School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts

Murder on the Stage:
Ethical Process in Writing Theatre Based on Real Events

Kathryn Isabel Rice

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DECLARATION

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number HR182002

Signature: 

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the result of my creative practice-led research into the significance of ethical issues in writing theatre about real events. I wanted to discover how ethical issues may influence the process of researching and writing a play script based on real events, and how they are then evident in the script itself. My theoretical approach was influenced by Donna Haraway’s ideas of ‘feminist objectivity’ or ‘situated knowledge’. These ideas invoke a quality of ‘positionality’ in which an artist is compelled to acknowledge the subjectivity of her creative vision, and her position within the power structures that frame it. Positionality invokes a recognition of context that invites the artist to take responsibility for what she chooses to express, and the effect it may have on other people. I argue that this responsibility must be addressed in the script itself through an interrogation of the writer’s position and the meanings she chooses to make in relation to existing power hierarchies and injustice. I apply this interrogative process to existing play scripts based on real events, specifically murders, and then to my creative practice. The play Monologue for a Murderer is about a high school shooting that occurred in Erfurt, Germany, in 2002. The exegesis follows the creative process I underwent researching and writing this script, with a focus on its ethical implications. The thesis concludes with the script, in which I attempt to meet the ethical responsibilities raised by my choice to write about real events and real people.
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1. INTRODUCTION

I wasn’t like every other kid, you know, who dreams about being an astronaut, I was always more interested in what bark was made out of on a tree. Richard Gere’s a real hero of mine. Sting. Sting would be another person who’s a hero. The music he’s created over the years, I don’t really listen to it, but the fact that he’s making it, I respect that. I care desperately about what I do. Do I know what product I’m selling? No. Do I know what I’m doing today? No. But I’m here, and I’m gonna give it my best shot. (Zoolander)

1. What am I doing?

This thesis is the result of my creative practice-led research into the ethical issues of writing theatre about real events. It is a play, based on a real event, and an exegesis that elucidates the processes behind its creation. In the exegesis I argue that the choice to create theatre about real events raises ethical responsibilities that can be addressed by interrogating the writer’s position and the meanings she chooses to make of the event in relation to its power structures and circumstances of injustice.

The play, entitled Monologue for a Murderer, is based on a high school shooting that took place in Erfurt, Germany in 2002 (Lemonick). Through this play and the accompanying exegesis, I identify the ethical responsibilities that attach to writing about this event and attempt to clarify why they matter. I then work through an approach to writing theatre that honours these responsibilities, and attempt to make them manifest within the play script.

I choose to write about my work in the first person, using a personal, informal style that acknowledges and demonstrates the partiality of my thoughts and
experiences. This subjective approach embraces the idea of the “embodied nature of all vision” described by theorist Donna Haraway, and challenges the illusion of objectivity created by a scientific, impersonal “conquering gaze from nowhere” (26). Haraway’s ideas about the personal, contextualized basis of all knowledge claims form the basis of my approach to writing ethically about real events in the theatre, which I describe in Chapter 3, “An Approach to Ethical Writing”. A personal style is particularly apposite to creative, practice-led research in which the process is inherently subjective (Nelson 154).

A consciously personal style also addresses the issue of the colonizing voice. In writing about theatre that involves other people, I want to avoid the tendency to reinscribe another’s subjectivity: “no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself” (hooks 343). My aim is to speak my truths (Nelson 155) and be mindful that these are mine alone.

I begin with an overview of the theoretical background relevant to writing about real events. This chapter includes definitions of key terms and places my work within its field of inquiry. The next chapter identifies an ethical approach to writing theatre about real events, built on the two key ideas of positionality and meaning. I then apply these ideas to an analysis of nine play scripts based on real events that have been chosen for useful comparison with *Monologue for a Murderer*. I conclude with a similar analysis of my own play script.

2. Why am I doing it?

My interest in writing about real events began in Darwin in 2005, when I was commissioned to write a play for young audiences about cultural conflict across the Top End of Australia. The result, *Pirates of the Arafura Sea*, is a fictional narrative
play about a band of pirates that incorporates stories of real historical events. The use of these stories required me to gain permission from Yolngu and Tiwi elders. It was a humbling and confronting experience, in which I became aware of the importance of these stories in creating and maintaining identity. I felt a responsibility towards those who had allowed me to use their stories to retell them in a way that was consistent with their meanings within their respective communities. My feelings of responsibility were even more intense when I worked on *Wireless Head*, a commission by Agelink Theatre Company the following year, about the experiences of senior citizens living in suburban Perth. This process was different from *Pirates*, where I used pre-existing stories that had meanings independent to my creative treatment of them. For *Wireless Head*, I sought out and crafted the stories through an interview process. I visited people in their homes and they told me stories about their experiences of war and immigration, and at least in some cases, it was the first time they had told them. At the first performance, I felt nervous to a level I had never experienced before with a showing of my work. I wasn’t just afraid of being judged myself: I was afraid of unfairly exposing those who had entrusted me with their stories. And yet the sense of carrying a burden that was of significance beyond myself was also liberating, and the warm reception of the performance inspired a feeling of pride in me as a writer beyond any I had ever felt before.

This experience helped me identify what I was looking for in my work as an artist: meaningful, genuine engagement with the world around me that would help me to understand it. I wanted theatre to do this in a way that supported my ideological commitment to honesty, compassion and fairness. At around this time, I was experiencing increasing disillusionment with mainstream contemporary theatre that I felt betrayed these ideals. I was frustrated and angry at theatre that appeared distinctly
lacking in compassion and fairness in its portrayals of women and older people, such as *The Odyssey* by Homer, adapted by Tom Wright, directed by Michael Kantor, produced by Black Swan Theatre Company and the Malthouse Theatre in 2006; *The Red Shoes* by Hans Christian Andersen, adapted by Humphrey Bower, directed by Matthew Lutton, produced by ThinIce Theatre in 2008; and *The War of the Roses* by William Shakespeare, adapted by Tom Wright and Benedict Andrews, directed by Benedict Andrews, produced by Sydney Theatre Company in 2009. These were not works based on real people or events, but re-interpretations by young, white male writers and directors of classical works written by their young white male forefathers. I felt I was witnessing a contemporary re-inscription of a culture in which the reality of those who are not young, white and male was continuing to be defined by those who are, with a lack of respect for others’ perspectives that sometimes appeared to amount to conscious contempt. Yet I felt I had no legitimate critical language through which to express this, other than in terms of taking personal offence.

Each of the plays mentioned above depicted a violent, highly stylized world which featured frequent acts of exaggerated aggression towards the vulnerable. They assaulted the audience aurally and visually, and undercut any opportunities for the audience to engage emotionally with the characters. Women were either absent from the world, or appeared symbolically as chaotic, irrational and highly sexualized creatures. Suburban, middle-class or family concerns were satirized or ridiculed. A lot of other theatre I saw at that time, and continue to see, shared these characteristics. To describe these characteristics as ‘offensive’, and the works themselves as therefore somehow lacking, assumes that theatre has a responsibility *not* to offend. However many artists claim no such responsibility whatsoever, and are quick to align themselves with comedian Ricky Gervais: “offence is never given, it’s taken. … I’m
offended by things all the time but I haven’t got the right not to be offended, and … just because someone is offended it doesn’t mean they’re right” (qtd. in Idato).

Offence may be taken for any number of personal and irrational reasons, but carte blanche to offend people does not diminish the responsibility we have for our actions as people or artists. This responsibility takes on more significance when the action is public, and made from a position of relative power. The ‘offensiveness’ of a work of art then becomes about ethics when it betrays ideologies that amount to an abuse of this power. Gervais goes on to make a much less frequently-quoted clarification: “I can justify everything I do. You have got to be able to look someone in the eye and tell them why you made that joke” (qtd. in Idato). This is an expression of ethical process: it’s not about whether you offend anyone or not, but about accepting responsibility for what you do and say. This acceptance of responsibility invites an ethical awareness of the ideological underpinnings and power hierarchies evident within your work. Art academic Richard Nelson warns that “ideological soundness still comes into play, for the underlying cultural assumptions in an artistic project may be repugnant, as when the material is racist, sexist or snobbish” (173). However, ‘repugnant cultural assumptions’ can be difficult to isolate and call to account, particularly where a willful blindness to ethical considerations amounts to a perceived entitlement to say anything at all. I liken it in my mind to insider trading, or internal corruption within government. Abuse of power is harder to recognize in the absence of a particular victim.

Theatre based on real events provides this particular victim. By this I mean a person or people who are directly affected by a play that represents or otherwise seeks to investigate, elucidate or comment upon their specific experience. Theatre based on real events then opens up a clear avenue through which it may be called to account for
its ideology. Plays about real events bring out the underlying ethical issues that arise when creating art. The inspiration behind the art becomes embodied rather than abstract. The relationship between the artist and her inspiration has the potential to become real and personal. I believe the artist’s responsibility for any work always extends beyond her personal experience and impacts the web of relationships in which it is placed. When dealing with real events, the extension of this responsibility is particularly tangible. Unthinking, irresponsible creative work might intangibly reinforce injustice, or unconsciously inscribe prejudice. Creative work based on a real event has the potential to impact people negatively much more directly, which in turn engages ethical issues directly. This is where my interest in writing about real events stems from. Working with real stories does more than situate my work within the world, and ensure that it has significance beyond me. It provides a tangible engagement with ethical process, in which the ideology and power hierarchies behind a work take on a more obvious significance. The values of honesty, compassion and fairness are engaged in a way that enables useful discussion beyond whether a work is ‘offensive’ or not.

In writing about other people’s stories, my real aim is not to champion them or save them, but to give expression to my own creativity. This is a conscious departure point of my work within the verbatim theatre tradition that was originally inspired by community engagement and social imperatives (Anderson and Linden). Nelson points out the relationship of ethical impulses to resentment of others’ success, which “provides the motive to check for fairness and to create rules about it, to insist that no one receives undue advantages” (20). This resentment can then extend to an expression of the “fanatically jealous egotistical spirit” (24) that inspires an artist to create their work. I acknowledge that my search for ethical practice and indeed my
inspiration to write this thesis are both spawned from a grubby sense of injured feelings.

In 2009, I pitched a play to theatre companies in Perth. It was to be about a real criminal case, with a teenage girl at its centre. I gained the trust of the teenage girl and wrote the play with her input, and that of her friends and family. The play was developed during an unpaid residency and selected to be showcased at the National Play Festival in 2011. It had one independent production in Brisbane, and gained a nomination for a national playwriting award. Within the same time frame, another playwright also wrote a play about a real criminal case, also involving teenage girls. This play was also showcased at the National Play Festival. It had the support of a full professional commission behind it, was produced by a major theatre company, and won a significant award. I feel a sense of injustice on behalf of the girl at the centre of my play. I believe I got her story right, and that my work was a positive contribution to understanding it in a broader cultural sense. The other playwright didn’t speak to the girls at the centre of his story, nor did he (in my opinion) contribute positively to a broader cultural understanding of who they are or what their reality might have been. But my feelings of righteous championing for those girls are pretty much dwarfed by my personal and professional jealousy.

Both playwrights are middle-aged, middle-class, white and educated. But as a woman, I am statistically marginalized. I feel acutely conscious of the hierarchy of which I am a part. It is too easy for the “culturally empowered” to ignore or be oblivious to a hierarchy when they are sitting on top of it (Aly). This thesis represents an attempt to harness my shabby, entirely selfish and possibly misplaced sense of injustice to a nobler ambition to draw attention to more acute injustices and abuses of power, and how I as an artist may identify and respond to them.
The sentiment below was recently expressed by director Simon Stone. Like Michael Kantor, Matthew Lutton and Benedict Andrews, who directed the plays mentioned above, Stone works frequently with Australia’s established theatre companies.

Art is not a series of moral rules. It is a place to experiment. It is a place to … really explore the complicated meat of life. When people start giving moral guidelines into the way art should be conducted … what they’re essentially doing is killing what art is about, which is to question moral guidelines. (qtd. in Harkins-Cross)

This answer was to a question about a specific controversy in the theatre community: the perceived lack of support for contemporary Australian playwrights, in particular female playwrights. His rejection of rules about how art should be “conducted” may therefore relate firstly to administrative processes, such as an artistic director’s choice of repertoire or artists. However the intention to conflate these processes with the work itself is clear. It’s not the administration of art that meaningfully challenges the rules, it’s the art itself. Stone is suggesting that an essential quality of art resides in its creator’s unfettered freedom to create whatever they like, however they like. Any challenge to this freedom, or to Stone’s particular freedom, is quarantined and re-branded as a failure to understand what art in general is even about. My thesis is about identifying those very “moral guidelines” which he insists are the death of art.

Stone is a highly successful director. I am an under-performed playwright whose royalties in 2014 amounted to $165.30. The Australian theatre industry is hardly in danger of being tied up and starved by whatever “moral guidelines” I may try to impose. In any case, my interest is not so much in enforcing moral guidelines as it is in identifying ways in which artists can exercise their creative freedom
responsibly. And in the context of this thesis, it’s not even about how artists in general may do this, but how I do it with this particular project. If my ideas about responsible, moral or ethical art are valid, then with any luck they will “nudge the world a little” (Stoppard 63). That is the most I can aspire to.
2. BACKGROUND

‘Don’t you wonder, with every stranger you meet, what he did under the occupation?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Pierre promptly, ‘but automatically now and without caring about the answer. I’m tired with “collaborationist” as a term of abuse; we each did under the Germans what we were capable of doing; what that was, was settled long before they arrived.’ (Laski 32)

1  Context and definitions of key terms

1.1 Theatre based on real events

Theatre based on real events embraces several distinct genres and styles including verbatim theatre, documentary theatre, and fictionalized plays inspired by identifiable events or people.

Verbatim theatre is generally characterized by a performance text consisting exclusively of transcribed primary research interviews (Paget “Verbatim Theatre” 317). The term documentary theatre is understood more broadly, in that the performance text may be drawn from a variety of external documents including news media or transcripts of court proceedings. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson acknowledge in their introduction to Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present that the form continues to diversify and draws on a wide range of source material and performance techniques (2).

For the purposes of this thesis, I choose to use the term ‘theatre based on real events’ in its broadest sense. This includes verbatim and documentary theatre and would also embrace fictionalized theatre that explicitly or demonstrably relates to
actual people or events. For example, the play *Criminology* by Lally Katz and Tom Wright, directed by Rosemary Myers, produced by Malthouse Theatre and Arena Theatre Company in 2007, explicitly concerns a murder that occurred in Canberra in 1998. The foreword to the published version of the script identifies the murder and states that the play “bounces off the events of the crime” (Healey 2). The connection with the real event that inspired *The Damned* by Reg Cribb, directed by Andrew Lewis and produced by Black Swan Theatre Company in 2012, is looser. The playwright claims that the play “is very loosely based on [two] events” (Cribb), while Black Swan general manager Shane Colquhoun distanced it further from reality in his public statement “the play was fictional and inspired by a number of high profile cases” (qtd. in Loney and Cowan). However, there are demonstrable connections between the play and one particular murder that undermine this distancing and support public perception that the play is based on fact. Both of these plays fall into my definition of theatre based on real events.

For the purposes of this thesis, I choose to focus on theatre based on real events that is primarily driven by an artistic imperative rather than a social or political one. By this I mean theatre that is performed for a paying public by recognised theatre companies, as opposed to projects that use theatrical forms to produce outcomes within the fields of social science or medicine. I acknowledge that there may be overlap, and that ethnographic research methodology is relevant to the production of this kind of artistic work.

1.2 Ethics

Academic John Freeman writes that “Ethics equate to a social system in which morals are applied. … ethics point to standards or codes of behaviour expected by the group to which the individual belongs” (*Remaking Memory* 5). This definition
distinguishes ‘morals’ as the rules which are extracted from a standard comprised of ‘ethics’. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman distinguishes between ethics and morality without explaining the distinction other than to suggest that “moral issues” are specific and personal while “ethical thinking” is the broad conceptual background against which these issues arise (Bauman 2). The Oxford English Dictionary describes ethics as “Moral principles” (OED Online). “Moral” is then defined as “of or relating to … good or bad; … right and wrong, or good and evil, … ethical.” (OED Online).

The National Statement on Ethical Conduct into Human Research was developed by the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee and applies to all research involving humans undertaken in Australian universities. It defines ethical as “right or morally acceptable” (100). Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch describe the different derivations of the words ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ but note that they “have come to be treated as almost identical in meaning” (14). For the purposes of this thesis, I choose to use the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘ethics’ and focus on a practical application of ethical principles in the creation and performance of theatre. While ‘ethical’ appears to have a more inclusive connotation, suggesting the potential for different kinds of restrictive ‘morality’ that may arise within a broader framework of ‘ethics’, both concepts point to some kind of scale against which right and wrong are judged.

One need only ask ‘right or wrong according to whom?’ for any concrete definition of ethics to dissolve in a sea of competing claims. Ethical theorists also distinguish between a duty-based and consequence-based approach to ethical decision-making (Hill 217), which adds another layer of complication. In his book about philosopher Alain Badiou, theorist Peter Hallward describes ethics as “a kind of reflective sensitivity to matters of cultural difference and civic responsibility” (255),
which highlights the personal nature of ethical issues and the two social realms in which they most frequently emerge: dealing with difference and assessing the nature and extent of individuals’ responsibilities to others. The use of the word ‘sensitivity’ also invokes the potential for complexity and ambiguity in ethical judgment, as opposed to a simple linear scale.

In *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman describes how ideas about right and wrong have developed over time. Traditionally, ethical codes were an expression of the Divine: “Being in the right … was not a matter of choice” (4); rather it was a matter of following a single, pre-determined and divinely sanctioned path. Modernity marked a shift away from this vision of unity, and people came to see themselves as individuals with choice. This fracturing of faith in the divine led thinkers and legislators to create “an all-comprehensive, unitary ethics – that is, a cohesive code of moral rules” based on reason rather than belief and manifested through the law (6). Postmodernism is characterized by an awareness that these ethical codes have failed to give comprehensive and meaningful guidance, and the subsequent erosion of the belief that it’s even possible (10). Philosopher Slavoj Zizek describes this erosion as the “waning of a paternal authority that once gave substance to social being” (qtd. in Sheehan 126). The absence of an over-arching ethical authority, which he calls “the big Other”, then leads to “a process of creating myriad situation-specific little others” (Winlow and Hall 410) which provide ethical guidance in the form of codes and prohibitions. Postmodern thinkers argue that these codes are inherently doomed to fail, because they recast ethics as a bureaucratic matter rather than “a genuine social and internal dialogue” (Winlow and Hall 411), and because “the authorities we may entrust are all contested” (Bauman 21).
Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ view of postmodern ethics argues for “an understanding of the individual subject as s/he exists within a ‘face-to-face’ relationship with the other” (Grehan *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship* 12). This understanding manifests in “an unconditional responsibility for the other, signalled by the epiphany of the encounter” (Burvill 233). Badiou, however, rejects the idea of responsibility for ‘the other’ in favour of “an ethics of the Same” (Hallward 255). He makes the connection between a total, objective truth and its vulnerability to corruption, and argues for the positive “recognition of the unnameable” (Hallward 259), or an acceptance of the unknowable in all things, to guard against evil. This argument is echoed in Bauman’s call to respect mystery and ambiguity (Bauman 33).

The abstraction and fluidity of these ideas make it difficult to form any kind of practical definition of what ‘ethical’ might mean in the context of creating art. However, despite their ideological differences, Levinas, Badiou and Bauman all re-situate postmodern responsibility for right and wrong with the individual and contingent upon each momentary situation, rather than framed within a universally applicable code. This individual approach is consistent with a secular emphasis on context, complexity and an awareness of competing claims. However, ultimately their approach describes the location of ethical decision-making and the elements that contribute to it, rather than how one actually determines what is right and what is wrong.

The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* isolates values on which the principles of ethics are based. One of these is justice: “a regard for the human sameness that each person shares with every other” (11). I suggest that a commitment to equality underpins Levinas’ “unconditional responsibility for the other” (Burvill 233), Badiou’s call to “continue in such a way as to be able to
continue to continue” (Hallward 265) and Bauman’s urge to re-personalize ethical processes. These ideas only have value if application is universal and benefit is equal. While theorists write about ethics in abstract terms, they can only ever be applied within an existing matrix of constantly shifting power hierarchies. Thinking of equality as an essential ideal that drives ethical decision-making leads to more accessible guidance: decisions or acts that manifest equality and justice are ‘right,’ while those that manifest inequality and injustice are ‘wrong.’ While it would be rare for any single act or choice to be that simple, this understanding of what ‘ethical’ means points towards a practical process. This process identifies and interrogates existing power structures, and is guided by a commitment to equality and justice.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Researching real events

The rise in theatre practice that seeks to address social issues in work based on real events corresponds with a rise in qualitative research practice in academia (Clifford). Qualitative research practices developed in social anthropology have embraced the arts as a tool through which researchers can present research findings in a way “that would more closely render the aesthetic of lived experience” (Cole 64). Research outcomes then may be presented in creative forms, including prose, poetry, and performance. Meanwhile theatre based on real events has embraced qualitative research methodologies in the pursuit of authenticity and reliability. These methodologies are of direct relevance to theatre based on real events because of practical and ideological similarities. Both navigate ways of interrogating and presenting ‘reality’ while fundamentally challenging a positivist epistemology in which ‘reality’ can be objectively determined.
Psychologist and academic Ruthellen Josselson describes narrative research as a form of qualitative research that “privileges the particulars of lived experience rather than logical positivist constructs” (32). Rather than linking stories to any external concept of reality, the stories themselves are considered the source of reality as understood and experienced: “Narratives are not records of facts … but of a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of … life” (33). Qualitative researcher Kristin M. Langellier describes personal narrative as “liminal”, or on the threshold, “between literary and social discourse, between written and oral communication, between public and private … between ritual … and incidental … between fact and fiction” (459). Personal narrative challenges concepts of external or objective reality by privileging internal, subjective and artistic expressions of it. The tension between objective and subjective understandings of reality is acknowledged in academic commentary on arts-based research: “arts-based inquiry … takes form in the hyphen between art and social science research … where epistemological standpoints of artists and social workers collide” (Finley 72).

Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis embraces the tension between external reality and internal apprehension of it with her self-confessededly transgressive book, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*. Ethnography is defined as writing about the world “using first hand observation and participation” (Ellis *The Ethnographic I* 26). In autoethnography, the research is focused explicitly on the researcher (Freeman *Remaking Memory* 3). Ellis’s book is essentially a textbook about these qualitative research practices, but she writes it in the form of a personal narrative novel in which she teaches a class of postgraduate students. The narrative is presented as an expression of events that really happened and the
characters are real people who took Ellis’s class. However, the emphasis throughout is not on accuracy but on meaning.

Ellis’s approach is problematic for me as a reader. She states that her purpose is “to engage readers in methodological concerns in the same way a novel engages a reader in its plot” (The Ethnographic I xx). The crucial feature that distinguishes this book from any other novel is the “reflexive connection … between the lives of participants and researchers” (The Ethnographic I 30), and the resulting relationship with actual people and events. However, this relationship becomes unhinged by the denial of any external objective reality: “Rather than believing in the presence of an external, unconstructed truth, researchers … embrace narrative truth” (The Ethnographic I 30). The relationship with the subject and the creator’s involvement in the relationship become constructions of the creator. Ellis admits that she allows herself the freedom to change, invent and construct details “to write a more engaging story” (The Ethnographic I 125). She identifies a spectrum in which such social research may be “closer to art than science” in which “your goal would not be so much to portray the facts of what happened to you accurately … but instead to convey the meanings you attached to the experience” (The Ethnographic I 116). While she emphasises a strong commitment to ethics and positive outcomes, she doesn’t admit the opening to abuse this approach allows. While the ultimate aim is a product of research that is “faithful enough … that we … feel safe to act on what we find” (The Ethnographic I 124), in a world where reality is always constructed, that could mean anything.

A completely contingent, contextual, constructed reality in research also makes knowledge claims impossible to evaluate. Susan Finley rejects the value of assessing quality at all, and invites a reorientation “toward assessments that place
value in diversity, inclusivity, [and] dialogic creativity” (75). Like Ellis, Finley’s approach is to say that the process of research is an end in itself. D. C. Phillips challenges this model of research with the view that where the aim is response and change, correspondence with some form of objective reality is still required: “many rival narratives can be devised to account for a given action” and “when further action or intervention is called for … we are more likely to act successfully if we act on the basis of correct information” (17). However, Phillips acknowledges the political, process-oriented motivation of narrative research in breaking the “illiberal hegemony of positivism” (20). Donald Polkinghorne suggests that the perceived conflict between conventional and interpretivist social science research is illusory because “different knowledge claims require different kinds of evidence” (474). He explains that narrative research is not concerned with what actually happened, but with how people understand and process what happened to them.

Ethnographer Charlotte Aull Davies describes an approach to ethnography based on the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar “which assumes a social reality independent of our knowledge of it” (6). This approach fuses postmodernist reflexivity with a concept of independent reality, by describing the world as simultaneously constructed and real. She illustrates the idea with the example of magnetic fields, which are understood as a constructed concept, yet exist and operate independently of this construction (19). I find this approach to be of most use to my project. Ellis’s approach admits the importance of the relationship between the creative work and reality, but subordinates it to a commitment to constructed meaning. Davies’ approach balances reality and constructed meaning, and eliminates the risk of losing the former altogether.
2.2 Real events in the theatre

Tom Barone writes that the dichotomies between art and science, fiction and non-fiction didn’t exist before the 17th century. Despite postmodern thought working to eliminate it, the boundary persists, albeit with considerable overlap. Barone writes that work that occurs in this boundary-space produces a “dialectic tension between actuality and imagination” (108). He describes how reading non-fiction towards finality and actuality homes in on tangible reality, while a reading of fiction spirals outwards to formlessness and imagination. By harnessing both inward and outwardly spiralling forces, a work may produce an understanding of the world that is simultaneously actual and hypothetical, meaningful and ambiguous. The work then exceeds the limitations of either fact or fiction, and the real is meaningfully experienced in the fictitious.

This harnessing of reality in art may become problematic as it exists in a deliberately transgressive space. A study on responses to feature films based on history showed that even though audiences understood the films were untrustworthy sources of information, they still gathered facts from them indiscriminately (Marcus). The mutually dependent relationship between fact and fiction in art based on reality is difficult to unravel, which makes it easy to misinterpret, and easy to imitate.

Australia has quite a history of artistic fraud, where artists have deliberately misrepresented their experience and racial backgrounds in order to inhabit Barone’s powerful dialectic tension. Academics Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese describe in their article ‘Wogface, Anglo-Drag, Contested Aboriginalities: Making and Unmaking Identities in Australia’ how what would otherwise constitute criminal fraud has been defended by the privileged status of art. They demonstrate how the freedom to play with boundaries between reality and art can amount to an aggressive
re-inscription of existing power structures: it is only the culturally dominant who get away with it.

Documentary theatre traces its roots back to the 1930s through what academic Derek Paget describes as a “broken tradition” that re-surfaced in the 1960s, again in the late 1980s, and again in the early twenty-first century. He equates documentary theatre with an oppositional ideology that best finds expression in non-naturalistic, consciously presentational forms (“The ‘Broken Tradition’” 224). These forms strive for a quality of actuality in performance that rejects the artifice of conventional naturalistic theatre, and embraces the tropes of postmodern performance art. Theatre is then striving to engage with the real world both in content and form: content in an explicit engagement with real people and events, and form in postmodern reality in performance described by Freeman as “the body that bleeds or the gaze that meets our own” (New Performance/New Writing 89). Both point to a cultural push towards engaging with reality in the theatre. This engagement is possibly influenced by the gradual ongoing destabilization of traditional journalism through the effects of media saturation and commodification (Burns; Howley). News sources are no longer necessarily viewed as reliable or sufficient resources for understanding the reality of the world around us. Theatre offers an opportunity to examine issues with the kind of sustained depth and engagement that is no longer on offer in traditional media (Anderson and Wilkinson).

My difficulty with the postmodern actuality-in-performance approach to reality is that, like relativist theory, it only exists as an isolated individual construction. Where all reality is constructed, no action admits consequences, and responsibility dissolves. Even the reality of a person bleeding onstage struggles to retain its essential realness when it’s happening only for the benefit of a theatre
audience. The answer is not to abandon the relativist approach completely, but rather to acknowledge the myriad mutually dependent relationships and our embodied placement within that web, as described by Bauman and Haraway. This approach connects theatre to meanings and consequences that extend beyond its own constructed world.

Theatre academics Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson write about productions that deal with human rights issues through theatrical treatment of real events. They focus on the relationship between the real and the not-real, and draw out two significant points for theatre based on real events. The first is aligned with Barone’s idea that factual and fictional understandings may be brought together to produce a response that encompasses both. Derbyshire and Loveday describe this response in Brechtian terms: theatre makes information both intellectually and emotionally graspable because while there is a “demonstrable relation to objective reality” (208), the events onstage are still understood as not real. “Freed from the obligation to consider what is witnessed as real and consequential, audiences may … respond at a deeper level” (209). The second point is that a postmodernist, constructed approach to presenting reality draws attention to the constructed nature of society, and encourages the audience to question it. This aspect of theatre based on real events is of particular significance in its usual topic areas of social injustice and communities in crisis.

2.3 Addressing ethics in theatre

In conventional, positivist science, questions of ethics are external to the research process (Lincoln and Denzin 5). Ethical imperatives are to do no harm, obtain informed consent, protect privacy, and refrain from deception, except where justified (Lincoln and Guba 222). The mandated response is not embedded in the
process, but rather “depends on the ‘moral boiling point’ of the individual inquirer” (Lincoln and Guba 223). Interpretivist social science works to embed ethical considerations into the process by acknowledging the situated relationship between researcher and participants (Lincoln and Denzin 5).

Carolyn Ellis confesses to some ethically suspect choices she made in her work, both in conventional and interpretivist research contexts. She enmeshed herself within a community for the purposes of her research without ever telling anyone in that community. The subjects of her work only found out when it was published (The Ethnographic I 147). She also wrote about her dying mother with her knowledge and consent, but deliberately concealed parts of her writing from her (“Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives” 18). She concludes that all ethical considerations, including consent, involve ongoing negotiation at all stages of the process. She emphasizes the importance of anticipating the wide-ranging effects of decisions, taking one’s own privileged position into account, and being aware of changing relationships and ethical responsibilities. She recommends proceeding on the basis that anyone who participated in or influenced the creation of the work may read it, and ethical decisions about what to include should be made on that basis.

Ethnographer Dwight Conquergood creates a map of ‘ethical pitfalls’ in performing ethnographic research in his essay ‘Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance’. The “Custodian’s Rip-off” is the plundering of others in search of good material, which Conquergood likens to rape (402). The “Enthusiast’s Infatuation” is a superficial identification with the subject which is simple and glib (404). The “Curator’s Exhibitionism” is a commitment to difference, which finds its project in display rather than understanding (405). Finally, Conquergood describes the “Skeptic’s Cop-Out”: the refusal to work with a culture of
which one is not a member (406). He finds this pitfall the most damaging as it closes down cross-cultural dialogue. Yet for activist and philosopher bell hooks, researching across cultures can amount to a re-inscription of an inequitable power hierarchy when it asserts the dominance of the researcher’s culture and the silent subordination of her subject: “no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can talk about yourself … I am still colonizer, the speaking subject” (hooks 343).

The act of researching and creating theatre about real events may cause harm in unexpected ways. For example, theatre maker Teya Sepinuck describes how she created a performance with a homeless man who was subsequently embarrassed by unwanted attention and offers of help. Sepinuck wonders, “Was he less secure in the world because of having been in this project? I don’t know the answer” (qtd. in Upton 108). I suggest that his way of being in the world was challenged and ultimately changed in a way that he didn’t expect or want. The issue of consent is particularly difficult where process and outcome are necessarily subject to change. Ethnographer Charlotte Aull Davies describes the difficulty of explaining research to potential participants in a way that is meaningful to them, and warns of the risk of appearing to persuade rather than explain. In any event, it’s impossible to obtain consent from everyone who may have an influence on a given work of art (White and Belliveau 91), or from subjects who are no longer alive (Adebayo 92).

*Le Dernier Caravansérail* by Théâtre du Soleil is an example of a theatre work in which ethical relationships between practitioners, participants and audiences were central to the creative process (McEvoy 211). The work was accompanied by critical writing by playwright and theorist Hélène Cixous which reflects on the complexity of these relationships. She describes the paradox of the artistic, aesthetic representation of real suffering that “makes the unbearable bearable” (qtd. in McEvoy
As described by Derbyshire and Hodson (211) and Barone (113), this is a process that allows us to confront realities that are otherwise too painful to bear.

Cixous and director Ariane Mnouchkine navigate the theatre’s relationship to real events by foregrounding the ethics of the embodied relationship between the artist/researcher and subject/participant. Cixous exposes the ethical negotiations in her accompanying critical text: “how to theorise and stage one’s role … without becoming narcissistic; how to reconcile the seductiveness … of theatre with the … violence it represents … How do we come as close as possible to the other’s place without taking it?” (qtd. in McEvoy 219). Cixous articulates the ethical balancing act between self and other, beauty and terror, genuine responsibility and the appearance of it, aesthetics and action. Mnouchkine takes up the challenge of translating these real-world concerns into art through bold theatrical choices that “showed the seductiveness and charm of theatre … yet at the same time … physicalized the ethical negotiation between self and other” (McEvoy 224). This was achieved through the use of rolling performance platforms that were pushed and positioned by performers. The device made manifest the dependent and reflexive power relationship between the creator-researcher/pusher and participant/pushed.

Theatre academic Caroline Wake draws attention to the theatrical conundrum of false witnessing in Version 1.0’s production of CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident). The production’s highly self-conscious, reflexive attitude to truth and lying sought to theatricalize the construction of reality as practised by the Australian government. Wake draws attention to writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi’s theory that “every survivor is a false witness” (Wake 180). The production explores the slippery nature of truth and its vulnerability to exploitation by theatricalizing actual acts of misrepresentation. The actors are exposed as pretenders performing verbatim words
that are a true record of a real lie. The result is a paradoxical, reflexive treatment of truth and falsehood that exposes the ethical ramifications of bearing witness in real life as well as in the theatre.

Theatre academic Helena Grehan’s book *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* deals specifically with issues of authenticity and ethics in theatre. Grehan’s theories on ethics are based on the work of Bauman and Levinas in which ethical responsibility is contextualized within individual, face-to-face relationships. Grehan discusses this responsibility in terms of the ethical burden that a performance may place on an audience. She does not deal directly with the ethical relationship between the creator of the work and their subject. She acknowledges the ‘burden’ of objective reality, as opposed to the freedom of purely fictional art, and the impact of theatrical representations of true events. However, her focus is primarily on the spectator’s ethical response to the Levinasian ‘call of the other’. She notes that theatre is a mediation, in that the performers are inevitably calling on behalf of someone else (*Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship* 31). This agency relationship implies that the artist has an ethical responsibility to ensure that the ‘call’ is genuine. It is this responsibility that makes individual, constructed reality answerable to the real world.
3. AN APPROACH TO ETHICAL WRITING

In the left-hand margin of the sheet mentioned were several sentences in handwriting different from that of the essay writer. One such sentence had been underlined with a red felt-tipped pen. The sentence read: *You seem not to understand how morality works in literature.* Beneath the sentence, another sentence had been written with a black felt-tipped pen in the handwriting of the essay writer: *Worse, I do not understand what is morality or even what is literature.* (Murnane *A History of Books* 61)

1. Theoretical approach

Theorist Donna Haraway’s ideas of ‘feminist objectivity’ or ‘situated knowledge’ describe a way of being which acknowledges the existence of an objective reality in a flexible, shifting relationship with embodied subjectivity. Her theory is of particular relevance to my study in two key ways. Firstly, it admits the existence of a reality that is independent of an individual’s construction or knowledge of it. This is central to an understanding of theatre based on real events in which an examination of the event itself is not solely a matter of internal construction, but also of external force. Secondly, Haraway’s theory points to a way of being in which ethics and responsibility are integral to all human projects. For Haraway, personalizing our perspective is the way to make us responsible for what we see (28).

Haraway argues for a way of thinking about knowledge which I believe draws a link between abstract ideas about ethics and how they might become manifest. Her ideas are particularly adaptable to thinking about creative work. While Bauman, Levinas and Badiou write about theoretical ways of being, Haraway deals with the
actual process of claiming knowledge and authority. She writes about “the embodied nature of all vision” and how traditional claims to objective truth deny this embodiment in favour of a “conquering gaze from nowhere” (26). This gaze holds “the power to see and not to be seen” (26), which allows anyone claiming it to define what or who they see, and escape judgement themselves. Haraway’s antidote to this is “situated knowledges” (27): acknowledgment of the embodied, particular and partial nature of any claim to truth. No one can possibly know anything – or learn anything – except from her own perspective.

This “positioning” dovetails with postmodern ethical theory in that knowledge, like ethical responsibility, resides in each individual. The idea of “positioning” also inherently implies responsibility to others. It invites individuals to be answerable for what they claim to know and exposes their fallibility. It requires that “the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as … a slave to the master” (Haraway 37). Norman K. Denzin builds on the idea of situated knowledges in social research with his concept of “thick description” (99). ‘Thick’ description acknowledges the detail and complexity not just of anything or anyone that is described, but the webbed super-structure of knowledge and power within which that thing or person is capable of being described.

If art is understood as knowledge, Haraway’s ideas about ‘situated’ knowledge and Denzin’s principle of ‘thick’ description can provide a practical pathway to ethical art making. These ideas invoke an ethical quality of ‘positionality.’ An artist who positions her work in this sense is compelled to acknowledge the partiality of her vision. She examines the power structures that give a frame to her vision and enable its expression as art. She acknowledges the autonomy and agency of the people who
inspire her work, and those to whom she presents it. She is personally responsible for what her art expresses.

Nelson’s ideas about the inherent positionality of art expose another dimension to ethical issues. He writes about art’s inescapable subjectivity. It is an expression of self: “You cannot be expressing truths felt by anyone but yourself” (155). Art is personal and entirely subjective. This subjectivity appears to be understood as an ideal of artistic freedom, in which artists are free to express themselves outside boundaries that might apply in other discourses. For example, for director Simon Stone, this freedom is not just a privilege of art, but an essential quality of it: “When people start giving moral guidelines into the way art should be conducted … they’re … killing what art is about” (qtd. in Harkins-Cross). However, Nelson warns that “subjectivity is difficult to countenance when it reveals the ideologically repugnant (like racism)” (116). He undermines the idea of the artist’s absolute right to freedom of expression by acknowledging that it is shaped and limited by the values of the community in which it exists. Even in a postmodern state of doubt, suspicion and constant challenge of authority, “there are some issues we just do not want to feel ambivalent about” (Grehan "Aalst: Acts of Evil" 10).

Positionality invokes recognition of the work’s context within interconnected relationships, power structures and cultural values. This conscious assumption of responsibility for the work extends to an examination of its meaning for the artist and her audience. Artistic subjectivity is not then an excuse for the artist to claim unlimited freedom, but an invitation to be answerable for what she subjectively chooses to express.
2. Location of ethical issues

Conquergood’s analysis of the ethical dimensions of ethnographic performance focuses on the researcher/artist’s relationship with her participants/subjects (407). This situates ethical issues outside the researcher, in the relationship between them and the people who are the focus of her work. The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* also contemplates a research paradigm in which ethical issues generally arise in the investigatory stage of the research process. This is consistent with traditional scientific quantitative research, and also adapts to qualitative research: ethical issues arise when a researcher interacts with participants (formerly called subjects) in the course of investigating or collecting data. Ethical values are manifested in balancing the risks to the participants during this investigatory stage against the benefits of the research in a more general sense. The assumption is that if the risks of the investigatory process are balanced by the benefits, the research as a whole will then be ethical. This assumption underlies much discussion about ethics in verbatim theatre (Conquergood; White and Belliveau; Gallagher; Burvill).

Creative practice-led research, or ‘performative’ research, is crucially different from both quantitative and qualitative modes of research. Freeman describes how in performative research, artistic practice becomes “the method and means of research rather than its … subject” (*Blood, Sweat and Theory* 4). The starting point and expression of the research then exists within the practice itself (Haseman 100). Brad Haseman argues that performative research constitutes a distinct research paradigm, fundamentally different from the quantitative and qualitative paradigms. This has a particular significance in identifying where and how ethical issues may emerge in the course of creating any work of art, whether in a research context or not. Quantitative
and qualitative research paradigms both “flow from a central research question or problem statement” (Haseman 100) which is then investigated, tested and translated into a report of the findings. Quantitative researchers may translate their findings into numbers or words, while qualitative researchers may use words or a variety of other forms to express their knowledge claims. The distinguishing feature of performative research is that it is never merely expressed in words: “claims to knowing must be made through the symbolic language and forms of practice” (Haseman 100) (emphasis mine). Unlike both quantitative and qualitative research, performative research does not translate or report its findings. It is its findings: “they not only express the research, but in that expression become the research itself” (Haseman 102). This concept of performative research captures the essential quality of any art as something that only exists in its expression:

Artworks are very different from the process that created them. Artworks operate aesthetically and morally … they are rhetorical constructs, with enormous symbolic, aesthetic and ethical dimensions. None of these dimensions is actually investigative. They all assume positionality … They are high incarnations of bias. (Nelson 153)

If art is its expression in the same way that performative research is its expression, then it is only in its expression that ethical issues can be meaningfully addressed.

3. A framework for ethical writing

I have argued that the ethics of art is inevitably manifested in the artwork itself. Based on Haraway’s theory of ‘situated knowledge’, ethical responsibility lies in practice that interrogates who the artist is, what she says, and to whom she says it. This engagement with identity, positionality and meaning is a practical pathway for
creating work that answers ethical responsibilities. It situates the artist, her work, and the event she is writing about within a matrix of power hierarchies. An awareness of power and injustice can then extend beyond the subject of the work to encompass the ethical responsibilities invoked by its creation. The practical issues that arise from an ethical engagement with positionality and meaning are expanded in the following chapters.
4. POSITIONALITY AND MEANING

But on the morning of the 21st we learned that the following day the Jews would be leaving. All the Jews, without exception. Even the children, even the old, even the ill. Our destination? Nobody knew. We should be prepared for a fortnight of travel. For every person missing at roll-call, ten would be shot.

(Levi 20)

1. Positionality

I use the word ‘positionality’ to describe the conscious positioning of an artist within her work. This involves articulating the distinctions and the relationships between the maker, the made, and the world in which it exists. Positionality aims to reveal the embodied relationship between the knower and the known. It admits that knowledge can only be claimed from the particular perspective of a particular person at a particular moment. This concept is of particular significance in theatre based on real events where the creative voice potentially purports to speak for others.

Haraway’s ideas of ‘situated’ knowledge and Denzin’s principle of ‘thick’ description compel an artist to acknowledge the subjectivity of their vision. This includes an active appreciation of the power structures within which the artwork is created, and of the independent subjectivity of those whom the artwork may affect. This appreciation allows the artist to claim ethical responsibility for their work. By exposing itself as a particular, embodied and subjective claim, it allows for the validity of opposing claims. It envisages a network of intersecting relationships, or “webbed connections” (Haraway 30) in which actions have consequences.
Art is inherently subjective. Nelson writes that:

no matter how politically sophisticated or how analytically structured around the formal or iconographic preoccupations of art history, the motivation of an artist is personal. … You cannot be expressing truths felt by anyone but yourself. (155)

He acknowledges the unpopularity of concepts such as “authenticity and sincerity” (155) while arguing for the enduring and essential nature of the artist’s subjectivity. Even where artistic practice has developed as a form of knowledge production and research, it is “the personal and even intimate qualities of artistic inquiry [that] … account for its unique intelligence and access to universal experience” (McNiff 394).

To acknowledge the personal nature of art is to admit its “authorial ideology” (Nelson 65). These are the values embedded in the work that inevitably reflect the artist’s background, culture, class, education, ethnicity and experience. Ethical positionality implies more than an acknowledgment that art is an expression of one’s personal bias. It invokes the conscious interrogation and exposure of this bias, which Nelson describes as “the process of leavening our artistic judgments with something relative and referenced” (76). Where an artist positions herself within the work, she can assume responsibility for the bias of her own vision, and the impact it has on those who are implicated in it.

Positionality is a challenge to positivist objectivity described by Haraway as “the conquering gaze from nowhere [that] … makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not to be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (26). This is the objective voice that describes and defines. It inscribes a one-way relationship between the producer of knowledge and the subject of that knowledge. While objectivity is central to traditional scientific research, this ‘conquering gaze’ is also
conceptually consistent with artistic creativity. The artist knows her creation intimately and controls it completely. Murnane elucidates the depth of the artist’s knowledge in the context of writing fiction:

*The boy’s name was David.* … to write such a sentence was to lay claim to a level of truth that no historian and no biographer could ever lay claim to.

There was never a boy named David, the writer of the fiction might as well have written, but if you, the Reader, and I, the Writer, can agree that there might have been such a boy so named, then I undertake to tell you what you could never otherwise have learned about any boy of any name. (Murnane *A History of Books* 182)

The ‘conquering gaze’ then becomes a conduit of artistic expression through which the artist creates and authorizes her own truth. In fiction writing, part of the formal compact with the reader is that the authorizing voice describes people and events that only exist within the art work itself.

When this ‘conquering gaze’ is turned on actual people and events for the purposes of either science or art, its power to dominate others is realized. It is a colonizing force that dominates and silences even where it purports to give its subjects a voice. This is directly transferable to the production of art that ‘speaks about’ other people. Without positionality, through which the artist’s bias is exposed, the ‘conquering gaze’ is infallible. This is achieved through claiming authority, as described by hooks, and also through the invisibility of this authority, as pointed out by Haraway. An unidentified, disembodied voice of authority does not open itself to challenge or admit responsibility for the subjects it dominates.

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that has arisen in the social sciences in recent decades. Academic Leon Anderson describes it as linked to
“blurred genres of writing, a heightened self-reflexivity in ethnographic research, an increased focus on emotion … and the postmodern skepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims” (Anderson 373). Autoethnographer Caroline Ellis defines her process as “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political.” (The Ethnographic I xix). Autoethnographic methodology exposes the researcher/creator within the work, and opens up potential pathways through which positionality can be ethically addressed. For example, the play The Laramie Project by Moises Kaufman and the members of Tectonic Theater Project uses autoethnographical practice by including the experiences of the researcher/performers as a part of the story they uncover. This practice positions the creative voice and exposes its agenda in relation to the events that occurred in Laramie.

However, autoethnography as a practice is also vulnerable to the conquering voice of invisible objectivity. Academics Elissa Foster and Jay Baglia point out that despite its exposure of the research process, The Laramie Project still “appeals to the assumptions of positivism: that there is an objective truth” (133). In writing about autoethnographic trauma studies, Sophie Tamas identifies the disjuncture between her experience, and the process of writing about it: “we are talking about being broken and undone. But our voices as we speak do not sound broken”. This is the effect of using a gaze or voice ‘from nowhere’ that is disembodied, dominating, authoritative and unchallengeable, even when it is your own. For Tamas, the disjuncture forces her to split her awareness of herself, and be both colonizer and colonized object. She warns of the consequences:

… my sane, readable account of loss may reinforce the expectation that our trauma ought to make sense … I do not think realizing we are utterly lost and
broken necessarily causes despair. What breaks us is the impression that everyone else isn’t. (Tamas)

This is the illusion of wholeness and authority that the ‘conquering gaze’ maintains. Tamas here exposes the double danger of such infallible certainty. It dominates and defines by ‘speaking for’ its subject, and denying its subject any autonomy. This relates to an ethical responsibility towards the subject. But Tamas points out the broader ramifications of the ‘conquering gaze’: it presents itself as the only meaningful way to engage with a subject. It creates an illusion of certainty that denies our experience of what it is to be human (Bauman 32). It promotes an impossible ideal against which humanity can only fail.

McEvoy, in writing about Cixous’ *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, describes a different approach to ethical positionality: “the representation of the … other might only be possible through suppression of the creative-writing self” (211). He quotes Cixous:

> it’s the question of the word placing itself on that which would otherwise be only silence and death … Can a poet permit him or herself, and does s/he have the force to speak about that which has been reduced to silence? Wouldn’t this be blasphemy? Isn’t it a necessity? (214)

This is the central ethical paradox faced by artists who choose to create works about real events. It is impossible to take the place of and speak for others. Yet it is equally impossible to remain blind to and silent about traumatic events in which our culture is complicit. The artist must navigate between these two mutually exclusive impossibilities to find an ethical pathway. *The Laramie Project* makes explicit the process of speaking for others, while in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, Cixous chooses to actively repress her creative voice in order to make space for the immigrants whose
stories the theatre piece aimed to tell: “the persona of Cixous … ran the risk of overshadowing the experiences and anonymous stories” (McEvoy 217). Cixous demonstrates an approach of retreat and chooses to express her position by exposing the competing ethical responsibilities within the work itself, for example, through a series of questions in the program that challenge her impulse to create the work and highlight the ethical paradox on which it was built. While the two productions demonstrate very different approaches to ethical positionality, each acknowledges the subjectivity of the artist/creator in a relationship with that of the people who are represented in the work.

In an interview with Carole-Ann Upton, Sepinuck states “I would like to see my own life in each person’s story and I haven’t lived through any of those experiences … but I know what it’s like to be a daughter … I know what it’s like to do things I regret” (106). Here she homes in on the essence of positionality, which is a respectful awareness both of the connections and the distance between one’s own experience and those of one’s subjects. The ethical path to an artist’s claim to knowing another’s experience is in acknowledging that it is unknowable.

2. Creating meaning through theatre

Meaning is produced through a constellation of circumstances that are mutable, contextual and highly individual. An artist’s creative work has no fixed or inherent meaning. Rather, meaning is created in the minds of the individuals who receive the work through a network of inter-related factors. The language, age, education, socio-economic status, cultural background, and experience of the receiver, combined with context, time and place, create a cocktail of influences that render each person’s reception of an artwork unique. This effect could be heightened in theatre
based on real events, where audience members may already have their own relationship to the events or people being depicted. Janelle Reinelt describes documentary theatre spectators as “co-producers” who create meaning relationally (10).

Despite the slippery process of interpretation, meanings are regularly drawn from artworks for useful discussion. However, to apply an ethical standard to meaning appears to infringe on an artist’s creative freedom. It suggests a kind of moral straitjacket in which certain messages, responses or interpretations are right and others are wrong. I argue that examining the ethical ramifications of meaning is not that simple, nor is it about censorship. Rather, it is about encouraging artists to identify the vulnerabilities their work exposes or exploits, acknowledge corresponding responsibilities, and act on them.

Theatre based on real events is usually a process of making meaning of those events. Verbatim theatre and tribunal plays are often intended to make complex social and legal issues graspable (Derbyshire 202). The process of meaning-making may be through narrative, which Josselson describes as “a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life” (33). Theatre is an embodied form of meaning-making, in which contradictions, gaps and silences can become a signifying part of the narrative. The fragmentation of linear story becomes another way of creating meaning that acknowledges personal narrative as relational, ongoing, unfinished and transitional (Langellier). Postmodern tropes are therefore equally at home in theatre based on real events, in which fragmentation, deconstruction and reconstruction, contingency and uncertainty are expressed through “a discourse composed of competing narratives” (Raphael 134).
When theatre is based on real events, the meaning produced in the minds of its audience attaches to issues, events and people outside the artwork. Unlike fictional theatre, which creates its own world of meaning with an infinite spectrum of relationships to the world outside, theatre based on real events creates specific meanings with very tangible connections. A play about a particular event will produce attitudes and understandings in its audience not only about the play, but about that event: “Spectators come … believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand” (Reinelt 9). This expected link with reality, even in the most obviously abstracted, constructed and mediated work of art, extends the artist’s reach beyond the boundaries of their art. The audience creates an understanding of a person or event based on what they have witnessed. In this process of understanding, the theatrical experience becomes an actual experience of that person or event: “The experience of documentary is connected to reality … and is in fact constitutive of the reality it seeks” (Reinelt 7). The theatre piece also becomes part of a permanent cultural record of that person or event in the form of a published script, reviews and critical commentary.

The artist’s responsibility for their work attaches to this extension of influence. This is not to say that artists are responsible for each audience member’s perception or individual interpretation. It is to acknowledge the artist as an instigator who is responsible for her provocations. The artist’s responsibility for the work extends to the attitudes and understandings about the person or event that the work inspires.

The ethical implications of this responsibility are inevitably linked to where the artists and the subjects of the work identify themselves within existing power hierarchies. A theatre piece about a celebrity, a politician or a powerful
businessperson, for example, will be part of a broader discourse and contribute a proportionally small amount to existing cultural understandings of that person. Where the piece deals with people or groups who have little control over how they are perceived, or no existing public presence at all, the artist’s contribution to their public identity has proportionally more weight and therefore more significant implications for those who are being portrayed. Typically, these are the people and groups featured in theatre based on real events: minorities, victims and perpetrators of crime, and those who have suffered disenfranchisement or trauma. This specific responsibility can then be extrapolated into a more general responsibility that artists bear when they choose to represent the disenfranchised and the vulnerable.

The artist’s responsibility for the understandings and attitudes her work engenders is not abstract in theatre based on real events. Much theatre about specific issues of social injustice is intended to inspire not only understanding, but a pathway to action (Grehan *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship* 137). This may be made explicit by the artists (Fitzpatrick 66), or be implicit in the underpinning ideology of the work. When the audience believes they may confidently act on the understandings they have gained through theatre, the artist’s work becomes manifest in the world.

3. Audience and artist identity

The meaning an artist communicates through her work is strongly shaped by who receives it and how they interpret it. While meaning-making is contingent and individual, it remains useful in the context of theatre based on real events to consider how cultural codes and group identities affect the meaning audiences take from a work. This is particularly relevant in forms of theatre that expressly deal with identified groups who define themselves, or are defined by the work, through a shared
culture, circumstance or experience. Audience members who identify within the
group that is the subject of the work will interpret meaning differently to those who
don’t. For example, the verbatim play *Cruising* by Alecky Blythe presents an aged
pensioner’s search for love. Verbatim theatre academic Antoinette Moses observed
that younger audiences “found it very funny” (251), but audiences the same age as the
lead character responded with no laughter. It may be inferred that younger audiences
found the lead character’s quest for love “strange and amusing” (Moses 251) because
it was contrary to their existing understanding of old people. Older audiences, on the
other hand, found no such comedic reversal of expectations.

Divergent interpretations of a work become more problematic when European
theatre practice attempts to engage with non-European migrants, refugees or
disenfranchised cultural groups who have had collective experiences of displacement
and violence. In these cases the entire cultural framework in which a work is
interpreted becomes implicated. Meaning is interpreted through dominant codes,
values and assumptions that re-inscribe existing power hierarchies. The experience of
disenfranchised groups is then only seen and interpreted through accepted ways of
knowing. The Indigenous Australian experience, for example, risks being presented in
the theatre only within a pre-existing agenda of reconciliation. This is set by
predominantly white artists working within a white tradition for white audiences:
“Indigenous theatre is consistently reduced to a form of testimony of oppression for
non-Indigenous critics and audiences to witness as a gesture of good faith” (Casey
133). Theatre created by non-Indigenous artists in a European theatre tradition can
only validate the Indigenous experience within its own cultural framework. Artistic
Director of ILBIJERRI Theatre Company Rachael Maza poses the question of the
artist’s identity in relation to Indigenous stories as an ethical one:
Who is making stories, who has control over the stories that are being perpetuated, and who should have? What is right, and what is our right as Aboriginal people to say, ‘No, we need to have control over that mythology and those stories and narratives’? (qtd. in Watts)

Michael Balfour refers to the dangers of “narratives of persecution” (1) which reinforce existing power inequalities. Representations of violence that are intended to validate those who experienced it risk being part of an ongoing narrative that casts members of the affected group as victims. Balfour notes that this victim narrative can be reinterpreted without changing the narrative itself by restricting the audience to those who shared the experience (8). This approach is applicable to theatre created in the context of social welfare or health projects, but not practical for theatre intended for public audiences.

The story of a person’s experience is intertwined with her sense of self, particularly within marginalized groups who have experienced upheaval or trauma (Thompson). To tell someone’s story is therefore to take control not only of their narrative but their identity: “Playing with stories becomes a play with the bodies of the participants” (Thompson 156). Maza identifies the telling of Indigenous stories as a political act of self-determination, and warns of the harm caused by the appropriation of stories and culture by non-Indigenous artists “with little or no understanding of the true significance or meaning of the culture that’s being appropriated” (qtd. in Watts). I argue that it is not only the appropriation of content, but the imposition of a system of cultural interpretation that reinforces inequality. It reinforces existing structures and narratives that privilege those in power.

An ethical awareness of identity and the cultural framework in which identity is formed must also include an awareness of language. Language is the medium
through which identity may be expressed, and meaning-making only occurs through a shared understanding of it. Vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and accent within language are fine markers of identity that influence how meaning is made and received. These markers attach to social power structures and hierarchies. When working cross-culturally, it is important to be aware of the vulnerability of other languages to the powerful international hegemony of English. While other languages may work similarly, they aren’t the same.

Moses argues that ethical issues in verbatim theatre arise where the intentions of the playwright diverge from those of the subjects or participants (273). Clearly, a theatre work will be ethically compromised if the artists creating the work and those who are contributing its material don’t share a common understanding of the work’s aims. However, a work exists independently of the intentions behind it. Also, there will be members of an identified group who may not be involved in the creation of the work at all, yet still be affected by the meanings that work contributes to a cultural understanding of who they are. It is the cultural framework of the artist and audience that determines what the work means. It is their identity conceived in the broadest sense – cultural, socio-economic, sexual, national, experiential – that contributes most significantly to how meaning is made. This becomes an even more vital consideration where a group’s identity is made manifest in its stories, for example through shared experiences of ongoing disenfranchisement, war, or a traumatic event. I argue that ethical issues are most crucially exposed not by intentions, but by the alignment or divergence of identity in relation to the work: of the artists, represented groups and audiences.
4. Violence and trauma

Events of trauma and violence may come to identify those who shared the experience as a defined group. These events, and the groups who experienced them, frequently attract the interest of artists. While bloodshed has been a widespread and longstanding element of theatre since Ancient Greece, it’s particularly pronounced in theatre based on real events, which retains a strong appearance of being driven at least partly by a socio-political agenda. For example, the now disbanded Sydney-based documentary theatre company Version 1.0 described itself on its Vimeo website as making “performances that are both political and intensely personal, based on strong research, that engage with significant political and social issues” (“Versiononepointzero”). *The Laramie Project*, a play about a violent murder in the town of Laramie, evolved from an investigation into “How is Laramie different from the rest of the country and how is it similar?” (Kaufman vi). The play *Beyond the Neck* concerns the aftermath of the mass shooting at Port Arthur, Tasmania in 1996.

Playwright Tom Holloway writes that his experience of the event “100 km away from what was happening … brought up things that I needed to share, to know that I wasn’t alone” (4). Underpinning these explicit agendas is a common drive to make meaning of violence and the resulting trauma through the theatrical form.

Postmodern performance artists like Stelarc and Marina Abramovic have influenced a trend towards actuality rather than representation in the theatre. Freeman describes “exposure of artifice” (*New Performance/New Writing* 20) as one of the defining projects of postmodernism in the theatre. The postmodern preference for the real over the representational is expressed in Abramovic’s work in a focus on physical presence, which sometimes includes physically violent events taking place in the performance space. This deliberate manufacture of genuine violence has become a
postmodern theatre trope that is employed in theatre based on real events. However, where Abramovic’s performance art focuses on the present, theatre based on real events is intended to connect audiences with specific events that have already occurred, usually experienced by people other than the performers in another time and place. For example Levad, co-created by actress Yoni Prior and director Barrie Kosky in 1993, was based on the experiences of a Jewish actress in the years prior to World War II. In it, solo performer Prior attempted to connect the audience with past suffering through actual suffering on stage:

   By this blurring or bleeding of the lines between the actual and the fictional, might the audience be brought to read the impact of the actual (historical)/fictional forces represented on the fictional character by responding to the impact of the actual/material forces on the present actor?

   (Prior 126)

This provocation suggests that an audience ‘reading’ or witnessing trauma is central to the project. This witnessing of actual acts of suffering and endurance is also highly valued by some practitioners and critics outside of theatre based on real events. Critic John McCallum praises The War of the Roses specifically for “what [the director] put those actors through”; director Tom Wright defends his graphic depictions of violence onstage by saying “sometimes you must reveal the human condition in all its maggot-ridden glory. … A true theatrical experience involves your body responding in some way” (qtd. in Blake). Lisa Fitzpatrick describes a production of Ashes to Ashes by Harold Pinter, directed by Vahid Rahbani in Toronto in 2007 (59). Audience members were abused by the performers in an attempt to give them “a vicarious affective experience of intimidation and loss of control” (66) that would connect them with a specific (though fictional) violent event situated within the Holocaust. She
argues that an “aesthetic of startling” and “evocation of fear” (63) is powerful because it engages the audience as active witnesses to violence who are then compelled to respond, act and change. This position assumes that forcing a visceral, physical response from the audience is desirable, and that this response will lead to particular action.

I find this position problematic first of all because it resembles bullying: the theatre-maker uses her position of relative power in having the floor to physically intimidate the audience into agreement. While purporting to challenge the audience’s passivity, this approach to theatre continues to rely on it the same way that conventional dramatic theatre does. While audiences may be forced into a visceral, physical response, they are not invited to actually interfere in the action that is intentionally making them uncomfortable. This is another crucial point of departure from Abramovic’s performance art, in which the witnessing public may be invited to participate. For example, in the original performance of The Lips of Thomas, Abramovic’s performance of self-mutilation would continue until a member of the public stopped it (Harpin). In the theatre, audience interference with a performance is generally discouraged. In addition, it can be argued that enthusiastic engagement with violence in art encourages rather than mitigates actual violence in the community (Virilio), and that aggression and violence are not effective tools for communication in the theatre in any case (Hermanis). There is also the danger of “remaining within the traumatic event and repeating it endlessly” (Kaplan 136). Artists dealing with traumatic events that they didn’t experience directly are at risk of “reveling in the material s/he objects to” (Van Alphen, qtd. in Kaplan 113). Those concerns aside, if theatre is a medium through which real traumatic events may be processed to produce meaning, then to focus on the violence is to miss the point.
Cultural theorist E. Ann Kaplan writes that the experience of trauma is one of emotion and affect that only gains meaning through context and a process of translation, or “finding ways to make meaning out of, and to communicate, catastrophes that happen to others as well as to oneself” (19). She identifies art as a means through which survivors of direct trauma and members of their wider community can work through its pain (19). Art can then be a process which contextualizes the traumatic experience in order to give it meaning. She warns against ‘empty’ empathy: “empathy elicited by images of suffering provided without any context or background knowledge” (93), which can be easily forgotten or dismissed. This quality of invoking ‘empty’ empathy could also be described as sensationalism, which is defined by its highly emotional and usually violent content. In a study of the historical origins of sensationalism, historian Joy Wiltenburg points out that provocatively visceral, emotional material becomes “difficult to contest … without aligning oneself with horrific violence” (1397). A focus only on emotions or sensations of empathy “presumes a like-minded community” (Wiltenburg 1380) and so re-affirms rather than challenges existing power structures: “representation generally is a means of exercising power – naming and controlling the field of discourse where social order is articulated – sensationalism intensifies this process” (Wiltenburg 1380).

The value in witnessing trauma, either as artist or audience, is then not in recreating the essence of the violence that causes it, but in engaging with its context and causes. This is not to say that it must be done through conventional dramatic narrative. Paget argues that documentary theatre is inherently drawn to non-naturalistic forms (“The ‘Broken Tradition’” 225) and describes it as “a theatre of interruption” (229) that is consciously reflexive and presentational (228). Kaplan says
that the narrative of trauma does not necessarily require a linear sequence as “Fragments, hallucinations and flashbacks are modes that trauma often adopts” (65). She argues for engagement with context and cause through an aesthetic process of distancing through which an audience can offer “attention to the situation, as against attention merely to the subject’s individual suffering, and this positioning thus opens the text out to larger social and political meaning” (125).

5. Responsibility and guilt

Courts tease out a linear narrative of cause and effect in order to assign guilt. Where individuals have experienced violence and war, their personal narratives may seek certainty and comfort in a narrative of blame that calls to account those responsible for injustice (Thompson). However, to assign definitive real-world guilt in the theatre where it hasn’t or can’t be assigned in court is to gesture into the void. Courts impose direct consequences on those it finds guilty, whereas the consequences of a verdict via theatre are indirect, unpredictable and unquantifiable. The laws of evidence and due process that safeguard fairness don’t apply in the theatre. To take advantage of their absence to prosecute an agenda of blame in the theatre is to reiterate rather than expose injustice. Apart from being ethically questionable, theatre that blames individuals for specific crimes or broader injustices could risk legal action in the form of defamation and contempt of court. The best that theatre based on real events can achieve is a deeper understanding of what has happened, and to open up a more nuanced conversation about it. I argue that the value of examining crimes, human rights issues or broader injustices through the medium of theatre then lies in theatre’s capacity to engage with these issues in a way that governments and legal
institutions cannot: with imagination, empathy, and emotion (Derbyshire). If creative engagement is the aim, then to focus on blame is reductive and limiting.

In writing about war crime trials, philosophy academic Justine McGill warns: … to require that an individual accept personal responsibility can be a way to quarantine responsibility, thus protecting other individuals, and the society to which they belong … from having to assume their own individual and collective responsibilities. (184)

The temptation for theatre makers may also be to divert responsibility for injustice away from themselves, and thereby place the artist in a position of uncontestable privilege. This diversion can emerge as a tendency to blame the audience: for passivity in the face of injustice (Fitzpatrick); for complicity in it (Campbell); or for laziness more generally (McCallum). But if an artist can only express her own truth, then the only blame she can truly ethically assign is in the responsibility she claims for herself.

6. Conclusion

In the postmodern world, it’s problematic to insist on prescribed ethical conduct in any field of endeavor. As Bauman states, “the authorities we may entrust are all contested, and none seems powerful enough to give us the degree of reassurance we seek” (21). We live in an age of cynicism where “little can be taken seriously and nothing can be taken at face value” (Winlow 407). Without a strong unifying ideological force, like religion, any attempt to embed ethical process risks being reduced to simplistic directives that invite superficial, cynical engagement. This is particularly pronounced in art, where the freedom to challenge authority is understood as inviolable. In any case, no set of rules could possibly apply to all
scenarios in theatre making, nor do I believe that ethical engagement with art is ever reducible to a simple case of one course of action being right and another wrong. So I resist the temptation to prescribe what I believe to be ethical ways of approaching meaning-making in theatre based on real events.

Rather, I invite theatre makers writing about real events to apply an ethical awareness to their work as well as a creative and aesthetic one. This awareness accepts that artists are responsible for the work they create, and understands that these responsibilities are particularly tangible in theatre based on real events. It acknowledges the powerful effect of identity on understanding and meaning-making, particularly when dealing with groups of people who have been marginalized or experienced traumatic events. It interrogates the value of focusing on trauma, violence and blame. With this awareness, the artist finds active expression of her own integrity, as described by Nelson in the provocation: “does this accord with what I want to do, who I am, and what I am capable of thinking, feeling and giving out?” (77).
5. OTHERS

It’s not the despair, Laura. I can take the despair. It’s the hope I can’t stand.

(Clockwise)

1. Introduction

Writing theatre based on real events raises ethical issues that are manifested within the work. I have selected nine play scripts to which my ideas about these issues may be applied, and which contextualize the way I approached them in the play I wrote for this thesis, Monologue for a Murderer. These plays, written between 1991 and 2012, share significant characteristics with Monologue for a Murderer that enable a useful comparative analysis of ethical challenges and how they are met. The plays are written for mainstream theatre audiences and are about actual cases of murder or accused murder. While the treatment of the cases varies from fictionalized to documentary style, each of these plays is demonstrably connected to a particular crime by specific details within it, and the writers have chosen these crimes with a stated or implied intention of attempting to understand them. The plays, in chronological order of production, are: The Boys by Gordon Graham (1991); Blackrock by Nick Enright (1995); The Laramie Project by Moises Kaufman and the members of Tectonic Theater Project (2000); Aalst by Duncan McLean (2005); Checklist for an Armed Robber by Vanessa Bates (2005); Criminology by Lally Katz and Tom Wright (2007); Beyond the Neck by Tom Holloway (2007);
The Boys was written by Gordon Graham and first produced by the Griffin Theatre Company in 1991. The play is about three brothers who commit a random rape and murder the night that one of them is released from prison. It interweaves two dramatic narratives: the events of the day leading up to the crime, and the period of days and weeks afterwards as the mother and partners of the perpetrators deal with the fallout. The play is based on the rape and murder of Anita Cobby in Sydney in 1986. In that case, five men stole a car, picked up a woman they didn’t know from the side of the road, raped her, beat her, killed her and left her body in a paddock. They were arrested in the weeks following the murder. Three of the men were brothers, and one of those brothers was a prison escapee (Murphy v R). Graham has said “It’s very fictionalized, but it was a response to my own horror and the general horror [of the murder]” (qtd. in Litchfield). Writing the play was an attempt “to answer the question of how people could get from Point A to Point B in the space of a day or so, starting off already on the edge … but what combination of circumstances that particular day got them to that point” (qtd. in Litchfield).

1 I attended the following productions of these plays: The Laramie Project directed by Adam Mitchell, produced by Black Swan Theatre Company at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), 4 April 2007; Checklist for an Armed Robber directed by Chris Bendall, produced by Deckchair Theatre Company at Victoria Hall, Fremantle, 28 March 2009; staged reading of The Damned directed by Andrew Lewis, produced by Playwriting Australia at Parramatta Riverside Theatre, 19 March 2011; and Beautiful One Day directed by Eamon Flack, produced by ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and Belvoir at Whitehorse Centre, 2 May 2015. I watched a video recording of Criminology, directed by Rosemary Myers, produced by Arena Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre at the CUB Malthouse in August 2007. I read the published script versions of the remaining four plays (The Boys, Blackrock, Aalst and Beyond the Neck).
Blackrock was first produced by Sydney Theatre Company in 1995. It was developed from the theatre-in-education play A Property of the Clan, which was produced by Freewheels Theatre-in-Education Company in 1992. Both plays were written by Nick Enright, with Brian Joyce the commissioning director of A Property of the Clan and David Berthold director and dramaturg of Blackrock. The plays follow the events in a community when a fourteen-year-old girl is raped and murdered at a surf club party. A Property of the Clan was created in response to the actual rape and murder of fourteen-year-old Leigh Leigh at a surf club party in Stockton NSW, following extensive research in the community. Enright claims that “my concern has never been with the facts … the concern of the play was why any group of boys abuse any girl, and how they came to do it” (Enright vii).

The Laramie Project was first produced in 2000 by the Denver Center Theatre Company in association with Tectonic Theater Project in the USA. This play is a response to the beating and murder of Matthew Shepard in the town of Laramie, Wyoming in 1998. Members of the Tectonic Theater Project interviewed Laramie residents over a period of eighteen months following the murder in order to “learn more about why Matthew Shepard was murdered, about what happened that night, about the town of Laramie. … How is Laramie different from the rest of the country, and how is it similar?” (Kaufman vi). The play presents the resulting interviews within a performance of the interview process.

Aalst was first produced in 2005 in Ghent, Belgium by the theatre company Victoria. It was written by Pol Heyvaert and Dimitri Verhulst. It was subsequently adapted into English by Duncan McLean and produced by the National Theatre of Scotland in association with Victoria and Tramway. The play presents the inquisitorial trial of two parents who murdered their young children. It is based on the
case of a Belgian couple who murdered their seven-year-old son and two-year-old daughter in 1999. The play script comes from “statements and interviews relating to the crime, principally … [from] the trial in 2001 as well as press articles and material from a television documentary about the case” (Young 76). Heyveart has said that “about a third” of the play is invented. In his introduction to the English version, McLean quotes Gary Lewis’ idea that “maybe art has a responsibility to try and understand things we can’t get at any other way – that’s what it’s for.”

Checklist for an Armed Robber by Vanessa Bates was first produced by Vitalstatistix Theatre in 2005. The play interweaves a story of the Moscow theatre hostage crisis of 2002 with a story of the failed robbery of a bookstore in Newcastle NSW that occurred on the same weekend. The play was developed from two newspaper reports of these events. Chris Bendall, director of the second and third productions of the play, writes “The play examines the way terrorism impacts on the lives of the innocent, while simultaneously seeking to understand what motivates these acts” (viii).

Criminology by Lally Katz and Tom Wright was produced by Arena Theatre Company and Malthouse Theatre in 2007. The play is about a self-obsessed, manipulative law student who, with the knowledge of her best friend, makes a plan to kill herself and potentially someone else as well. She then murders her boyfriend by an overdose of heroin after a dinner party. The events of the play closely follow the case of Anu Singh who was convicted of manslaughter in 1997. Her friend Madhavi Rao was also charged in relation to the death but was eventually acquitted (R v Rao). In the foreword to the published version of the play, Tom Healey writes that “there is no attempt here to comment on the actual case … Just a wondering about what, between us, we have allowed our world to become” (2).
Beyond the Neck by Tom Holloway was first produced by Tasmania Performs and a Bit of Argy Bargy in 2007. The play is about a group of four strangers who converge on Port Arthur ten years after the mass murder of 35 people that occurred there in 1996. Each character’s relationship to the events of that day is revealed as their intertwined stories unfold. Holloway writes that the play is “not just about what happened” but that the event itself “brought up things that I needed to share, to know I wasn’t alone” (4).

The Damned by Reg Cribb was produced by Black Swan Theatre Company in 2011. The play follows the relationship between two disenfranchised teenage girls in a rural Western Australian town, and how they come to murder a friend. In 2006 there were two separate Western Australian cases in which teen girls conspired together to murder another. Neither Cribb nor Black Swan Theatre Company has publicly described the play as based on either of these cases. However, the setting and details within the story about the girls’ backgrounds and the murder itself connect the play specifically with the murder that occurred in Collie. Cribb says “it is the motives for these acts that prompted this particular writer to investigate and question further” (Cribb).

Beautiful One Day was a co-production by ILBIJERRI Theatre Company, Version 1.0 and Belvoir Theatre Company, first produced at Belvoir St Theatre in 2012. The play was developed by a collective of artists from those companies who “came together over a shared sense of outrage at the injustices surrounding the death in custody” that occurred on Palm Island in 2004 ("Beautiful One Day Education Resource Pack" 8). The play presents interviews and reports from various sources about the death of Mulrunji Doomagee and subsequent events, and also contextualizes it within a broader story of Palm Island and the performers’ actual relationship to it.
The play seeks “a way to turn anger into real understanding and new possibilities” ("Beautiful One Day Education Resource Pack" 8).

In looking at these plays, I will attempt to tease out how the writers deal with the ethical issues within the work. In previous chapters I outlined a framework on positionality and meaning that I will apply in order to assess whether and how an examination of this kind may be useful both in creating and responding to theatre based on real events. I will try not to label works or choices within them as either ‘ethical’ or ‘unethical,’ in favour of exposing the ethical issues and the implications of particular artistic choices.

2. Speaking for Others

These writers have chosen to write intimately about a criminal event of which they have no direct experience. When playwrights write about a real event, other people’s actual experiences will fall within the domain of their created world. These plays don’t silence those affected, invalidate their unique experiences or even necessarily represent them directly. But they do assume authority over stories that constitute part of other people’s lived experiences, and in mainstream subsidized theatre, they use a platform of substantial influence to do so. In this respect, the writers of these plays are speaking for other people. This exposes those people to the risk of misrepresentation. It may perpetuate injustice against them where they don’t have access to an equally powerful platform to speak for themselves. They are particularly vulnerable to ongoing injustice or misrepresentation if they are no longer alive. To write about events of which one doesn’t have direct experience is to appropriate someone else’s experience to create or support particular meanings about that event for the wider world. I believe this appropriation attaches to two somewhat
paradoxical ethical responsibilities: to honour the unknowability of those experiences that are being appropriated, and genuinely and rigorously to seek insight into them.

2.1 Positioning within the work

*Beautiful One Day* addresses this responsibility by explicitly positioning the performers, who are also the theatre makers, in relation to Mulrunji Doomagee’s death. The play begins with them introducing themselves and their actual relationships to Palm Island. The two non-Aboriginal performers, Paul Dwyer and Jane Phegan, speak of their experiences arriving at Palm Island for the first time. Rachael Maza tells of her family connection to Palm Island. Magdalena Blackley and Harry Reuben establish themselves as residents of Palm Island. Kylie Doomagee talks of her uncle, the young man who died. This formal and reflexive choice lays bare the ethical standpoint of the theatre makers. By highlighting the performers’ positions in relation to the story, their positions become an important part of the story. This is particularly significant here in a story about injustice. The power hierarchy on Palm Island and in Australia more generally is skewed heavily in favour of mainstream white Western culture. In writing about this play, journalist Nick Galvin points out that:

> Often the story that is shouted loudest and longest is the only one that gets heard. … If the storyteller happens to be a police force, a government, or an entire race, then their version will likely drown out all others.

By devoting time to the performers’ identities, the play emphasizes the importance of positionality in speaking of the hierarchy. The story of Palm Island is one of injustice and suffering, told from the point of view of those who align themselves with the victims. An ethical perspective is one that acknowledges the power structures within which knowledge is claimed. It is also one that owns its partiality. The exposure of
the performers’ bias is both confronting and disarming. It creates an intriguing paradox in which the claims made in the play are simultaneously inviolable and completely vulnerable to challenge: they are the truth as experienced by those with a declared personal relationship to the events, both absolute and partisan.

_The Laramie Project_, created twelve years earlier, pioneered the documentary style of theatre in which the process of researching and investigating the story is part of the final performance. As with _Beautiful One Day_, the performers in the original production also participated in creating the play. They played themselves onstage and their observations and reflections are included in the resulting script, alongside the observations and reflections of Laramie residents. Moises Kaufman writes of his interest in “hav[ing] a dialogue both on how the theater speaks and how it is created” (vi), inspired by Bertolt Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’ approach of reporting rather than enacting drama. This aesthetic decision is also an answer to the ethical issues raised by speaking for other people. Breaking open the research process attaches significance to the identities and experiences of those who were directly involved. Including the researchers as characters in the story acknowledges that they play a part in mediating and shaping the story. The responsibility they take in asking the questions then selecting and reporting the responses is exposed and deliberately emphasized. Laramie residents’ desire for integrity in how their story is told is part of the story itself: “say it right, say it correct. I think you have a responsibility to do that” (60); “Just deal with what is true” (66); “You need to do your best to say it correct” (100). The mediatory role of the theatre makers is illustrated in an explanation of what it’s like to be a witness in court: “lawyers questioning you from this angle but the answers need to be funneling this way, to the jury. So what you have to do is establish a funneling system” (97). Courts depend on the accuracy and integrity of witnesses.
Similarly, *The Laramie Project* depends on accuracy and integrity to back up its claims that we are all implicated in what happened to Matthew Shepard in Laramie: “we need to own this crime. I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this” (60). Positioning the theatre makers within the work and acknowledging the mediated process supports the ethical integrity of this claim.

2.2 Telling a story

*Beyond the Neck* and *Checklist for an Armed Robber* do not expose the research process in the same way. However, the ethical responsibilities raised in speaking for other people are addressed in the narrative form these plays share. Both plays use the device of consciously and continuously shifting the position of the authorial voice in relation to the story. The performers move fluidly between narrating the action from a perspective outside the characters, to narrating from the perspective of the characters, to embodying the characters. The fluidity gradually coalesces in each play to dramatic scenes in which the characters communicate with each other, rather than with the audience. This form highlights how positionality shapes story. It makes clear to the audience that the performers are not these characters, but are representations of them shaped by narrative and authorship. This ethical engagement with positionality through form then becomes a central theme in the pieces. In his discussion of *Beyond the Neck*, academic Noel Maloney describes how “direct address is foregrounded as a means of investigating the nature of storytelling itself. Telling is both subject and strategy” (166).

*Aalst* also draws attention to constructed storytelling, but within the dramatic enactment of a consistent narrative fiction. The ethical responsibilities raised by speaking for others are then addressed implicitly within the dramatic action of the play, rather than explicitly through form. The performers play parents accused of
murdering their two young children. A disembodied judge’s voice interrogates them about their past and the events leading up to the murders, as though in an inquisitorial trial. From very early on, it becomes clear that the story being told is a construction, through a flow of questions, responses and counter-responses shaped not necessarily by objective reality, but through the active participation of the judge and the defendants:

[JUDGE:] Robberies. Do you recall how many you committed?

MICHAEL: About thirty.

[JUDGE:] About thirty, you say? Let’s not get carried away. I counted twenty-one, to be precise. (McLean 3-4)

The mutable, contingent, hierarchical nature of reality is dramatized, which invites audiences to view this story as a construction in itself. Academic Stuart Young describes how the play “draw[s] attention to the methods of construction … [it] cleverly and self-consciously manipulates the audience to highlight the issue of the relationship between representation and reality” (76). The performers are not the murderers, this story is not their story; it is a story crafted for effect in the same way as the characters craft their story within it. The thematic focus on power, identity and how they work to construct narrative engages directly with the ethics of speaking for other people.

2.3 Crossing cultures

Aalst and Checklist for an Armed Robber both feature characters based on people who spoke languages other than English. The parents in the Belgian murder case were Belgian and spoke in Flemish. In the original production of the play, more than half of the couple’s dialogue was taken verbatim from media and court sources (Young 76). Checklist for an Armed Robber presents a theatrical enactment of the
Moscow theatre massacre. Most of the hostages would have spoken Russian, and the rebels who held them would have spoken Russian to the hostages and Chechen to each other. The issue of language translation or cultural difference is not explicitly addressed in either play. *Checklist for an Armed Robber* was written in Australian English for Australian audiences. The playwright specifies that the Russian characters’ voices “were not written with Russian accents in mind but rather the actors’ own accent with the intention of making them almost part of the watching audience” (Bates ix). Linguistic difference and cultural difference is here deliberately made invisible to Australian audiences. The effect is both to avoid ethical engagement with difference and to invisibly re-inscribe English-speaking cultural dominance.

This inscription of culture within language would be clearer to Australian audiences in the English version of *Aalst*. The English adaptation was written by a Scottish playwright. Duncan McLean states that his intention was to “recreate the original version in English”, thereby revealing a reliance on “notions of equivalence and fidelity that have long been discredited in translation studies” (Young 76). Translator May-Brit Akerholt writes that “Translators must create a language which captures … the original … without sacrificing the otherness that *is* the original” (19). I argue that capturing ‘otherness’ takes on a more significant ethical significance when representing actual people whose experiences are defined by time, place and the language in which they occurred and were first expressed. It is a challenge to convey the sense of languages other than English and the fluid, contingent nature of translation to English-speaking theatre audiences, but not an impossible one. *The Secret River* by Andrew Bovell, based on Kate Grenville’s novel and produced by Sydney Theatre Company in 2013, features characters who only speak Dharug; *Ngapartji Ngapartji* by Scott Rankin, created with Trevor Jamieson and Alex Kelly
and first produced in 2005 incorporates the teaching of language; *La Dernier Caravansérail* featured translations in the program that were written in pencil as “a mark of respect, a kind of openness to reinscription and error, to correction and doubt. The pencil gestured towards a refusal to replace the others’ words” (McEvoy 222).

McLean’s approach aims for neutrality, yet imprints the play with Scottishness that is betrayed in phrases such as “wee girl” (12) and “shitey wallpaper” (16). Translation theorist Lawrence Venuti warns that “The repression of translation … conceals the inevitable inscription of … cultural values … yet simultaneously treats English as the transparent vehicle of universal truth” (331). Both *Aalst* and *Checklist for an Armed Robber* attempt to downplay this cultural inscription of English-speaking dominance. To acknowledge the forces of language and translation is to be aware of difference, cultural identity and class, all of which are significant factors within the events depicted by these plays and for the people who experienced them. Neither of these plays addresses this ethical challenge.

2.4 Dramatic narrative

*The Boys, Blackrock, Criminology* and *The Damned* primarily represent the event in a dramatic enacted narrative. *The Boys* and *The Damned* intertwine two narratives that occur across two different time periods. *Criminology* uses non-naturalistic dream sequences and direct-to-audience monologues by the main character, speaking from within the action. The published version of *Criminology* also features monologues from other characters reporting and commenting on the action retrospectively, as though to a court or the media, but these monologues don’t appear in the video version of the original production. These are the only deviations within
the four plays from a chronological dramatic enactment of scenes relating to the event.

This theatrical treatment of real events makes it most challenging for the writer to engage effectively with the ethical responsibilities in speaking for other people. This is the theatrical equivalent of Haraway’s “conquering gaze from nowhere” (26) that assumes authority without exposing itself to challenge. The writer’s voice and bias becomes invisible and inviolable. This is of particular relevance where the writer is claiming authority over events and experiences in which they had no part. They may omit, exaggerate or change elements to suit their agenda, none of which is declared. The audience is invited to accept this version as a coherent whole. This is the essence of artistic creation, but where the creation has an evident and necessary relationship to a real event, the responsibilities of the artist take on particular significance: for those directly involved in that event, for the audience who desires to discover more about it, and for the artists who purport to know.

3. Representing Trauma and Violence

Each of these plays was inspired by an event that included at least one violent death. The Boys, Blackrock, The Laramie Project and The Damned are all inspired by cases of violent murder. Aalst deals with the double murder of two small children. Beyond the Neck tells stories of the aftermath of the mass murder of 35 people. Checklist for an Armed Robber features an act of terrorism that resulted in the deaths of 130 hostages and 44 Chechen rebels. The violent death that inspired Criminology resulted in a murder charge and a conviction of manslaughter. The death in custody featured in Beautiful One Day resulted in a series of coronial reports and trials, the latest of which yielded an inconclusive result. I have argued that choosing to write
about these actual episodes of violence, suffering, death and loss inspires an ethical responsibility to honour the gravity of what occurred. The postmodern artistic freedom that declares all social boundaries ripe for challenge is yet bound by a social order that condemns the deliberate taking of life, except in the most extraordinary of circumstances. We accept that the focus on these episodes of violent death is inspired by a need to better understand them, underpinned by a broader social imperative towards a world where such episodes of violence may be reduced or avoided altogether. Ethical commitment to this imperative is manifested in a focus on the circumstances that produce violence, rather than the violence itself.

Most of the plays address the ethical issues of dealing with traumatic violence by a framing device that removes it from the dramatic action of the play. This opens up the space to acknowledge the seriousness and extent of its effects, while maintaining distance from the violence itself. The framing device contextualizes the violence, which enables ethical engagement with its contributing circumstances. It also avoids the pitfalls of sensationalism and voyeurism by directing focus away from graphic details that don’t support that ethical engagement.

3.1 Framing within the action

*The Boys* frames the violence of a brutal rape and murder by dramatizing the events in the afternoon and evening prior to the crime, and its aftermath. The focus is on the circumstances that produced the crime, not on the actual enactment of it. The crime itself is not presented onstage nor is it directly described. The victim and her family and friends are absent from the story. The extent of the brutality is revealed only in a handful of oblique references to it made by characters who weren’t there: “They found that poor girl” (Graham 45); “Only somebody mad could do that” (46); and “you never seen anything like it, what they done to her. They just ripped her
apart” (51). These references allow the audience to comprehend the extreme gravity of what occurred without dwelling on detail. The violent impulses within the male characters are evident in the gradual build up of aggression towards each other and their partners.

3.2 Framing in a report

*Blackrock, The Laramie Project, Aalst, Beyond the Neck* and *Beautiful One Day* all frame violent events by presenting them in the form of a witness report. The device of reporting the violence distances the audience from it, but also allows access to a substantial level of detail. As the event is mediated by a witness, the details of the trauma and violence are framed by the perspective of the reporter and the intention that drives their report. This intention then gives meaning to the violence.

*Blackrock* is the only play among these that includes the crime within the timespan of the dramatic narrative, but like *The Boys*, it deliberately keeps the crime itself and the victim offstage. The nature of the crime is initially sketched in a brief summary of a news report: “Someone bashed her with a rock or something” (Enright 29). The rape becomes evident as two of those responsible for it confess what they’ve done in the context of asking for support from their friends (33). Several scenes later, the murderer character Ricko confesses to his friend and describes in some detail the moments leading up to killing Tracy (45). His confession allows intimate access to the moments leading up to the violence, but omits the final graphic detail. The confession is not offered in the context of accepting responsibility, but avoiding it. By framing them in the dramatic dialogue of the main characters, the violent acts in *Blackrock* are given their full weight, without dwelling on the violence itself.

*Aalst* and *Beautiful One Day* also feature confessions of the crimes by those who committed them. These plays replicate a courtroom in which the accused stands
witness to the crime they committed. This distances the violence further in an atmosphere of emotional detachment. The courtroom device allows access to highly graphic accounts of trauma and violence in the context of fact-finding and judgment. This framing shifts the dramatic impact of the descriptions of violence away from the violence itself, and onto the consequences for the accused. In Beautiful One Day, when Sergeant Hurley describes what happened in the moments in which Mulrunji Doomagee was fatally injured, he is doing so in order to save himself from a murder conviction. In both plays, the emotional impact of the violence lies more in the cool remorselessness with which the accused attempt to justify themselves, rather than in the details of the violence.

In The Laramie Project and Beyond the Neck, those who report on the violence take the perspective of bystanders after the fact. This creates further distance from the violence through witnesses who weren’t direct parties to it. It reframes the violence for the purposes of piecing together what happened, or to support a point that the reporter wishes to make. It is the story of the violence, rather than the violence itself, that takes on significance for the mediating reporter. In The Laramie Project, the reports of Matthew’s condition when he was found, beaten and dying, are highly graphic but that detail is accorded specific meaning for those reporting it: “There was nothing I could do” (Kaufman 37); “They were both my patients and they were two kids. … And … for a brief moment I wondered if this is how God feels when he looks down at us” (38). The description of the aftermath of the massacre at the end of Beyond the Neck is similarly graphic, but is driven by the need to support the point the reporter wants to make: that in a scene of death and destruction, he shared a moment of connection with a stranger (Holloway 90).
3.3 Framing by comparison

*Checklist for an Armed Robber* uses a storytelling or reporting device throughout, with fluid shifts in which the actors both narrate and enact the action. The action of the Moscow story focuses on the siege itself and finishes with a passionless report and a joke at the point at which many lives were lost:

JOURNALIST: One hundred and seventeen hostages, fifty Chechens dead.

ALEX: [with a shrug] The book was definitely better. (Bates 34)

This deliberate withdrawal from the catastrophe gestures towards its extreme seriousness by refusing to engage with it. Earlier in the play, two murders are graphically depicted in two separate short scenes where hostages draw attention to themselves and are subsequently shot and killed by the rebels. These scenes are enacted rather than narrated and both feature a vulnerable, nameless character who is briefly established and then brutally gunned down. The risk of sensationalism is mitigated by the employment of an additional distancing device that permeates through the whole play. The story of the Moscow siege is intertwined with the story of the attempted robbery of a bookstore. The constant shifting between a large-scale public act of terrorism and a small-scale crime allows a retreat from the violence. It distances through comparison, by inviting the audience to find meaningful synergies between the two events. Director Maude Davey says “the juxtaposition … is actually an investigation of quite delicate or difficult things to articulate. It’s an investigation of masculinity” (qtd. in McDonald). The audience is directed away from sustained dramatic engagement with violence in the Moscow story by repeated shifts to a story in which violence is threatened but avoided.
3.4 Demonstrating

*Criminology* and *The Damned* are unique in this selection of plays about actual traumatic events in that they do not employ any framing techniques around the violence. They both feature dramatic narratives that follow events leading up to and including a violent killing. The action primarily follows the killers, who are in intimate relationships with the characters who become their victims. Unlike all the other plays, the victim characters are integrated within the dramatic action, although in the case of *Criminology* the victim character does not speak. Their deaths are then presented on stage as a climactic moment. Theatrical dream-like imagery is used in these moments to give the violence heightened emotional and visceral impact.

The plays both purport to yield insight into these crimes through a dramatic unfolding of events leading up to a representation of violence, but the effect is to draw the audience towards the violence in a way that risks appearing gratuitous and voyeuristic. The plays are structured in a way that suggests meaning is to be found in the visceral, emotional spectacle of killing. The crimes are so heavily foreshadowed that neither killing scene reveals any detail that the audience doesn’t already know. Their impact therefore relies on an emotional engagement with the graphic representation of trauma and violence itself: how it unfolds, rather than why. I have argued that direct representations of violence invite the kind of visceral response that risks glamourizing and fetishizing violence, and work against an ethical commitment to engaging with the causes or circumstances of it. However, critics of *Criminology* interpreted this direct engagement with disconnected violence as a provocative expression of social impoverishment (Varney; Croggon), while critics of *The Damned* specifically denied that the production was sensational (Searle) or gratuitous (Laurie). Kaplan illustrates the subjectivity of empathetic responses to representations of
violence: she and her students watched a documentary about Rwanda which she found extremely moving, but which some of her students found voyeuristic and sensational (92). I argue that ethical representation of violence requires an interrogation of all the factors that can influence potential responses, including an awareness of which responses are desired and why. Philosopher Theodor Adorno warns that “the so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain … contains the potential … that pleasure can be squeezed from it” (qtd. in Bartlett 177). Director of *Aalst* Dirk Pauwels writes “It is not enough for us to simply put something on the stage; we have to help people understand the reasons why it is there” (qtd. in Ouzounian). The risk in merely shocking or confronting audiences with a representation of violence is that it will confirm existing understandings and potentially support ingrained inequalities. I suggest that there is ethical value in questioning why these two plays feature representations of violent murders so strongly, while all the rest deliberately avoid them.

These are the only two plays in which the killers are young women. (In *Aalst* the killers are a man and a woman acting together.) Both appear to invoke what commentator Denise Varney describes in her critique of *Criminology* as “the monstrous feminine” (126) that “bears the hallmarks of and re-inscribes conventional views of the female as ‘sluggish, eager, artful, stupid, callous …’” (129). She goes on to argue that this patriarchal construction of the female killer is then undermined by a theatrical staging of the violence itself. However, as critic Alison Croggon suggests, the effect is to exploit as much as to critique the stereotypical “deadly sexualized woman”. If ethical engagement involves identifying power structures and injustice, then the decision to write about women killers raises further issues. Women are much more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violence, and are vulnerable to
objectification and sexual exploitation more generally. These particular vulnerabilities heighten the ethical responsibility for artists who choose to engage with women and violence to do so in a way that meaningfully addresses entrenched inequality. Without this awareness, they may re-inscribe a power hierarchy that routinely sexualizes and objectifies women’s bodies.

4. Making Meaning out of Murder

These plays take a public event and process it through artistic form as a way of making meaning about that event, and about the world more generally. Naturally the plays do not purport to be an exhaustive or thorough treatment of each event. They are partial, selective, creative responses. But their deliberate association with the real events attracts an ethical responsibility to draw meanings that expose rather than reinforce injustice and condemn rather than celebrate violence. This is not to impose a particular ideology on the treatment of these events. It is to acknowledge an existing, shared ideology within the community of which these plays are a part, and to be ethically aware of what meanings the community attaches to violent attacks.

The ethical integrity of a work based on an actual event may be revealed in how it compares with what actually happened. I accept that ‘what actually happened’ may be open to a complicated philosophical debate, so for the purposes of my analysis I will compare the events as reported in the media and courts to the theatricalized versions. If I accept that the writers are all seeking understanding of these particular events, this comparison exposes the writers’ judgment of what details are relevant to that quest, and what aren’t. Some elements are retained, some are ignored, and some are deliberately or unconsciously changed as part of a creative process that reveals the writer’s bias not just as an artist, but towards this particular
event. Selection, refinement and invention of elements within the play occurs irrespective of whether the work employs a documentary style (The Laramie Project, Beautiful One Day and Aalst) or a fictionalized ‘based-on’ approach (Criminology, The Damned, Checklist for an Armed Robber, Blackrock and The Boys). The relationship between events in the play and events in real life is a significant indicator of the play’s ethical position in that it betrays the meaning the theatre makers choose to make from this event, and how they choose to draw it.

4.1 Trial by theatre

The Laramie Project and Beautiful One Day choose to make meaning through a form of trial by theatre. Each central event inspires an investigation into ongoing social injustice: homophobia in The Laramie Project and racism in Beautiful One Day. Both plays present witnesses and witness reports whose authority is established by positioning them in relation to the event, for example by introducing them, “Rebecca Hilliker, head of the theater department at the University of Wyoming” (Kaufman 6); “Hello, I’m Magdalena Blackley, I’m from Palm Island” (ILBIJERRI). The presentation of witnesses resembles a trial and eventually leads to a recreation of one in the enactment of a police interview and sentencing (The Laramie Project) and a courtroom cross-examination (Beautiful One Day). The audience in each case is invited to accept all the evidence presented and draw a conclusion. This process of investigation then is part of the theatricalization and a conscious part of the meaning-making process.

The appearance of impartiality upon which the legal system is based is challenged by these plays. These plays actively align themselves with the oppressed group to which the victims belonged. In The Laramie Project, one of the theatre makers confesses that he cried for Matthew Shepard at the fence where he was left to
die: “I feel such a strong kinship with this young man” (Kaufman 34). The play’s support for Matthew extends to ideological commitment to presenting his murder as a homophobic hate crime. The play does not mention other violent crimes in Laramie that occurred around the same time (Foster 138), and frames its investigation into the crime as one into entrenched homophobia rather than a culture of violence. The voices of opposition within the play, such as: “A family is defined as one woman and one man and children. That’s a family” (25), are then supportive of the play’s greater agenda of exposing homophobic injustice. The words of Reverend Fred Phelps, who preaches hatred, are framed by those who oppose him (78). The play becomes a kind of witness statement that finds meaning in honouring the experiences of an oppressed minority. The play becomes a testament to bearing witness, and this is expressed in the final moments of the play: Matthew’s father urges his killer to “have a long life, and … thank Matthew every day for it” (96); the boy who found Matthew realizes “God wanted me to find him …[so] he didn’t have to die out there alone” (97). The final moment of the play is dedicated to sharing Matthew’s perspective as he was dying: “I can just picture in his eyes, I can just picture what he was seeing. The last thing he saw on this earth was the sparkling lights” (99).

The partisan approach is even more pronounced in Beautiful One Day. The performers/theatre makers declare their connections to Mulrunji Doomagee, Palm Island, and to Aboriginal Australia. The witness reports expose repeated and ongoing instances of institutionalized racism, violence, and oppression. Like The Laramie Project, Beautiful One Day omits any ‘evidence’ that might detract from its agenda of presenting Doomagee’s death as murder, such as his level of intoxication, which would have affected his ability to protect himself in a fall (Hine 36). Sergeant Hurley’s testimony is framed to highlight self-serving inconsistencies. One of the
performers presents evidence of Hurley’s history of violence that couldn’t be used in the trial against him. The sentencing of a riot leader follows witness claims that reports of the ‘riot’ were greatly exaggerated, and is directly interposed with a dramatization of Sergeant Hurley double-dipping on insurance claims. The effect is to reinforce a highly partisan story of inequity and injustice that deliberately denies impartiality towards Sergeant Hurley. The suppression of prejudicial evidence in any criminal trial is routine. The matter of insurance claims is unrelated. The case that Beautiful One Day presents against Hurley makes it very difficult to understand how any court could fail to find him guilty. However, he was found not guilty and indeed is still serving in the police force, where (completely irrelevantly) he was recently found by a court to have used excessive force (Weymes).

I have argued that to pursue an agenda of blame in the theatre is to risk further injustice. Beautiful One Day finds Sergeant Hurley guilty in a highly partisan trial by theatre. This is problematic where successive trials and inquiries by the Australian justice system have been unable to do so. The last formal inquiry was an inquest in which the coroner was unable to determine whether the fatal injuries were accidentally or deliberately inflicted: “If the two main witnesses … had not continually changed their versions and fabricated evidence it would have been possible to make a proper judgment” (Hine 138). To blame Hurley for murder in a forum where he has no due process and no right of reply, and where any further legal action is impossible, appears not only unfair but futile. It also risks quarantining all the blame for this death in the character of Sergeant Hurley. Judgment in this play is clear: he is violent, a liar, self-serving, and he got away with murder. Non-Aboriginal audiences watching the play will choose not to identify with him. Through him, our guilt is manifested and assuaged because we are not like him – if we were, we
wouldn’t be watching this play. Similarly, critics Jay Baglia and Elissa Foster argue that *The Laramie Project* can have the effect of absolving audiences of responsibility for a culture of homophobia and violence: “Surely, if we attend a performance like this and feel moved by its tragedy, we are not part of the problem” (139).

However, *Beautiful One Day* is not only a trial of Hurley. It is also a trial of the Australian justice system, and white Australian culture more generally, in which we are all implicated. The legal processes are exposed as inadequate and partisan. *Beautiful One Day* is an expression of a deep distrust that is borne out by witnesses to a long-standing and ongoing history of injustice in which Aboriginal people are systemically denied equality. The play is unable to provide answers, or even open up a way past the legal dead end in the pursuit of justice for Mulrunji Doomadgee’s death. It is only able to bear witness. This is its meaning and value, and how it manifests its ethical responsibilities: through bearing witness for those who have almost been obliterated by a system in which they are afforded no place.

4.2 Going to the source

*The Boys*, *Checklist for an Armed Robber* and *Aalst* create meaning by unravelling the forces behind violent events. The action in each play gradually unpacks the constellation of circumstances that drives the characters to murder, and leads to a meaningful answer to the question ‘why?’ In *The Boys* and *Checklist for an Armed Robber* the writers relied on public reports of the events. These plays closely follow the public details of the murders and then use them as a springboard for an imaginative extrapolation of private circumstances, which then provides the meaning.

The crime in *The Boys* is mostly consistent with the published facts about Anita Cobby’s rape and murder. The only substantial difference between the fictional and the real crime is that in the play there are three attackers who are all brothers,
whereas in the real case there were five, three of whom were brothers. The differences in their private circumstances are much more substantial. The murderous brothers in *The Boys* appear to be socially and financially more secure than their real-life counterparts, the Murphys. One of the Murphy brothers was found to have had “a disturbed childhood and inadequate educational opportunities” (Murphy v R), and one had just escaped from prison where he had been serving a twenty-five year sentence. All five of the attackers had criminal histories and all of them were single (R v Travers; Murdoch; Murphy; Murphy; Murphy). The play reinvents the attackers as embattled blue-collar workers who love their mother and manage to maintain a relatively stable and supportive family unit. Each of them is in an intimate relationship. Only one of them, Brett, has a criminal history, and his offence is comparatively minor. These changes or inventions serve to support the meaning this play attributes to this crime: that it is a crime of extreme hatred towards women. The play turns the focus away from other possible contributing factors to the violence, such as a dysfunctional family life, developmental delay, a criminal history and socio-economic disadvantage. Minimizing these factors and giving the characters a relatively stable background makes them more relatable for mainstream audiences. It is the focus on the characters’ relationships with the women in their lives that provides an answer to how this crime happened. The play gradually exposes the violent misogyny that drives these men to become rapists and killers. The play is specific about their sense of entitlement, their aggression, their unwillingness to take any responsibility for anything in their lives. It exposes the male characters’ hatred of women for refusing to submit to their sense of entitlement, for penetrating their vulnerabilities, and for insisting that they honour their responsibilities. The men who did this crime are situated firmly within the community, where their anger is allowed
to fester, is supported by other men, and where the consequences for women who resist them are deadly. This is the reality of this crime that The Boys reveals.

*Checklist for an Armed Robber* finds meaning through comparing an actual act of large-scale terrorism with a threatened act of small-scale violence. Like *The Boys*, it is based on public reports but invents private circumstances for its characters that then unpack the emotional forces that lead to violence. The play finds meaning in the personal connection and offer of understanding that occurs when the bookseller refuses to submit to the young man’s demands. The original report of the robbery at the bookshop in Newcastle contains no reference to the young man’s circumstances other than that he was hungry and very quiet in his demeanour (O’Shea). The final scene in *Checklist for an Armed Robber* is consistent with the report except for the monologue in which the young man reveals the driving frustration behind his actions. He is driven by a sense of bafflement at his systemic exclusion from a world of middle-class comfort: “You want to know what I want? I want this. I want to know the secrets” (Bates 36). The young man is able to express these feelings because the bookseller makes a personal connection with him, and it is through this expression that violence is averted. In the context of the play, the expression of frustration is seen to apply not only to the young man in Newcastle but also to the terrorists in Moscow. I argue that ethical engagement with violence requires awareness of the circumstances in which it occurs, and that the fundamental differences in the circumstances of these two events far outweigh the similarities. The comparison invites an understanding of the Moscow hostage crisis as an individual expression of frustration, rather than a political act of international aggression. The risk is that the represented violence becomes too decontextualized for ethical engagement with this particular event.
Aalst unpicks the motivations behind violence through a gradual unravelling of the murderous parents. Most of the dialogue in Aalst is verbatim from court transcripts and media reports. It is the final revelatory exchange that is almost certainly invented, and it encapsulates how the play draws an ethically responsible meaning from this double infanticide. Michael apparently bares his soul, gains sympathy, then says to Cathy:

MICHAEL: How was it?

CATHY: It was perfect. Very convincing. That’s five years off your sentence, I’m sure. (McLean 47)

This revelation that Michael is creating a self-serving version of the truth is hideous because it is so shocking yet completely consistent with all that has gone before. Cathy and Michael are so self-centred that they are completely without compassion for anyone but themselves, including their children. They only see the world from their own perspective – their truth is the only one, and everything keeps coming back to them. This is the truth behind violence that the play as a whole exposes: the monster is in all of us because we are all only capable of running our own agenda.

4.3 Dealing with the aftermath

Beyond the Neck draws meaning from the traumatic catastrophe of Port Arthur by approaching it from a very different angle. Rather than focusing on the circumstances that caused the massacre, or on the event itself, the play examines the aftermath of the violence. The characters tell fragmented, interrupted stories of a present heavily shaped by the ghost of the past event. The constantly shifting perspective in the text echoes the emotional processes that attend a great catastrophe (Maloney 175), and serves to reflect the magnitude of this event. The four emblematic characters each tell stories that work together towards the final moment of connection
between them, in which lies a conclusion to the drama. The stories are consistent with what is publicly known about the event at Port Arthur, and are acknowledged to be based on an extensive research process the playwright undertook with people who experienced it.

The stories focus on grief, loss and loneliness and attach a feeling of inevitability to the violence. Two of the four characters are directly impacted by the massacre: the tour guide was there that day, and the teenage girl’s father was killed. The placement of the action ten years after the event focuses on the present characters’ denial, alienation and loneliness rather than the violent loss itself. The other two characters’ stories highlight these issues further by drawing tangential connections to the massacre. The young boy’s story is a repetition of violence borne of delusion and loneliness, on a smaller scale. The young woman’s story is of sudden violent loss of her loved ones in a car accident. These stories avoid any kind of investigation of the violence itself in favour of finding meaning in the shared experience of grief and loss. These are the forces that drive wedges in relationships, because they reveal how alone we are as humans. Yet in its final moments of connection between the characters, the play demonstrates that it is only through relationships that we can find any meaning at all: Holloway says “So many of the people I spoke to said the moment they felt they could share their experiences with others was when they started to come to terms with it” (qtd. in Stephens).

4.4 Telling it like it is by inventing it like it might have been

*Blackrock, Criminology* and *The Damned* all make meaning through a dramatic narrative. They follow a chronological sequence of events in which murder, or the graphic confession of it, is the climactic moment. While these plays appear similar to *The Boys*, the way in which they make meaning from the violent event is
very different. *The Boys* seeks to engage meaningfully with the causes of male violence. It unravels the driving forces behind it, within a more dominant narrative that follows how the women gradually move from denial to understanding. *Blackrock*, *Criminology* and *The Damned* engage much more with the processes of the violence itself. The energy of the narratives tends more towards ‘what happened?’ rather than ‘why?’, and the answers are rooted deeply within invention, and not borne out by what actually happened in the cases concerned. Most concerning of all, from an ethical point of view, is that these plays all operate within and replicate a power hierarchy that objectifies and disempowers young women.

Like *The Boys*, *Blackrock* is based on a very violent crime involving several male perpetrators against one female victim. Fourteen-year-old Leigh Leigh was murdered at a party at a surf club, and most likely raped and beaten as well (Elder). Unlike *The Boys*, details of the crime itself are part of the meaning-making narrative. Elements from the actual case that appear in the play are that the girl is younger than her attackers and is sexually inexperienced. At a large party with no adult supervision, she becomes intoxicated and is raped. After the rape, she turns to an older teenage boy for protection, who then attempts to have sex with her. When she refuses, he attacks and kills her. As horrific as this crime is, the violence in the play is actually a sanitized version of what really happened to Leigh Leigh. She returned to the party after an episode of what is now understood to be extreme sexual and physical abuse (Carrington and Johnston). She was then surrounded by a group of young men who “spat, kicked and verbally abused Leigh” (126). It was large-scale mobbing apparently watched by many other young people at the party, and no one helped her. When she escaped this attack she was followed by an older young man who tried to rape her, and then killed her when she resisted. The significance of omitting the
mobbing, while retaining other details, is that it helps create a narrative in which responsibility for this crime is pushed onto the victim.

The victim’s sexual behaviour and history is highlighted throughout the play. Tracy’s behaviour makes Ricko feel entitled to sex, and her withholding it then provokes him to violence (Enright 45). His best friend Jared, the play’s lead character, initially shares this interpretation of events (61). The mother characters, Marian and Glenys, are quick to apportion blame to Tracy (39, 40). The teenage girl characters Rachel and Cherie focus on Tracy’s virginity as a significant point that proves her innocence and victimhood (47, 61). This emphasis on Tracy’s sexual history and behaviour contributes to an understanding of rape and murder in which the victim’s actions are considered important.

The earlier version of the play, A Property of the Clan, includes references to systemic prejudice throughout history, which contextualizes violence against women as a social problem. These references do not appear in Blackrock and are replaced with different story details, such as the following: Rachel’s mother is studying Aboriginal initiation rites; her father wins an advertising award for a campaign that features the beauty of women’s bodies; Glenys and Diane celebrate a birthday by going out to watch male strippers; Glenys is offered an article on beauty secrets to cheer her up. These details re-contextualize violence and sexual objectification of women as nuanced social issues that women both contribute to and benefit from. Director David Berthold explains that the intention was to “reveal a more universal inclination towards the objectification of the body” which moves away from the gendered understanding of the crime that A Property of the Clan presents. Law academics Mehera San Roque and Jonathan Morrow write that “Where The Clan stares male sexual assault in the face, Blackrock veers away from it, disengaging from
the real life script … it depicts nothing of the woman-hating savagery” (498). The effect is further exacerbated by what academic Mary Ann Hunter describes as “negligent, or merely cursory, treatment of the female characters” (137) that echoes the mistreatment of women depicted in the play. *Blackrock* moves away from questions of public responsibility, institutionalized violence and sexual assault towards private issues of “young masculine angst” (Hunter 136), parental control and teenage communication. Roque and Morrow conclude that:

> popular fantasy (journalism) feeds into legal discourse (Justice Wood’s judgement) which is then replicated … Points of resistance … are not equal to the task of challenging conventional beliefs about rape and murder. (501)

The drama of the rape is brought out in *Blackrock* through the character of Toby, who does not appear in the earlier version of the play. He is a boy from a well-educated middle-class family, who gets drunk and is goaded into the rape by the other boys. The legal consequences are then portrayed as potentially ruinous to his future. This framing of the story reinforces a concept of rape as something that young men fall victim to, rather than a choice that they make. The focus is on their vulnerability rather than their abuse of power. Tracy’s rape and murder is also thematically evoked and dramatically equated with Diane’s breast cancer (Berthold; Roque and Morrow). This again has the effect of casting the “mutilation of a woman’s body” (Berthold) as a matter of unfortunate circumstance rather than the result of deliberate choice.

The central story of Jared also contributes to a broader narrative that mitigates the violence of the central crime. Jared’s problem is that he witnesses Tracy’s rape, and his friends pressure him not to tell. Ricko tells him that he murdered Tracy and asks for Jared to be his alibi. The play tracks Jared’s gradual rejection of Ricko, and a confession that he witnessed the crime. But in the resolution of the story, he is not
required to actually turn anyone in, and Roque and Morrow note that “Jared’s confession is a trading of secrets … rather than an acknowledgment of his complicity” (495). The legal responsibility he may have had to help Tracy, or at least to report her rape immediately, does not feature in the play at all. This play focuses on a particular constellation of circumstances that support the view that male adolescent violence against women is sexually motivated, uncontrollable, and at least partly socially acceptable; and that young women’s behaviour contributes significantly to how, when and whether this violence occurs. I suggest that these understandings reinforce attitudes of serious social inequity against women and support a culture of male entitlement.

_Criminology_ and _The Damned_ feature two unusual crimes. _Criminology_ is based on the case of Joe Cinque, who was killed when his law student girlfriend Anu Singh gave him a fatal overdose of heroin. Singh was tried for murder but convicted of manslaughter due to her mental state: “Ms Singh may have been motivated by her apparently delusional beliefs that she was suffering from a severe disabling illness and that Mr Cinque was to blame” (R v Rao). Her friend, Madhavi Rao, was also charged but acquitted both of murder and manslaughter as there was insufficient evidence to convict on either charge. She had no apparent motive to kill Joe Cinque either. _The Damned_ is based on a murder case in which two teenage girls killed another friend and hid her body under the house they shared (Cox). The teenagers were socially and economically disadvantaged and had a history of drug abuse and family difficulties. The girls were convicted of murder.

The circumstances surrounding these two crimes are very different, except for the unusual element that unites them: they were committed by young women without an obvious motive. The plays draw particular meanings from this detail, and invent
others, to create remarkably similar narratives. The plays centre on an extremely powerful and manipulative young woman who inspires sexual desire in all the other characters. She exhibits no compassion and she is involved in an obsessive, destructive relationship with another girl that has strong sexual overtones. She dominates her friend and the men in her life with her sexuality and drugs. Each play attempts to provide motivation for the crime for the characters through an invented story. In *Criminology*, the central character Una is visited by the ghosts of dead celebrities who exhort her to find catharsis in notoriety and death. In *The Damned*, the girls find out that their friend isn’t a disenfranchised fringe-dweller like themselves, but actually a privileged middle-class girl who is trying to help them. The inadequacy of these motives, even within the worlds of the plays, reflects a sense of meaninglessness that permeates both of them. They appear to find meaning in presenting a superficial but highly graphic view of these young women as empty, directionless, drug-fuelled, emotionally starved and sexually rampant. This presentation of the central characters, along with sidekicks who are irrationally and sexually obsessed with them, is markedly similar, which suggests a stereotypical and patriarchal view of murderous women rather than an attempt to understand the forces behind these particular crimes. I suggest that the plays’ treatment of these characters is alienating and objectifying of them in a way that appears difficult to ethically justify.

5. Conclusion

In choosing a particular crime, I have argued that an artist has an ethical responsibility to be clear within the work what they wish to express about it. What is it that they want to reveal, or understand, or discover, or break open? How do they
attach meaning to this particular crime? This isn’t to say that they must make sense of it, or preach a moral, or find some positive consequences to it, or closely follow all the legal facts. *The Boys* does none of these things, yet within my framework it is a highly ethical artistic response to Anita Cobby’s murder. It identifies this crime as one of misogyny and masculine frustration, and peels back to its destructive source deep within the institution of the family. With different theatrical forms and approaches to the crimes, *The Laramie Project, Aalst, Beyond the Neck* and *Beautiful One Day* all find ways to reveal insights and express meanings that ethically address the responsibilities inspired by these actual stories of violence and suffering. They achieve this with a balance of positionality, rigour, insight, awareness and a genuine ethical engagement with what these crimes mean for all of us who live in the society in which they occurred.

My interpretation of these plays is, of course, informed by my position. I can only see from here. My perspective of the plays’ ethical responsibilities is strongly influenced by where I align myself in relation to them. Some of these plays have specific ethical responsibilities towards me as a white Australian, as a woman, a member of the middle class, or as someone who has experienced profound loss. But I receive *Blackrock, Criminology* and *The Damned* in a more personal way. These plays feature teenage girls in country towns who go to parties, do drugs, sleep with boys and get drunk. I have direct experience of that. The writers’ representations of the girls in these plays don’t have to accord with my view of myself to exemplify ethical integrity. Ethical awareness entails a responsibility to acknowledge injustice, inequality, and identity through positionality and meaning. Theatre based on real events is then empowered to broaden understanding, interrogate injustice, dismantle
prejudice and stand for equality for everyone, including teenage girls in country towns.
6. WHAT I DID

Aber der Anwalt ging nicht, sondern er fragte nach einer langen Pause:

„Sagen Sie, warum haben Sie das eigentlich getan?“

„Was getan?“, fragte Quangel gleichgültig, ohne den Gebügelten anzusehen.

„Diese Postkarten geschrieben. Sie haben doch nichts genützt und kosten Ihnen nur das Leben.“


But the lawyer didn’t leave. Instead he asked after a long pause, ‘Tell me, why did you actually do it?’

‘Do what?’ asked Quangel indifferently, without looking at the gentleman.

‘Write these postcards. They didn’t do anything and have only cost you your life.’

‘Because I’m a stupid person. Because I couldn’t think of anything better. Because I thought it would turn out differently. That’s why!’ (Fallada, translation by Kate Rice)

1. Introduction

I developed my interest in ethics and writing about real events through my practice. *Pirates of the Arafura Sea* and *Wireless Head* were my first two plays based
on real events. I then wrote a verbatim play about an online flame war in the amateur theatre community, *Apocalypse Perth*, which involved gaining the trust of people whose production of a rock opera had been widely ridiculed. For my next play, *Sweetest Things*, I wrote about an actual criminal case of a sexual relationship between a teacher and student. This project involved personal and legal risk as I had to negotiate with the parties concerned, and maintain confidentiality to a degree that would protect myself from contempt of court and allegations of defamation. I then had to navigate a way of presenting the story that respected the girl’s version of events while acknowledging her fallibility, and somehow gain real insight into what may have occurred. The ethical issues that *Sweetest Things* raised inspired me to investigate them further through post-graduate study.

At around the same time, I was looking to fulfill a long-held wish to spend six months to a year living in Germany with my family. It was while researching potential towns to live in that I came across Erfurt, in the former German Democratic Republic state of Thuringia. The Wikipedia entry for Erfurt mentions the school shooting that occurred there in 2002. I investigated further and was simultaneously repulsed and excited by the idea of making it the subject of my new play. There were several elements to the event that fascinated me. Robert Steinhäuser had kept up a charade to his parents and friends of attending school months after being expelled; he had targeted teachers rather than shooting indiscriminately; and the massacre ended with a dramatic exchange between Robert Steinhäuser and his teacher, Rainer Heise. Also, this event occurred in a *Gymnasium*, which is an academic high school roughly equivalent to a selective high school in Australia. These schools are academically and therefore often also socially and economically elite. I was intrigued by how this story differed from dominant American narratives of high school violence. I felt that the
ethical issues involved in writing about this story were important and intense, and
heightened by lingual and cultural difference. I felt terrified, but also encouraged by
my previous positive experiences. The tenth anniversary of the shooting was
approaching, and I determined to travel to Erfurt to attend the commemorative
ceremonies.

Our final choice of destination was Munich, 400 km to the south of Erfurt. My
plan was to spend several months undertaking intense advanced language courses to
bring my language up to maximum fluency, and pursue preliminary research on the
event. I would then follow my previously established practice of making contact with
potential research participants, negotiating and gaining their trust, and conducting
interviews.

I wanted to find someone who would be able to advise me on the practical
aspects of the research. The language school director put me in touch with an arts
bureaucrat who put me in touch with a subsidized theatre dramaturg who put me in
touch with a third year dramaturgy student. We met at a café next door to her theatre
school to discuss the project. As I gazed heavenwards for the right words to express to
her what it was I was trying to do, it seemed as though there were no words because
there was nothing to express. I didn’t know what I was trying to say or why I was
doing this project. I felt that I was dancing around a great big void. There was nothing
there except the kind of brutal violence that I really hate, that I feel is sensationalized
by art, that is made into some kind of false god of creativity because we don’t have
the sensitivity to understand anything subtler. Later, sitting in front of a YouTube
video about the shooting, I was reduced to numbness and drenched in tears. What
could I possibly have to say about random, violent killing? I was terrified of the task I
set myself and my inability to deal with it, and the nothingness that I felt was at its heart.

But just because there are no words for something doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. And what is theatre, if not an attempt to capture the ineffable?

2. Researching the play

I was required to obtain academic ethics approval through the university before I could officially begin the process of contacting potential research participants. The approval process took longer than I anticipated and was not complete until just days before the anniversary of the shooting. When I travelled to Erfurt, I had still not made contact with anyone there. I felt too embarrassed to contact people. I felt that the mere fact of asking them to take notice of me would be insulting. But wouldn’t it be more insulting for me to write about them anyway? I knew of people involved in the event, and would recognize them by sight: Christiane Alt, the principal of the school; Ines Geipel, the journalist who wrote a controversial novelized book about the massacre; Detlef Baer, who lost his wife that day; and Ruth-Elisabeth Schlemmer, the pastor at a church close to the school. I planned to attend the memorial at the school in the morning, a service at the church in the afternoon, and a production of a play about gun violence in the evening. I hoped to at least make some contact that I could then build upon and return to Erfurt in the future for interviews.

I took a four-hour train journey from Munich to Erfurt.

I kept thinking about the silence at the centre of the story. I grew up believing that it was beneficial to talk about things, but the more I thought about the events at Erfurt, the less faith I had in the power of words. They don’t change anything. Maybe
they just distract from what’s going on: the silent pulse of life, of existence, and finally of death.

I stayed the night in a monastery where Martin Luther King lived from 1501 to 1511. In 1945 the library of the monastery was hit by a bomb and the 267 people who were sheltering in the cellar were all killed. The German word for victim – *Opfer* – is the same as the word for sacrifice.

The following morning I went to the school, where a crowd of several thousand gathered for a memorial service at the front steps. The square in front of the school was closed off by traffic police. Politicians arrived in limousines and were directed to seats at the front. There was a strong media presence. At eleven o’clock, the time the shooting started, all the bells of all the churches in the city rang out.

Then the bells died away and a piano and a lone violin began to play a mournful tune in a minor key. It sighed out over this crowd to bring them to peaceful contemplation of a tragedy. All my failures loomed in it and I felt the depths of loss, the weight of my love for my children and husband, and the preciousness and transience of life.

Then the speeches started, but it was difficult to hear them. There was wind and noise from the nearby street. I got the gist, but words just seemed so inadequate. Trust me to dedicate myself to a medium that appears least able to deal with this. There were speeches from people who were there, loved ones of those who died, and the principal of the school who was there that day, ten years ago, locked in her office for hours while the secretary and deputy were lying dead in the office next door.

That afternoon I attended a service at Andreaskirche, the church close to the school which had been very active in counselling and supporting victims since the day
of the shooting. Minister Ruth-Elisabeth Schlemmer had been passing the school on her bicycle as the crisis unfolded, and she stopped to offer her help before it was even clear what was happening. (Müller and Raue 116)

The service was beautiful, but so very very sad. There was organ music and quiet prayer. The people were named, so we would not forget them. I felt as though I had come to know them. Their spirits loomed for me when their names are mentioned.

The minister spoke of the sadness, of the difficulty of learning how to live with such a loss, and how some have found it more rather than less difficult as time goes on. She spoke of seeing the lost life as lifted up, and that by lifting them up the sadness could be borne and freed from ongoing anger and regret.

As she spoke and the candles burned, I could feel the depth of my own losses – of my grandmothers, my mother, my father-in-law – yawning inside me, connecting me to this enormous loss through violence, and I was almost engulfed with sadness, and the vulnerability of my loved ones and my own mortality loomed so large that I had to consciously control myself and pull myself back from that brink. I felt that this was the brink that the people around me had known so intimately, that they had been living with for ten years.

They said the Lord’s Prayer and I don’t know it in German so I had to whisper it in English.

The bells rang and it was over. I filed out with the others, and one of the service leaders gave me a psalm and a photograph of a sundial.

Everyone who came out of the tiny church was met by a man in a suit holding a small sign. It said: “Anything learned? Anything changed?” I was so shocked at the confrontational audacity of it that I could hardly bear to read it or register what it
meant until I was ten steps away, striding into clear air, breathing deeply. Anything learned? Anything changed? These people had lost their loved ones! Everyone in that church felt the security, the depth of emotion, and had let themselves be held in a safe place. There was no room in the church for accusations. It was a place to face mortality and find comfort in loss. Not to challenge.

Maybe there would be room for that at the theatre. That is where I went next. I attended a production of *Die Würde des deutschen Waffenschränke ist unantastbar* by journalist Roman Graf at Theater Erfurt. The title means “The dignity of German gun lockers is inviolable” and is a variation of the first article of the German constitution, *Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar*: “human dignity is inviolable.” The play is based on personal interviews and public and political documents concerning several different episodes of male teenagers using deadly gun violence in Germany, including events at Bad Reichenall in 1999, Erfurt in 2002 and Winnenden in 2009. The play is associated with the lobby group *Keine Mordwaffen als Sportwaffen* (no murder weapons as sporting weapons) (www.sportmordwaffen.de). This group was formed in 2009 with the express purpose of lobbying the German government for gun control.

This theatre piece took me back to that place of loss and grief again. It featured extended accounts written by the victims, read out by actors sitting on the edge of the stage. It was raw and authentic. But I felt its hollowness after my visits to the school and the church. The representation of what happened was most graphic and intimate here in the theatre, but to what effect? Yes it’s terrible to lose your child. It’s truly the most terrible thing ever. Why take me to that terrible place? What does it do? It doesn’t help. It doesn’t add to my understanding, it just opens up a pit of despair and loss that goes nowhere and offers nothing. And the big danger is, that the audience becomes nothing more than a mob of feckless gawkers. Staring where there
is nothing to see but grief and destruction. It reminded me of gratuitously violent Facebook pictures of tortured animals, or of crowds standing around watching ambulance officers tend to bodies after a crash. I felt that just watching was supposed to actively achieve something, but I suspected that sucking up the violence produced little more than voyeuristic repulsion and manufactured outrage.

The church offered more than that, and I want theatre to do so as well. The man with the sign asking what we had learned and what had changed belonged here, at the theatre. I could then say: this theatre changed nothing. The church service did. It offered solace and meaning.

After my experience in Erfurt, I decided to abandon my plan to conduct interviews with those affected by the shooting. My previous work had always been about uncovering an untold story. This was a big part of how I judged the value of these projects. In *Pirates of the Arafura Sea, Wireless Head, Apocalypse Perth* and *Sweetest Things*, the participants I found were happy to speak to me because no one had asked them about their stories before. I found value in discovering and sharing these stories with audiences who didn’t know about them. The rhetoric of ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ continues to have traction, despite its reliance on inequitable power relationships. Even though the event in Erfurt is relatively obscure among Australians, it continues to attract enormous public attention in Germany. There are many dedicated books, documentaries, YouTube shorts, essays, Masters theses, parliamentary reports, inquiries, debates, magazine articles, and newspaper reports. Many people, including survivors, the bereaved, professionals, and Robert Steinhäuser's parents and friends had already spoken publicly through them. Inquiries for more information keep coming. The principal of the school has ring binders full of
them and even after ten years, they continue to stream onto her desk every week
(Müller and Raue 165).

The closest I got to a personal interaction was a pencilled note in the margins of a copy of *Für heute reicht’s*, a hybrid narrative-style investigation of the event (Geipel). I borrowed it from my local library in Munich and the copy had been underlined throughout. On page 230, the investigating character in the story is warned away by a bereaved lawyer: “ich kann im Moment niemandem von den Angehörigen sagen, der bereit wäre, mit Ihnen zu sprechen” (I can’t tell you any of the next of kin who would be prepared to speak with you). Written underneath in pencil: “Ich hab’s nie ausgesprochen und doch denke ich, ich redete ununterbrochen davon” (I never spoke about it and yet I still think I talked about it continuously). I took this as a warning: those who wanted to speak already had, those who didn’t, wouldn’t. And more importantly, it was painful either way. To comb over this well-mined ground yet again, causing even more pain in the process, seemed unethical to me.

The stories that people had told were horrifying. At the centre of each of them: raw, hopeless pain. The testimonials all spiraled into a tunnel of loss, silence, death, and blame. They bristled with the need for community, to have been there, the indignity and pain of not being with their loved ones when they needed them. But I came to feel that the tunneling spiral of pain, loss and blame went nowhere but down. It’s harder to bear because the victims were young, they were killed in an explosion of violence, at the imposition of a stranger’s will, in a place that was supposed to be safe. But when you strip away the circumstances, the essence of loss is the same, whether your loved one dies of cancer, in a car accident, or a natural disaster. It’s terrible, and it’s real, but it’s not unique to this event. If I was going to be part of a crowd picking
over the corpses, then I felt I had to be very clear within myself why I had chosen these ones.

Feeling the intensity of that loss as though it’s your own isn’t necessarily productive. I felt the pain of the bereaved, but my tears didn’t bring me closer to understanding what happened. Sharing the feeling of loss gave an illusion of understanding, solidarity, community and helpfulness that the spectators could then just walk away from and take superficial comfort from, without ever dealing with what I think is the actual reality of the event. In my opinion, the essence of this event does not lie in the nature of the violence and its attendant loss. What happened in Erfurt wasn’t an accident. These were targeted murders. The heart of this event is not the loss, it's the desire to kill. This is what distinguishes this particular kind of event from any other catastrophe in which lives are lost. At its centre: someone did this on purpose. Robert Steinhäuser was expelled from school without any qualifications, so he was unemployable and ineligible for further education. He didn’t tell his family or his friends about the expulsion, so for months afterwards he lived a charade of attending school. When he attacked, he specifically targeted teachers and actively tried to avoid hurting students. (The two students who died that day were killed as he shot through a locked door.) According to the state government commission into the incident, Robert Steinhäuser’s transgression was an attempt to achieve recognition and public importance (Müller and Raue). It appears that he was at a point where he decided that the best or only thing he could do was enact a theatrical mass murder of the people he thought were responsible for his misery.

I felt that focusing on the repercussions and the victims and the loss actually would reinforce the structures that led Steinhäuser to make this decision: he is isolated, singular, and everyone else is against him. For many, this is seen as the
appropriate way to deal with him. Angela Merkel, the conservative party leader at the time, said:

_Wer das Unverständliche verstehbar und das Unerklärbare erklärbar machen möchte, der muss aufpassen, das er sich nicht – zumindest unterschwellig – auf die Seite des Täters stellt und versucht, das Unentschuldbar mit irgendein welchen Umständen zu erklären.”_ (Whoever wants to make something that’s beyond understanding understandable and the inexplicable explicable has to be careful that he doesn’t – even unconsciously – stand on the side of the perpetrator and try to explain the inexcusable with circumstances.) (qtd. in Slotosch, translation by Kate Rice)

According to Merkel, even to attempt to understand Robert is to betray his victims, and places you on the wrong side of the line that defines our humanity. Many of those who were directly affected by the event believe this as well. A recurring issue for many of the survivors and bereaved is the need to suppress the memory of Robert Steinhäuser. The school principal, Christiane Alt, said: “Ich kann es nicht ertragen, dass er so postmortalen Ruhm auf sich zieht – das passiert immer wieder, nicht nur im Internet – und dass die Namen der Opfer ins Vergessen sinken” (“I can’t bear that he attracts such posthumous celebrity – it keeps happening, not just on the internet – and that the names of the victims sink into obscurity”) (qtd. in Müller and Raue 160, translation by Kate Rice).

There is ongoing debate about the appropriateness of a seventeenth tribute. Seventeen people died that day, but only sixteen are officially mourned. There were sixteen names on the plaque at the school, sixteen candles on the memorial on the steps, and sixteen people were honoured and remembered in speeches. The voices of the perpetrators were also unheard in the theatre piece. They were given no words and
no story. It was only in the church that there was a seventeenth candle, on its own, to 
the side, in the dark.

I felt compelled to place Robert in the centre of the story. The German word 
for ‘perpetrator’ is Täter. It comes from the verb tun, to do. It means ‘do-er’, which is 
closer to our word ‘actor,’ which for me reinforces the theatricality of the event as a 
whole. Robert staged this event. He wanted witnesses, as the impact of what he did 
depends on it. He even performed in a black combat costume with a balaclava mask. I 
was concerned that looking at Robert may actively reinforce the dramaturgical 
structure that he orchestrated, and thereby empower him and those like him. He 
wanted people to see him and know his story, and this is the only way he felt he could 
take control over it and face its indignity. I didn’t want him to be right.

My experience in Erfurt left me without the ethical process on which I had 
previously relied. I had relied on giving a voice to those who wanted to speak – those 
people had already spoken. I saw value in uncovering a story that was previously 
unknown. This one had been examined many times over. I relied on personal, situated 
relationships between myself and those involved in the event. I had no such 
relationship. And if I did, what I saw as an ethical response to this event – that is to 
try to understand Robert’s story – would actually be contrary to what many of those 
involved in the event wanted.

I felt that all I had to offer beyond what was already in the public domain was 
my imagination and story.
3. Writing the play

I found the process of writing this play very challenging. I felt impeded by doubt. I doubted whether I wanted to write this project as theatre. The years leading up to this project were marked by my increasing disillusionment with theatre. This is partly through my dissatisfaction with my own career as a playwright. Despite some success and some national recognition, I have been unable to move from poorly paid independent and youth theatre into the mainstream. My frustration is exacerbated by a sense of alienation from and distrust in the institutions that shape the theatre landscape in Australia. From 2006 to 2010 I saw a substantial proportion of the professional theatre that was produced in Perth, including national and international touring productions. I found very little of this work inspiring. I felt myself in an ironical endgame in which I was frustrated at being excluded from a theatre community for which I had little respect. This ambivalence manifests itself very strongly in the play and became crucially intertwined with how I understood the character of Robert.

I pushed through the impasse first of all by keeping an open mind about the form the piece would finally take. I structured a story and then began to write it in the hope that the form (theatre, film or prose) would reveal itself. I also gave myself permission to comment on my writing. I wrote scenes longhand in pen on the left hand side of a spiral bound exercise book. On the right hand side I allowed myself to write in pencil any criticism, thoughts, memories, comments, or ideas that the scene inspired. This process of constantly dipping in and then pulling out from the world of the story resulted in a kind of see-sawing, judgmental perspective on my own process that captured my doubt in myself as a writer, and my lack of faith in theatre more generally. I came to see these expressions of doubt as an essential part of the work.
I finally committed to theatre as a form for the project after a rehearsed reading of an early draft of the script. I allowed myself to be talked into it by the director and my supervisors. I acknowledge that however ambivalent I am about theatre and my own practice as a playwright, it is the art form to which I have dedicated myself, and through which I am best placed to research an ethical process.

3.1 Speaking for others – Positioning

The comments, observations, memories and personal images in the play allow me to position myself autoethnographically in relation to the story of the event at Erfurt. My personal response to the writing process acts as a frame through which I can acknowledge my aesthetic manipulation of actual events. My own commentary on the creative work is part of my ethical response to the impossibility of telling this story, because it exposes the ethical issues arising from my own artistic commitment to it. I acknowledge the unknowability of this story: I wasn’t there when this event occurred; I have very limited experience of guns; I’m not even German. The commentary also allows space for the relevant experiences I have had that drew me to create meaning from this event. This positioning allows me to claim personal responsibility for the work.

Exposing the creating voice along with the created world opens both to scrutiny. It exposes artistic authority as provisional rather than absolute. It contextualizes one’s voice as highly personal, indefinite, and mutable in a way that admits doubt and allows for ongoing ethical interrogation. Unfortunately this admission of doubt and exposure to interrogation is also a challenge to artistic expression. The highly personal nature of the commentary runs the risk of appearing irrelevant and indulgent. Expressions of doubt may invite further criticism from the audience and undermine their acceptance of the whole as a valid or complete work.
The vacillation between perspectives could appear to lack clarity. For these reasons, I questioned whether the personal commentary ought to remain in the play up until the final draft. The tension between the ethical and aesthetic demands of the work is captured in my decision to leave it in. I wanted to acknowledge the ethical conflict of creating entertainment from violence and aggression. I also wanted to maintain a fictional story – and create emotional engagement with a character who feels compelled to kill, and then in a moment of complete honesty and reality, chooses not to.

It was like trying to simultaneously obliterate and assert my selfhood.

3.2 Speaking for others – names

When I first began writing I started using different names for the characters. However I felt it would be somewhat hypocritical to use fictional names when I was committed to engaging with this as a real event. I noted that *The Laramie Project* and *Beautiful One Day* feature real names, but that these projects were both created with the active participation of those who experienced the central event. *Beyond the Neck* and *Checklist for an Armed Robber* feature nameless, emblematic characters, which goes some way to resolving the difficulty of depicting fictional versions of real people. The other plays I looked at used fictional names, with varying degrees of distance from the names of real people. I felt that the name change from Anu to Una in *Criminology* seemed somewhat underhand because it both admitted and denied that the character was a real person. However, this actually expressed the kind of dual sensibility I felt I needed to find. The characters in the play are my own inventions, based on real people, but they aren’t them. Yet I felt quite strongly that the dead ought to have their real names, despite the unchallengeable assumption of power that naming them represents. It can be a false sense of loyalty to speak for those who can
no longer speak for themselves, who can’t see the play, or object to it, or challenge me. However I wanted to honour them by acknowledging the reality of their deaths. It also felt somewhat absurd to change the name of Robert Steinhäuser when his name and identity were such a central part of the story. In the second draft of the play, I used real names.

This became ethically problematic. I felt that one of the victims of the shooting ought to be involved in Robert’s story, so his death would resonate in the fictional narrative part of the play. I therefore took the name of Hans Lippe, who is one of the actual victims, and began using it for the character of a teacher who is tired and not engaged with his students. One of Robert’s friends remembered an altercation between Robert and Herr Lippe while on a school camp (Müller and Raue 175). In the play, this character (Herr X in the final version of the script), specifically challenges Robert over his failure to commit to his schoolwork. While this character was a central part of what I felt was the actual story, I felt very bad about using the name of Hans Lippe. I didn’t know anything about him as a person or a teacher and I had invented this character and his interactions with Robert to suit my own interpretation of the events. Ultimately I felt that using his name in this way would be a betrayal of my responsibilities to him, and that his loved ones would be very hurt to see him represented as this character. I also felt uneasy about using the school principal’s real name, even though the character I wrote was very closely based on what I knew of her and was consistent with actual events. She could potentially read or see the play, and I felt that to use her real name as this character without her knowledge and consent would betray the responsibilities to her that attached to my decision to write about her experience. Yet I still felt the need to honour this particular story. To change all the
names and fictionalize it completely could generalize and detract from the value of investigating this particular incident.

I found an answer by thinking about public as opposed to private identities. I felt that Robert’s public identity had a strong enough existence to bear my contribution to it. I also felt that in committing this act, he had deliberately created a public identity and exposed himself to ongoing enquiry. He had placed himself in the public domain. This is how I felt I could justify keeping Robert’s real name in the final draft, and maintain a transparent, ethical connection of this work to the actual event at Erfurt.

The other people involved in this event, including his family, friends, the principal, Herr Lippe and the other teachers, had not deliberately put themselves into the public sphere. Their public identities were also very much defined by what happened that day, and were relatively small. I felt that to portray them in this play with their actual names would be to make a proportionately large contribution to their public identities, and that would be wrong. My solution was to change all the names of other characters in the final draft of the play, including the principal’s, to make it clear that these were inventions based on reality, not actual versions of real people. I hope that it would then be evident to those involved that this play treats Robert Steinhäuser differently from how it treats the other characters. The character of Robert in the play is a conscious version of his real-life counterpart, intended to contribute to public discourse about him, in a way that the other characters are not.

I made two exceptions to this. I used the real name of Herr Heise, the teacher who intercepted Robert and locked him in a classroom. This scene is an exact portrayal of the scene as described by Rainer Heise in an official inquiry into the event in 2004 (Müller and Raue 32) and is the only time he appears in the play. Also,
the actual victims would be named to honour them as real people, but they would not be represented within the fictionalized story.

3.3 Representing trauma and violence – framing

I believe that the ethical approach to representing violence is to frame it in a way that allows the audience to engage critically with the event, while still appreciating its gravity. The device of including my own commentary on the process of writing this play was the first level of framing, but I wanted it to be the first of several levels of time, place, perspective and story within the play. I felt that further framing within the story would be a further manifestation of framing as an ethical process. The idea was to actually theatricalize how context and position produces narrative. It starts with the writer character reflecting on the process of researching and writing the play. It then shifts to a narrative enactment of the character Frau Doktor, who is working at the school five years after the shooting, but cracks in her businesslike façade are starting to show. She is asked to take a break from work. She travels to the next town and attends a production of a stylized, non-naturalistic play about violence that inspires a dream in which she is confronted by Robert Steinhäuser. This dream character Robert introduces an enactment of his version of the events leading up to the shooting. The event of the massacre itself is then presented in the objective style of a police report. This layering of the plot shifts narrative perspective from me as the writer, to the character of Frau Doktor, to the dream character of Robert, to an apparently objective re-enactment of what happened that day. Further layers are introduced in the enactment of the play within the play, and in Robert’s involvement in making a film within his story within Frau Doktor’s dream within the play.
The idea of layering different levels of narrative was inspired by the work of Gerald Murnane, whose novels are infused with layered imagery. He usually writes in the first person, from the perspective of a fiction writer. He frequently writes in the conditional tense and keeps returning to images that extend and challenge the creative process itself – for example with references to a room in a building imagined by an imaginary character, or to the continuation beyond the frame of a painted landscape that a character is looking at, or to a character that one of his characters created but whose story he decided to abandon (Barley Patch 264). I was inspired by how his writing is so personal and introspective, while simultaneously revelatory. I wanted to capture this universality in the particular, and so find an ethical frame for the events in Erfurt.

3.4 Making meaning out of murder – comparing

With this play, I wanted to highlight our social, communal responsibility for this event. I didn’t want to separate and demonize Steinhäuser, or wallow in the grief and loss his violence initiated. I wanted to place him within a community and find a way to accept collective responsibility for him. This play would be an attempt to understand the particular conflagration of circumstances, personality and frustration that led him to decide to kill, in order to open up productive ways of thinking about violence.

I was interested in Steinhäuser’s sense of failure and frustration because I was feeling the same way about theatre: that I had failed to achieve what I set out to achieve and what was expected of me; that the system I was attempting to work within was stacked against me; and that I deserved better treatment from those in power. I felt I could relate to his alienation and confusion. I was also struck by the inherent theatricality of planned crimes of mass violence. The young male
perpetrators of such crimes deliberately stage-manage for maximum impact, both in the immediate vicinity and through the world media in competition with similar crimes. Ines Geipel notes that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (responsible for the mass shooting at Columbine High School in the US in 1999), Sebastian Bosse (responsible for an attack at a high school in Emsdetten, Germany in 2006) and Robert Steinhäuser were all at some stage actively involved in theatre (Geipel Der Amok Komplex 201). I have not had personal experience of such an event, but I felt extremely familiar with blood-soaked outpourings of masculine rage on stage and in film.

The challenge was to draw a comparison between theatre and episodes of mass violence in a way that would be meaningful and create insights into each, rather than detract from them. I felt that comparison would highlight the desire for public acknowledgement and self-absorption inherent in each, and demonstrate how the extremity of Steinhäuser’s response to failure has its seeds in a culture that values aggression, fame, and individual achievement. We are all set up to fail. I wanted to find resolution in the final exchange, in which Steinhäuser is confronted by Herr Heise. This is the moment where he is stripped bare, away from the need to perform and prove himself, and he is exposed just as he is, and in that moment he chooses not to kill. This is echoed in the moment where Frau Doktor speaks in front of her students and allows them to see her vulnerability and guilt over her role in the event, and again in the exposure of my own creative process and my own failure within it. I hoped that the play itself would be an expression of this stripping back to a state where we are able to embrace vulnerability and find value in failure. I believe that if Robert Steinhäuser had been able to do this, he would not have acted as he did.
3.5 Making meaning out of murder – editing and bending the truth

I edited and shaped the events of Erfurt within the play to support my agenda. However I endeavoured to be clear within the script as to which parts were very closely based on actual events, and which were invented. This is actually spelt out in the script and was expressed theatrically in the production through lighting and performance style.

- The account of the shooting, including the encounter with Herr Heise, follows the official report exactly.
- The direct address from the writer/storyteller character is all true and draws on my experience of creating the script, and episodes from my life that informed the writing of it.
- The vignette of the theatre performance Frau Doktor attends is based on a real experience I had when I first tried to cut my daughter’s fingernails.
- The story Robert tells about his involvement with the school is a fictionalized version of what is publicly known about Robert’s history leading up to the shooting.
- Frau Doktor’s story, set five years after the shooting, is fictional.

The fictionalized version of Robert’s experience closely follows the publicly reported version (Geipel *Der Amok Komplex*; Müller and Raue; Geipel “*Für Heute Reicht’s*”). I embellished this narrative with dramatic detail that supports publicly accepted inferences: that Steinhäuser was intelligent but academically lazy; he had a troubled relationship with authority; his relationship with his family was emotionally distant; he felt a lack of control over his life and there was a strong disconnection between how other people treated him and what he felt he deserved. There are no elements in Steinhäuser’s story that are not supported by the public reports. I
borrowed some character traits and the particular bullying incident of a burnt hand from the history of Sebastian Bosse (Geipel Der Amok Komplex 184). Bosse had a similar background of underachievement at school and frustrated ambition. Unlike Steinhäuser, he left behind extensive diaries and videos in which he expressed his feelings (Geipel Der Amok Komplex 167). These details were consistent with Robert’s narrative and I felt justified in including them because of their basis in reality and the strong similarities between their personalities, circumstances and ultimate choices.

I chose not to include the detail that Robert spent much of his time playing violent computer games. I also avoided dwelling on how he came to purchase his arsenal of weapons and ammunition. I felt that both of these elements are part of very strong narratives concerning violence that I felt would overwhelm the meanings I wished to draw. Easy access to guns is part of the social landscape that enabled and extended the impact of his violent act. Robert’s deep involvement in violent video games would have at the very least informed the way in which he staged a real-life shooting. However, the issues of gun control and the impact of violent video games are both concerned with the enactment of violence rather than its emotional breeding-ground. I was interested in the social and psychological circumstances behind Robert’s choice, rather than the ease with which he was able to put it into practice. I felt that Robert’s emotional journey of frustrated entitlement and alienation led to violence, and this was the meaning I wished to draw from the event. This emotional journey is subtle and internal and therefore possibly less readily graspable than the direct causal link that may be made between a violent game and a violent act, or buying a gun and using it. This is why I felt ethically justified in leaving these elements out.
In the fictional story, Frau Doktor deals with her feelings of guilt over her involvement in the shooting, and her rage at Robert for inflicting the situation upon her. Through her conflict with Robert’s ghost, she comes to accept her own emotional vulnerability. This story, while entirely invented, is inspired by the official, accepted version of events leading up to the shooting and what happened on the day itself.

The principal of the school expelled Steinhäuser. While his expulsion can be seen as an inevitable consequence of Steinhäuser’s fraud, it was also a public action that had an enormous impact on his life, and which can be directly linked to his decision to respond with violence. Steinhäuser asked after the principal when he first entered the school that day. He began shooting outside her office, then moved away to other parts of the school. She came out and saw the bodies of the deputy principal and her secretary, then retreated back into her office and hid under the desk until the crisis was over. The door to her office was not locked (Müller and Raue 160). This set of circumstances inspired a story that would express what I felt was central to this event: that it was about our collective inability to deal with failure, our obsession with achievement and performance, and the redeeming quality of sharing one’s vulnerability. This is why I developed Frau Doktor as an emotionally closed person who was unable to admit her own contribution to the circumstances that led to the shooting.

This comes from us, from how we choose to live, and we are all culpable.

3.6 Doing harm

Academic Lynn Freed suggests that “If [memoir] is done right, someone will be hurt” (qtd. in Robertson 137). This point is echoed by writer James Walter, quoted by David T. Hill: “good biography … will almost certainly embarrass and offend the subject, family, friends, and acquaintances” (226). I don’t believe offence is
necessarily inevitable, but it is highly likely that an individual’s response to how they or events concerning them are depicted depends on how the depictions accord with their own view.

I have argued that ethical thinking about theatre based on real events extends beyond the immediate impact it may have on those directly concerned. I believe it is possible for those represented to be pleased with a play that is in other respects unethical. It is also possible for participants or affected individuals to be highly displeased with a play, and yet for it still to ethically address its responsibilities. The area is contestable and dependent on the individuals and circumstances involved. The feelings of someone directly affected therefore may not necessarily prove or disprove an ethical approach. However, consideration of those feelings is part of an ethical process in which an artist takes responsibility for the claims she makes, and to whom she makes them. In writing this script, I kept in mind that it could eventually be read or seen by people directly involved. I have sent an email to the school, the church and the theatre that says I have written the play, and I will provide a copy of the script either in German or English to anyone who wishes to read it.

I was more immediately aware of the certainty that the play would be seen by my father. In an earlier version of the script, I included some personal anecdotes that I knew were potentially hurtful to my father. I described him as a “failed musician.” I made mention of the fact that he lived in a house with his wife while she was sleeping with another man. I also referred to a particular incident where I felt disappointed in him. One time when visiting me as an adult, we went to a war museum, and he seemed to be more emotionally invested in someone he didn’t know well who had died at war, rather than in me and my family. It was a moment of misplaced emotion,
where the interest and engagement I wanted from my father seemed hijacked by sentimentality and a glorification of violent spectacle.

The reference to my father as “failed” along with describing my mother as a “cancer victim” were similar to the mention of my mother’s extended affair. Even though for me these details are a kind of constant background, and therefore relevant to the way I think about and write about relationships, I could see these little mentions as teasers that could be distracting to an audience, and therefore unnecessarily indulgent on my part. These issues underpin who I am and will always come out in what I write, but essentially this piece of writing is not about my disappointment in my parents, or the effect of the breakdown of their relationship on me. I feel that those stories are different and that I can explore them better elsewhere.

The reference to the moment at the war museum was more problematic to me. It was a way of illustrating a delicate and important point about this particular play. It’s about how romanticized and powerful violence can be, and how it can suck attention away from what is really happening in our lives. It looms as somehow more important to those who aren’t involved – perhaps giving an edge of meaning, reminding us that life is transitory, but also appearing to diminish the flow of real experience and relationships. This incident was therefore very relevant to the play, but I felt it was very specific and could be hurtful to my father. I decided to cut it, partly because it could be distracting and personal. I also hoped that the point was already made. Most of all, I didn’t feel it was ethical to expose my father to the audience in this way. I knew that the inclusion of this moment wouldn’t pass Ricky Gervais’ test: I couldn’t look my father in the eye and justify this choice to him.
4. Conclusion

Ethical process admits that there are other perspectives in the world. Artistic process declares that its perspective is the only one. The ethical process is therefore antithetical to the artistic process, not because of free speech or artistic freedom, but because art is so inherently biased, one-eyed, singular and definite. If an art work is finished, question time is over. Ethics is all about questions.

_Monologue for a Murderer_ was produced at La Mama Courthouse Theatre in Melbourne in October 2014 by my company, Always Working Artists, in association with La Mama. It was directed by Jeremy Rice, designed by Sarah Tulloch, and featured actors Louise Cox, Nicholas Denton, Kaarin Fairfax, Kirsty Hillhouse, Andi Snelling and Charlie Sturgeon. I felt the greatest satisfaction in watching Robert and Frau Doktor come alive in the theatre. I felt that the relationship between the angry young man and the older woman who holds power over him resonated very strongly with me, and that was unexpected. I felt that this was a relationship I’ve seen played out in life but very rarely in film or television or theatre. I also really liked the highly theatrical play-within-a-play section where Frau Doktor visits the theatre. I think this is the part of the play that felt safest to me, because it felt the most removed from me by layers of storytelling and the theatrical frame, even though the story was based on my own experience. I also liked the effect of the layered stories, of going deeper into a nuanced version of what might have happened, constantly filtered through the perspective of the character who owns the story. This was central to my idea of resisting a singular, view-from-everywhere version of what happened and in that respect I believe the technique worked.

Overall, I found the finished production difficult to watch. The ongoing seesaw of doubt and questioning permeates the whole work and comes out as a lack of
confidence that actively pushed me as an audience member away from the story. It forced me to engage critically where I wanted to engage emotionally. The certainty and confidence of artistic expression was lacking and made this play almost unwatchable. It’s like I didn’t quite believe it should be watched. I felt unsure of myself, and very exposed because it was so personal. I didn’t like the Writer character very much. She seemed absorbed and anxious, even though I agreed with everything she said, there was such a strong thread of ‘should I even be doing this’ running through it all, I felt as though she should just stop. I actually wanted more connection through to the characters in the other story. There was somehow too much doubt.

So was this process ethical? I don’t know. I think so. Does it matter? Yes it does. I think that ultimately ethical process in writing about real events is a balancing act, where the essential audacity, aggression, achievement and narcissism of artistic process is balanced with an admission that indeed, we are not in charge of the world. We only live here and it is up to us to make it worthwhile.
7. CONCLUSION


I wanted to both understand and judge Hanna’s crime. But it was too awful for that. When I tried to understand it, I felt I wasn’t judging it as it actually should be judged. When I tried to judge it as it should be judged, there was no room left for understanding. But I wanted to understand Hanna too: not understanding her meant betraying her again. I couldn’t work it out. I wanted to face up to both: understanding and judgment. But it wasn’t possible to have both. (translation by Kate Rice)

I return to Simon Stone: “When people start giving moral guidelines into the way art should be conducted … what they’re essentially doing is killing what art is about” (qtd. in Harkins-Cross). Through this exegesis I have argued for moral guidelines into how art should be conducted. I have chosen the term ‘ethical framework’, and emphasized awareness and interrogation over prescription, but I recognize that ultimately this entire exegesis is a guide to the ‘right’ way to approach writing theatre based on real events. Many people, including Stone, may consider
such a thing completely ‘wrong’ because it judges and limits artists’ freedom to challenge the status quo and express whatever they like.

I suggest that art is only ever created within a particular ideological framework and power hierarchy, and that artistic freedom, however broadly conceived, will inevitably be shaped by it. In that respect, all artistic work expresses some kind of ethical value. I have argued that these ethical values take on particular significance when creating theatre based on real events, because of the potential impact on how actual people and events are seen in the real world beyond the theatre. I have argued that this power invokes an ethical responsibility for the understandings the work inspires, particularly where the events themselves concern injustice and inequality. Based on the philosophy of Donna Haraway, I outlined a framework for addressing this responsibility within the work through an ethical interrogation of positionality and meaning: who are you; where do you align yourself in relation to these people, this event, and the existing power hierarchy; what do you want to say; and why do you want to say it? This interrogation of ethical responsibility aligns with Richard Nelson’s description of the artistic process. Rather than an imposition of judgment, it’s a process that invites the artist to be aware of the ethical dimensions of decisions she is already making.

The financial realities of the theatre in Australia suggest that works based on real events will continue to feature on our stages, as theatre companies attempt to tap into existing audience interest. In their 2015 main stage seasons, Melbourne Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Griffin Theatre Company, Belvoir St Theatre, Queensland Theatre Company and State Theatre Company South Australia all
featured at least one play based on real events.² Part of my motivation for writing about a violent event was that I thought companies would be interested in it. I wrote it in an environment where playwrights are jostling for limited space, theatre companies are scrambling for audiences and theatre itself seems to be struggling to maintain relevance in the world. Issues of power, equity and access take on extra significance where there is very little of it to go around. Artists can’t challenge the status quo if they don’t have a platform from which to do it. This is why I believe that an artist’s commitment to equity is so important. If there isn’t room for everyone, I ask that those who do claim the space do so with an ethical awareness of the responsibility that entails.

² Melbourne Theatre Company: The Waiting Room by Kylie Trounson; Malthouse Theatre: I am a Miracle by Declan Greene; Griffin Theatre: Yasukichi Murakami: Through a Distant Lens by Mayu Kanamari; Belvoir St Theatre: Kill the Messenger by Nakkiah Lui; Queensland Theatre Company: Brisbane by Matthew Ryan and Country Song by Reg Cribb; State Theatre Company South Australia: Madame: The Story of Joseph Farrugia by Ross Genf, Ingrid Weisfelt and Vincent Crowley.
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