story written into the play? Please tick all that apply and add more if required

- Excited that people will hear these stories
- Excited that people will learn about Alopecia
- Surprised about what I had said during the interview
- Reassured to see others have had similar experiences/feelings as me
- Worried about what people will think when they see the play
- Informed because I learned something new about Alopecia
- Vindicated because our stories are important and should be told
- Nothing in particular
- Other:

Q6: If you could add or remove anything from this play (that you have not already communicated to Sarah through email) what would it be and why?

Q7: If you had to sum up in a sentence or two what the play is all about, what would you write?

## Appendices

Q8: After reading the play, how do you feel about your involvement in this project so far? Please tick all that apply.

- Excited
- Nervous
- Upset
- Amused
- Saddened
- Empowered
- Angry
- Happy
- Confused
- Regretful
- Nothing in particular
- Other (please specify)

Q9: Will you be recommending the performance of *bald heads & blue stars* to your friends and family?

Yes, Maybe, No

Q10: Do you have any final comments you would like to make about the play script or your involvement in this project so far?

### **9.13. Appendix M: Survey Three**

Q1: Please tick all of the ways you would describe this performance (you can choose multiple answers)

- Entertaining
- Boring
- Educational
- Engaging
- Slow moving
- Humorous
- Sad
- Thought provoking
- Confronting
- Insulting
- Professional
- Good representation of the Alopecia experience
- Poor representation of the Alopecia experience

Q2: How would you rate the performance out of 10?

Q3: Which sections of the performance did you most enjoy and why?

Q4: Which sections of the performance did you least enjoy and why?

Q5: How did the performance make you feel?

Q6: Have you been thinking/talking about the play after the weekend, and if so, what about?

Q7: If you attended with family and friends, how did they respond to the performance?

Q8: Has being involved in this project influenced how you think about your alopecia experience?

Q9: Overall, what has being in this project meant to you?

## Appendices

Q10: Is there anything else you would like to tell Sarah about this project or the performance?

### 9.14. Appendix N: Interview Transcript Framework

Interview Details	
Interview Transcript No.	
Date of interview	
Date of transcription	
Participants in interview	
Location of interview	
Interview Duration	
Related notes ( <i>relationship, interruptions, concerns etc</i> )	
Reflective Transcript No.	

Interview Transcript	
<i>Transcript</i>	<i>Artistic impulse</i>

### 9.15.Appendix O: bald heads & blue stars poster



**USQ arts WORX**

# bald heads & blue stars

**28 - 30 August, USQ Arts Theatre, 7:30pm**  
Heartbreak, hilarity and hairloss ensue in this new Australian verbatim play by Sarah Peters about the female experience of Alopecia.

Directed by David Burton

**\$28 Adult | \$22 Conc/Group 10+ | \$15 Student | \$12 School Group 20+ | \$10 Child**  
*Matinée performance: 11am, 28 Aug. Teachers' notes available.*

**Book now** | 07 4631 1111  
artsworx.com.au

Queensland Government | The Chronicle | AAAF | WINNEWS | eopsis media | TOOWOOMBA REGIONAL COUNCIL

**f** Find Artsworx on facebook

## 9.16. Appendix P: Television promotion

### A play highlighting people suffering alopecia is taking place in ...



**WIN Canberra, Canberra**, WIN's All Australian News, **Newsreader**

28 Aug 2014 12:57AM

Duration: 1 mins 30 secs • Uni of Southern Qld Radio & TV • ID: M00058635264

A play highlighting people suffering alopecia is taking place in Toowoomba. The show will run from tomorrow until Saturday at USQ.

#### Interviewees

David Burton, Director

Sarah Peters, Playwright

AUD 1,394 ASR

6,000 ALL

2,000 MALE 16+

1,000 FEMALE 16+

#### Also broadcast from the following 6 stations:

WIN Albury (Albury), WIN Ballarat (Ballarat), WIN Bendigo (Bendigo), WIN Gippsland (Sale), WIN Mildura (Mildura), WIN Shepparton (Shepparton)

### An unusual play is being staged in Toowoomba. It highlights the s...



**GEM, Canberra**, All Australian News, **Melissa Jaros**

28 Aug 2014 12:58PM

Duration: 1 mins 30 secs • Uni of Southern Qld Radio & TV • ID: M00058637033

An unusual play is being staged in Toowoomba. It highlights the story of 15 Queensland woman suffering from alopecia in a major USQ production.

#### Interviewees

David Burton, Director

Sarah Peters, Playwright

AUD 2,752 ASR

35,000 ALL

20,000 MALE 16+

14,000 FEMALE 16+

#### Also broadcast from the following 5 stations:

GEM (Regional Queensland), GEM (Regional NSW), GEM (Regional Victoria), GEM (Tasmania), GEM (Regional West Australia)

All folders are up to

### Heartbreak and hilarity will be on show from tomorrow at USQ, wit...



**WIN Toowoomba, Toowoomba**, WIN News, **Natassia Apolloni**

27 Aug 2014 7:15PM

Duration: 1 mins 30 secs • Uni of Southern Qld Radio & TV • ID: M00058626371

Heartbreak and hilarity will be on show from tomorrow at USQ, with the opening of Bald Heads and Blue Stars. The play features the stories of 15 QLD women suffering alopecia.

#### Interviewees

David Burton, Director

Sarah Peters, Playwright

AUD 1,856 ASR

34,000 ALL

15,000 MALE 16+

17,000 FEMALE 16+

#### AM Radio (4 items)

## 9.17. Appendix Q: Newspaper promotion

**iSENTIA**  
INFLUENCE • INFORM • INSIGHT

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(www.copyright.com.au)



Queensland Country Life, Brisbane  
21 Aug 2014

General News, page 98 - 160.00 cm<sup>2</sup>  
Rural - circulation 28,329 (---T---

ID 00301344036

# Hair today, gone tomorrow

**O**UR hair can be a symbol of self-expression, entailing constant concern, care, maintenance and manipulation.

We spend time looking for the perfect hairdresser – someone we can trust and understands how we want to be perceived.

So how do you untangle your sense of identity when your trusted hairdresser informs you that you are losing your hair?

*Bald beads & blue stars* is a premiere verbatim play by Toowoomba actor and academic Sarah Peters that explores different women's experiences of alopecia, a condition resulting in hair loss. Combining her intelligence, educational background and community passion, Sarah uses theatre to tackle big subjects such as youth mental health and alopecia.

*Bald beads & blue stars* was inspired by Sarah's own story of alopecia, and has formed an integral part of her practice-led research. Sarah said she was thrilled to be sharing the stories of the alopecia community through an exciting and challenging show.

"My play is a humorous journey about women's experience of alopecia resulting in accepting who you are," Sarah said.

"This play shares some of my stories and also other women's stories."

"I interviewed 15 women from across Queensland who have alopecia, travelling to Cairns, Mackay, Longreach, Roma, Boonah and Brisbane to share stories about our experiences and asking the question 'what does it mean to have Alopecia?'

"I have gathered many verbatim stories from about being feminine, beautiful and desirable to public encounters with well-meaning strangers who make assumptions about your gender, sexual orientation and state of health."

The stories shared with Sarah have led to the creation of this verbatim play, which follows the central story of Violet and her journey with alopecia. From heartbreak to hilarity, *bald beads & blue stars* brings audiences into the lives of this beautiful community of women. Sarah is passionate about community stories, regional theatre and the empowering potential of performance.

Directed by David Burton, best known for his award-winning theatrical work, including other verbatim plays, *bald beads & blue stars* is presented by USQ Artsworx and supported by Arts Queensland and Toowoomba Regional Council.

◆ *Bald heads & blue stars* runs from August 28-30 at USQ Arts Theatre, University of Southern Queensland. Tickets are available via [www.artsworx.com.au](http://www.artsworx.com.au) or (07) 4631 1111.

## Appendices

**iSENTIA**  
INFLUENCE • INFORM • INSIGHT

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**Toowoomba Chronicle, Toowoomba QLD**  
20 Aug 2014

General News, page 3 - 38.00 cm<sup>2</sup>  
Regional - circulation 17,392 (MTWTFS-)

ID 00300691778

### **Hair-raising play**

BALD Heads and Blue Stars is a premiere verbatim play by Toowoomba actor and academic Sarah Peters, exploring different women's experiences of a condition resulting in hair loss - alopecia.

From heartbreak to hilarity, Bald Heads and Blue Stars brings audiences into the lives of this beautiful community of women.

The show is from Thursday August 28 to August 30 at USQ Arts Theatre, University of Southern Queensland (Toowoomba campus).

Tickets are available via [artsworx.com.au](http://artsworx.com.au) or 4631 1111 and cost \$28 for adults, \$22 for concession, \$15 for students and \$10 for children.

## 9.18. Appendix R: Teacher's Notes

### **bald heads & blue stars**

Teachers notes 2014

#### **Contents**

1. *bald heads & blue stars*

Playwright

Director

Process

Synopsis

Themes

Characters

Cast

2. Transforming transcripts

Three examples of the playwriting process

3. *bald heads & blue stars* discussion points

Pre show questions

Post show questions within the Dramatic Languages  
framework

4. Verbatim Theatre Process Activities

Story Pairs

Interviewing practice

Monologue Manipulation

Performing stories

## Appendices

### 1. *bald heads & blue stars*

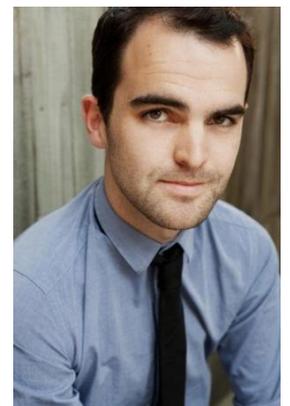
#### **Playwright: Sarah Peters**

Sarah is a theatre artist and scholar, currently studying her PhD at the University of Southern Queensland, researching the theory, method and impact of Verbatim Theatre practice. In 2012 she completed her Master of Arts with the dissertation *Listening to Story: Investigating the Art of Interviewing within the Verbatim Theatre Process*. Sarah has presented findings from her research into Verbatim Theatre at various theatre and regional arts conferences since 2012, as well as facilitating verbatim and political theatre based workshops. Sarah was commissioned in 2013 to write *twelve2twentyfive*, a one act verbatim play on youth mental health and wellbeing. Sarah has participated in a variety of local Toowoomba productions, performing in *Blackrock* and *The Female of the species* at the Empire Theatre in 2012 and *The Bench* with Toowoomba Repertory in 2013. Sarah is passionate about community stories, regional theatre and the empowering potential of performance. *bald heads & blue stars* holds personal resonance for Sarah as her own experiences with Alopecia are included throughout the play.



#### **Director: David Burton**

David Burton is an award-winning writer from Queensland, Australia who is the author of over fifteen produced plays. David is most well-known for *April's Fool*, which toured nationally in 2012 and was published by Playlab Press. His other works include *Boomtown* for the *Queensland Music Festival* (2013) and numerous works for *The Grin and Tonic Theatre Troupe* including *Orbit* (with the Queensland Theatre Company). In 2014, David co-wrote *Hedonism's Second Album* with Claire Christian, premiering at La Boite Theatre Company in August, also published by Playlab Press. In the same year David won the Text Prize for Young Adults and Children's Writing for his memoir *How To Be Happy*, which will be published in 2015.



## Appendices

You can find more information about David on his website [www.daveburton.com](http://www.daveburton.com), or follow him on Twitter @dave\_burton, or like him on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/daveburtonwriter](http://www.facebook.com/daveburtonwriter).

## Process

*bald heads & blue stars* is written in the style of Verbatim Theatre. This process involves interviewing a community of people based on a certain topic or event, recording these conversations and then using the stories as stimulus for the creative development of performance. I was interested in telling the story of women's experiences with Alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that results in varying degrees of hairloss. Basically, the body thinks that hair is bacteria and the immune system fights it off, causing the hair to fall out.

I decided to publicise the idea to see if women with Alopecia might be interested in telling their stories. I contacted the Australia Alopecia Areata Foundation (AAAF), was featured in an article in The Chronicle and spoke about the project on ABC Southern QLD radio to get the word out and see if there was any interest within the Alopecia community. Over 15 women responded to this call out, and I then travelled all over Queensland (and one trip down to NSW) to meet with the women and record their stories. This map shows just some of the places I travelled to:



## Appendices

It was really important to me that I travelled to each location to meet with the women in person, rather than only talking over the phone or communicating in a written way. There is something unique and beautiful about the way people express themselves and tell their stories orally, and I think Verbatim Theatre really values and highlights that. Also, it meant I had a better insight into each person; their style of storytelling, their rhythm and expression/presence, as well as their geographical context. Place became an important feature of the stories, as women living out west in Longreach experienced their Alopecia differently to women living in larger urban or coastal areas.

Then began the task of transcribing the interviews, and while listening I would make notes of all the ideas and images that would come to mind while typing. I would be listening to one of the women's stories and would suddenly see a moment of performance very clearly in my mind – sometimes it was a certain way of performing that story, or an idea for a costume or set piece, or sometimes an idea for a song or even just a way of moving for a character. These moments became the starting point for writing the play.

I worked with undergraduate students at USQ to workshop ideas and read through the stories that emerged from the interviews. Further on in the teacher's notes you will see some examples of how I transformed the interview material into a piece of theatre. The process of creating this play has been very collaborative, and the performance has been influenced by the women I interviewed, my own personal experiences with Alopecia, and the various theatre artists who have assisted throughout the plays development. I also sent a draft of the play to each of the women involved, asking for their feedback and advice whilst also giving them the opportunity to remove parts of their story if they no longer felt comfortable having it included. This is an important part of my practice, as I feel that the stories someone might feel comfortable telling me in a one to one setting might not be the same as the stories they are happy to share with a wider public audience. Our stories are how we understand our lives and the world we live in, they are often highly personal and to share them with others can be a great gift.

## Appendices

The process of writing this play has been an exciting journey into the world of alopecia, but more importantly, into the world and lives of 15 strong, beautiful and courageous women. I feel honoured, humbled and excited to share our stories through theatre.

### **Synopsis**

Our story centres on the characters of Violet and Alopecia. They meet when Violet is three years old, and the audience is taken on the journey of Violet's relationship with Alopecia. *bald heads & blue stars* weaves the stories of 15 women throughout this central narrative, exploring what it means to lose some or all of your hair. What happens when you're wearing a wig in grade eight and it blows off while playing netball? How do you tell the guy you are dating that you're actually bald? How does it feel to wake up in the morning with no eyebrows and no eyelashes and feel like you have no face? The audience is taken along on Violet's journey as she experiences high school, wigs, friends, family and embarrassing social situations, all with Alopecia by her side. Reflecting on themes of beauty, identity and acceptance, *bald heads & blue stars* offers us stories of challenge and triumph, heartbreak and hilarity all on the road to embracing and celebrating what makes us unique.

### **Themes: Beauty, identity, self esteem**

What does it mean to be beautiful, and how is this different from *feeling* beautiful? Throughout the play many of the stories explore how women judge their own beauty on the ideas and expectations of others. Some feel as though they can no longer be beautiful now that they have no hair, and if they want to feel pretty they have to wear a wig and makeup. One character explains it as feeling like Princess Fiona from shrek – she is an ogre by night when not wearing a wig, but feels 'normal' during the day. Other women talk about how they now understand that beauty is a diverse and personal thing; that there is no one definition of beauty. For a lot of women they came to this understanding when they discovered that other people found them attractive even when bald, that their beauty didn't exist in one or two parts of themselves but was instead a 'whole package' deal. A lot of the women talk about beauty as a feeling, and something that is flexible and changing. They can feel

## Appendices

beautiful at times and not at others, and that accepting our own differences isn't something that you do once, but something that you have to keep doing.

The themes of identity and self esteem are entwined throughout this play as the women explore their sense of self, and how this has changed, through their experiences with Alopecia. Many of the women have lost their eyebrows and eyelashes, they share about waking up to see a 'blank page' in the mirror, or feeling as though they can't express themselves in the same way without having a 'full face'. For other women, they are constantly fighting against the assumption that they are unwell – that their baldness is caused by cancer related treatments. They talk about being fit and healthy and finding it difficult when strangers pity them or assume that they are less physically capable than others. The play explores how often our own sense of self and esteem comes from others perceptions; when a bald woman is mistaken for a man constantly this can have an effect on how they see themselves.

Rather than giving a definition of beauty, or asserting one way for women to see themselves, *bald heads & blue stars* shares a diverse variety of personal experiences, reflections and advice for the audience to consider for themselves. For Violet, she journey's from a narrow and restricted idea of beauty/self esteem to understanding that there are a million different ways to be beautiful and that it is up to her to see that beauty and strength, both in herself and in others.

### **Characters**

**Violet:** Ages 3 – 28. She is the central character in the play and we follow her journey from first being diagnosed with alopecia in childhood, through highschool and towards embracing her (much less hairy) self.

**Alopecia:** A character based on the 'idea' of the autoimmune condition, his relationship with Violet and each of the characters changes throughout the performance as they feel angry, hurt, accepting etc of him and his presence.

**Narrators:** The three narrators act as a chorus and voice Violet's thoughts

**Actors:** Throughout the performance the actors guide us into each story shared, explaining how the play was created and introducing each scene. The play is meta-theatrical in this sense, with a twist on the 'play within a play' convention.

## Appendices

Women: The cast become the 15 women who were interviewed, ranging from 18-70 years old.

### **Cast**

Kristian Santic

Laura Trenergy

Cassie Bell

Kate Charles

Sarah Peters

## Appendices

### 2. Transforming transcripts

#### Example One

##### Interview Transcript

This is an excerpt directly from one of the interviews where I have transcribed everything said by both participants.

SP: *Looking at the photo* Did you have patches here on your wedding day?

- well yeah, the thing was on my wedding day I'd grown my hair long to wear it up, and when I went to the hairdressers, because I got married over in England, so it wasn't my normal hairdresser

SP: oh

- um she said, 'you can't wear your hair up because you', I had a patch that actually went into my hairline *demonstrates how the patch was coming up from the back of the neck*, which was odd, first time, my patches were always in the middle of my head, above my ears, around the back *gesturing*

SP: yeah

- or low, but they never actually went into my hairline

SP: ok

- and so it was like, almost like, it wasn't triangular, but it was almost like a triangular wedge

SP: yes

- in at the side of my neck, so I couldn't wear my hair up, I had this big piece of hair missing, and that's why I went for this hair style which was kind of up on top with a bun.

## Appendices

### Edited Transcript

The next stage would usually be to go through and edit out all of my sections as the interviewer, so that I was left with just the story from the participant.

On my wedding day I'd grown my hair long to wear it up, and when I went to the hairdressors, because I got married over in England, so it wasn't my normal hairdresser and she said, 'you can't wear your hair up because you'... I had a patch that actually went into my hairline, which was odd. My patches were always in the middle of my head, above my ears, around the back, or low, but they never actually went into my hairline. It was like, it wasn't triangular, but it was almost like a triangular wedge in at the side of my neck, so I couldn't wear my hair up, I had this big piece of hair missing. And that's why I went for this hair style which was kind of up on top with a bun.

### Playwriting

This is an excerpt from the script itself, and I have made bold the line that has come directly from the story above. In this example you can see how a big section of the interview might only result in a very small inclusion in the play:

4: It came and went for a couple of years, but when I stopped breastfeeding is just all fell out

**1: I had this big piece of hair missing, like a triangular wedge**

3: The worst thing was going to the doctor for the first time and being told its

All: Stress

### Example Two

A very simple way to turn a story into a performance is to have two actors play the parts. While in the original interview someone might say:

I don't know if you find, I find that if I'm in a shop a lot of people let me go first, I think because they think I'm sick. 'You go first' I go no I'm right, they say 'no no you go first' I say thankyou. Yeah so I get a lot of that.

## Appendices

You can then write it so that two actors tell the story together, and then instead of only having people talk directly to the audience, you can have action and relationships being performed on stage as well:

3 (40): I find that if I'm in a shop a lot of people let me go first, I think because they think I'm sick.

Shopper 1: 'You go first'

3 (40): Oh no I'm right

Shopper: No no, you go first

3: Alright then. 'thankyou'.

### Example Three

Finally, you can choose to completely write a scene based on the *ideas* from the interview. I explained to each of the women I interviewed that I might use sections of their stories word for word, or I might get an idea from something they have said and use this idea in writing the play. Here is an example of a scene that was inspired by how much the women talked about hating their mirrors:

*Violet is still holding her wig.*

N1: In the morning I'd say

VIOLET: I can do this, today I'll just go to work without the wig

*Alopecia is smiling in encouragement.*

N2: But I'd look in the mirror and think

VIOLET: Don't be ridiculous

## Appendices

### 3. *bald heads & blue stars* discussion points

#### Pre show questions

##### *Content based*

- How does it feel when you have a secret?
- How do you think it might feel to hide something about who you are from your friends and family?
- How important are 'looks' to you?
- Define what it means to be beautiful
- Explain what it means to be feel beautiful, and how is this different from being beautiful?
- When was a time that you felt most brave?

##### *Style based*

- What makes a good story?
- What are the important elements of storytelling?
- How might a spoken story be different when performed, rather than just told?
- What are the most common stories that you hear? (amongst friends, on the news, on tv shows etc)
- Why do you think some stories are told more often than others?

#### Post show questions

The following questions are designed within the framework of the Dramatic languages so that students are exploring/discussing the play from multiple perspectives.

##### *Elements of Drama*

- The actors took on many different roles in this performance. How old/young do you think some of the women portrayed in the play were, and how did their age affect their experience with Alopecia?
- Violet is the main character in the play. How was her role/story used to weave in the stories from the other women interviewed?
- The character Alopecia was a symbol for the condition that each lady experienced, and we most clearly saw his relationship with Violet. How was this relationship portrayed through staging and characterisation?
- There are many different types of tension (tension of task, tension of situation etc). When was the highest point of tension for you as the audience member? Why do you think that moment resonated with you the most? Was it due to the narrative (content) or the way the moment was performed?

## Appendices

- As explained at the start of the play 15 women were interviewed and their stories were included. How did the language of each story affect the way you perceived that character? What word choices and phrasing seemed most 'life like' to you?
- There are three different types of language used in the play; the language of the verbatim stories, the language of Violet's thoughts, and the language of the actors when they speak directly to the audience. How is each type of language different, and how does this influence the story of the play?
- What were some of the different places portrayed throughout the performance and how did the actors use the stage space to convey these different locations?
- The character Alopecia is a symbol for the autoimmune condition. What did you learn about this condition through the performance, and the way the character behaved on stage?
- Some of the stories are told in the present and some are told as though the character is remembering the story. How does this change the mood of the stories?

### *Skills of performance*

- There is a lot of movement in this performance and the actors have to transform very quickly from one character to another. What performance skills did they employ to show these changes in character, and how effective were they?
- The actors were sometimes telling stories on their own and sometimes working as an ensemble. What is effective about both ways of working? Which sections did you prefer as an audience member and why?
- Music was used to help heighten the mood in certain scenes, and also as a practical convention to assist with scene changes. How did the song choices help to tell the overall story?

### *Styles and their conventions*

This play is in the style of Verbatim Theatre, and below is a list of the conventions that are used in the play. Consider where they were applied within the performance and why.

- Direct address
- Choral speaking, with staccato lines
- Narration
- Juxtaposing oppositional stories
- Quick changes in time and place
- Monologues

## Appendices

- Cyclical narrative
- multimedia

### *Text*

The script itself is made up of many hours of stories.

- Were there stories that connected with you more than others? Why/why not?
- Which stories did you find the funniest/saddest? Why?
- Even though the women are talking about a very specific condition, how can their stories relate to everyone?

## **4. Verbatim Theatre Process Activities**

### Story Pairs

Ask students to move into pairs and designate who is A and B. Give the class a topic to tell a story about, for example, ‘the time I was most surprised’ or ‘the time I learned to drive’ etc.

Student A tells student B their story, as student B listens as carefully as possible to all the details, but also to the general beginning/middle/end of the story. Student B is not to interrupt or ask any questions.

Bring all the students back together. Student B from each pair will now tell student A’s story as though they ARE student A. They need to try and use their same language choices and some mannerisms, without making fun of them.

After each student B has shared the story discuss with the class:

- When in their pairs what was student B listening for when hearing the story?
- How did student A feel when their story was being told?
- Did student B feel a sense of responsibility to student A?
- How different would it be if student A wasn’t in the room when student B was telling the story?
- What parts of the story did Student B forget to tell?
- Did they do anything to the story to make it “better” (or more entertaining?)?

## Appendices

### Interviewing practice

Divide the class into two groups, A and B. Give each group a topic that they will interview the other group members about. For example, it could be about their first day of highschool, how their family celebrates Christmas, what their bedrooms look like etc.

In their groups, have students brainstorm what kinds of questions to ask about their topic. The questions need to stimulate description and story – remember, the goal is to get the interviewee to share stories that would make for interesting performance.

Pair one student from group A with one student from group B. They each take turns in interviewing the other on their given topic, and practicing how to stimulate extra details, exciting anecdotes etc from their partner.

If possible, have these practice interviews recorded so that they can listen back to the interview and identify what worked and what didn't (in relation to interview skills), as well as which stories stand out the most as being potentially performative.

### Monologue manipulation

Often in verbatim theatre there are a lot of monologues. In this play I didn't always tell the actors how old the storyteller was – they had to work through reading the monologue and decide on the characters age, tone and physicality.

Choose a monologue from a verbatim play you are studying and consider the following:

- What do the specific word choices tell you about the character?
- The writer has chosen to put the punctuation in certain places. How would the intent and emotion of the monologue change if the punctuation were different? Try applying your own version of the punctuation and reading it aloud.
- Read the monologue as a 15year old and then again as a 50 year old. How does the rhythm, musicality and emphasis change?

## 9.19. Appendix S: My story for AAFF

Screen shot from website:

<http://www.aaaf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Sarah-Pv1.pdf>

**I've had ups and downs, I've been self conscious and I've been brave. I don't know where I will be this time next year, or what my head will look like. But it's an adventure, and it's all part of my story.  
I'm Sarah.**



Growing up with Alopecia Areata has made my life unique. My Alopecia first began when I was around 3 years old, with a few small patches developing. We lived on a property at a small place called Arcadia Valley, a beautiful place 'if you blink you miss it'. My earliest memory of my Alopecia is having my mum do my hair up in pig tails, but instead of the traditional two, we went for three in order to conceal one of my Alopecia patches. This was in grade 2 or 3, and by now we had moved to Roma. I remember getting up in front of the class and doing 'show and tell' about my Alopecia. It mustn't have been planned, just a spur of the moment decision, as I remember my teachers looking surprised. As a teacher myself now, I wonder what they thought about this little girl randomly presenting her baldness to the rest of the class.

When I was around 9 or 10 my parents took me to a specialist. I only remember sitting on a high stool and having someone look at my fingernails. Mum tells me that all of the treatments seemed too harsh, and she didn't want me to have to go through that.

Somewhere along the way I obviously started becoming more self conscious about my patches. From grades 8 through to 10 I went through stages of wearing a bandana to school and being very aware of my hair loss. It's quite funny thinking about it now, because I was only losing tiny circles of hair at this stage, but at the time I thought I had lost so much. We went for a trip to Brisbane to have a look at wigs (which was a pretty big deal, living 7 hours away) and I just remember the whole thing feeling awkward and weird. I hated having this big thick thing on my head, and I remember that at the time all I could think about was going on year 8 camp and I didn't want to be wearing a wig for that.



By the time I was a Senior all my peers knew what it was, and I guess I just settled into who I was a bit more. The patches started to get smaller, and for a few years between the end of high school and the start of uni, I only had tiny patches of hair loss. I had decided that my philosophy wouldn't be to try and hide my patches.

Then, in 2009, my hair just started falling out more rapidly. It got to winter and I started wearing beanies, and by the end of that winter, when it was really pushing it as beanie weather, I realised that I had begun to rely on the beanie. I had to sit down and decide what I was going to do. At the time I didn't have the confidence to just let people see my patches. Even though I had been very open about it with my students, and they were very supportive, I hated the way it looked, with all these long strands around big bald patches. So, I decided to make the plunge, shave it off and get a wig. I ended up with three completely different wigs. And so I became a wig wearer. I would change my wigs for school a lot, depending

Appendices

## 9.20. Appendix T: Continued communication example

Rehearsal update: 11<sup>th</sup> August 2014

Hi everyone,

Rehearsals are going really well - we are continually making improvements and changes so that we can best honour the stories and make the performance engaging.

The play will probably run for 1hr 10mins (on the website it says 1 and a half hours, but we have tightened it up a bit since then!)

I've attached a few photos of the cast in rehearsal - enjoy!

Hope you're all well,

Much love, Sarah



## Appendices