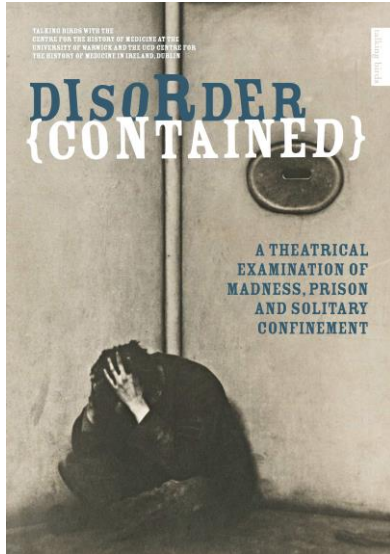


Talking Birds interview

- Professor Hilary Marland, University of Warwick
- Janet Vaughn, Derek (Des) Nesbitt, Peter Cann, Talking Birds



Hilary: What was the value to Talking Birds of working with the project's historical materials and research and with historians? And did it change the way how you usually work?

Janet: We like working with historical materials because allows you to examine the future in a way that you otherwise wouldn't because you're too close to it. I wrote about this in my blog post [What Can Performance Bring to the Table](#).

One of the major differences was having somebody else doing the research rather than having to do it ourselves. So it's like you've [*the research team*] had all the conversations, so we [*the artists*] don't need to go off and do that. So that's the major difference with how we would usually approach a piece of work; we'd be doing the research ourselves.

Hilary: As you use historical materials anyway, as part of some of the work you do, what was the difference with having Catherine and me on-board? We pre-sifted for you, but then you could read a book and that's pre-sifted, isn't it? That's just one view of history, so how's it different to just having read the book about solitary confinement?

Peter: Well, first of all because there isn't just one book. Hilary and Catherine have looked at a range of sources, which immediately gives us a wider approach than just taking material from one source. And that makes it more satisfying; it gives us the possibility of presenting a greater range of opinions and possibilities than just taking material from one source.

It means that we had somewhere to start from. If you're not an academic, and although I work at the university, I am not an academic, there is so much stuff you

don't know where to start. So somebody who can give you the start is a massive help, and an important part of the collaboration; a curation if you like. That sifting process is really important.

For the next stage, the development of the piece in rehearsals, it's great having academics because on a really simple, practical level, you can just ask a question, which somebody with far more expertise at research than you, can answer at five times the speed. And also quite often it's original research, it's something that you wouldn't necessarily have access to unless you are collaborating with a particular expert in that field.

Hilary: Because Talking Birds are used to working and doing the research themselves, does that have implications? Because you're entrusting us to do some of that sifting work. Do you feel you lose something with not having that direct contact yourself?

Janet: I don't think so, it's just a different way of doing it. And our own research is likely to be a lot less thorough or factually accurate and that's more important in this kind of piece than it might be in some of our other pieces because we're more interested in the story telling around those sorts of things - so we can be a little bit cavalier with the truth. Whereas we can't be cavalier with the truth in this instance. But the flip side of that being, what is the truth in history? It is all about opinion anyway.



Hilary: Was there anything that came out of the research that you thought 'wow, I didn't know that, and I don't know that I'd have found that out any other way'?

Des: Yes. For example, from a practical perspective of the sound design, obviously we don't have any recordings of what these institutions sounded like, so part of the job of the sound designer is to create

a version of that world that the play inhabits. I was thinking we know these were big institutions and so first thing I thought of was the footsteps of warders in these big, old buildings.

But because Hilary was there, she was able to say actually they wore felt slippers

on their feet, the warders, and that this was part of the regime. So footsteps wouldn't be factually right! I don't think that would have necessarily come up otherwise

It would have been easy to use theatrical or televisual clichés, but the research showed us the sort of environment the System was trying to create. Obviously it wasn't silent, but they were trying to create those conditions, so we needed to create an atmosphere of theatrical silence and we had to consider what sound elements to use that are evocative but also have a truthfulness. When we mentioned 'cavalier with the truth' earlier, I suppose what we're aiming for is truthfulness as opposed to the literal truth, whatever that is. Because I think that's debatable in itself.



Hilary: It's quite a tough gig to make a play about people who weren't really allowed to talk and were in a fairly quiet place. Not the most inspiring thing to be asked to do, is it?

Peter: But it is, because we had to think differently. It made us think. It encouraged us to experiment consciously, having long periods without any dialogue or any speech. There wasn't silence because we'd had Des' composed silence. But it encouraged us to think more creatively about ways of communicating ideas and themes and narrative, more than words or the usual kinds of physicalisation. I think there were more interesting forms of physicalisation in this piece and combinations of words and silence and movement that were encouraged by the challenges that the material presented.

Hilary: Did you find yourself restricting possibilities at any point? Maybe thinking, 'I don't think Hilary and Catherine will like that, or find it authentic'?

Peter: No, because this is the third collaboration and we knew that we could present ideas and material to them, and they would be quite happy and confident in saying yes or no. We've refined the collaboration, and so there was that trust there, I think, between all of us to be able to try stuff, and know that if it was crap they would say no.



Hilary: Were there other advantages in having historians to hand?

Peter: Well, it's these details and context that we wouldn't have got, that it's really hard to find in books, for example the specifics of the hierarchies in prison; the importance of the Chaplin, and where they stood in relation to the Doctor. And for me, because I

didn't know anything in depth about the system anyway, that virtually everybody in prison was in solitary containment at the time. Things like the relationship between the Pentonville experiment and deportation were new to me.

Having Hilary physically on hand during rehearsals was really helpful – we could ask you questions which you could then resolve. You did materially affect the construction of the piece, in a good way, in a positive way.

Janet: Were you surprised, Hilary, by some of the questions that we asked? Because many of the things that are of great interest to us when putting something onto the stage are those little tiny details that wouldn't make it if not for our research. But these little things are really important to us, not just because we find them interesting, but also because by putting them in supports the truthfulness that Des mentioned.

Hilary: Well the questions you ask do feed back into our research in interesting ways. The one I mentioned a couple of times in the panels was the question about who was in the cell with the prisoner, was the Chaplain on his own? I don't think we were 100% sure of that piece of information that we gave you at the time, and there's very little written down saying, 'I went into the cell and I was on my own with prisoner X'.

But because you asked, I looked and found some evidence which said, yes, the Chaplain went into the cell on his own with the prisoner. This was normal practice. But there was a certain secrecy about those conversations between the Chaplain and prisoner, so that was an interesting thing for us to think about, quite a detailed point, but something that was very, very important to know about as a

historian, because of the sort of relationships that were evolving within the prison.

But I think what's interesting, as we've worked together over these three projects, is we've never wanted to go to you and say 'those are our research questions, work it around that, these are the things we find important'. I mean these have come out in conversations, but what's amazed me in a way is the sort of dovetailing process that's taken place as you've looked at the material and worked with it. So although we're all looking at this material with different eyes, the questions emerging are often quite similar. And what that means to the historian is that it gives us a kind of affirmation that what we are trying to do makes some kind of sense and that we are asking questions that have a bigger relevance.



The other thing I've found really interesting is the way your scripting resembles the way people in the 19th century might have composed a case study in that they combined elements from different examples and different cases to produce a character almost. Doctors quite often wrote like that, they didn't say this is Mrs So and So, this is her case study; you could see them drawing on the best bits – it's a bit like they were producing a fictional patient or prisoner, creating a character as a kind of compilation.

Peter: It's the nature of the subject. It's history in terms of how data, how events, how legislation etc, have an impact on people; it's what we [Talking Birds] are about and what you wanted as well. We're asking the same questions I think.

Hilary: Some of the work Talking Birds has done has celebrated historical figures, eg *The Female Warrior*. Is there less responsibility to a historical accuracy in a celebratory piece than there is in a quite solemn, almost commemorative, piece like *Disorder Contained*? When you were putting composite characters together, were you aware that you were reading real stories and did that change the way that you thought about how you would present them on stage, in sound and verbally, visually?

Janet: It's more to do with the situation its going to be presented in actually. If

you're making a piece to perform outdoors, you wouldn't do a piece like *Disorder Contained* because nobody would be able to concentrate on it. So it's about putting the place, the idea, the people, together and finding the best way of presenting that for whatever circumstances.

Des: Saying that, we do feel a responsibility; the historical material for *The Female Warrior* was a pamphlet but which she'd verbally communicated to a man who'd written it down. So it was another layer of filtering, and we had to try and get rid of some of his layer. But if it's more contemporary material, we talk to people about their experiences so it's even more acute with that, that we want to be true to their story, if not entirely factually wedded to what they tell us it's like. So I think it's always there, that responsibility

Hilary: One potential treatment of our material might have been verbatim, straight out of the records and stitched together. Why did you choose the fictional route?



Peter: It would have bored me to do a verbatim treatment. I think there are a lot of problems with things that purport to be verbatim theatre, because there's a degree of invisible editing and choice and it's not necessarily as honest as people think it is.

Quite often thing that appear verbatim are not, they are based on constructions of dialogue. Making a character uses stuff that you've taken from one place and changed it a little bit to fit the character, and then actors add things too. It's an evolving process. But it's about remaining true to the material and true to the people who were the originators of that material, not being slavish to language or necessarily to bold facts. It's the effect of things on people is what we're interested in. It's important not to be slavish.

The way we chose to look at the historical material goes back to language and text; there were a lot of written reports which is not how people speak but do give you a clue to vocabularies and the kind of things used. So you can construct dialogue from that, which isn't the same as verbatim.

Hilary: Coming back to this question of truth, did you feel an extra obligation to

be truthful to the archive or sources?

Peter: Well you have a responsibility to the material, and it's an encouragement not to take shortcuts and not to be lazy really, and it does make you more rigorous which I s good because if you're trying to create something which has theatrical and dramatic impact, you can, as a writer and as a director, let that outweigh the verisimilitude of it. But if you're trying to present something, which in order for it to work has to have a strong connection with facts and with archive material, then it makes you work harder, it makes me work harder to that, I can't speak for other people. But it does make me work harder.

Hilary: How did you reach the decisions about the characterisation? The Chaplain, and the Schoolmaster and the Doctor were presented in very clear ways, which were very interesting.



Peter: In the material, in the first reading that I was looking for for characters who would be able to, in their narratives and in their character, communicate some of the ideas and the issues that we were exploring. So the choices that I made were around characters, workers, that seemed to have an influence on the research, particularly Pentonville, who had presented reports, or there were reports about.

And then for the prisoners, I needed to find characters who could help to demonstrate different elements of, or different types of, disorders that were being explored. I thought that it would be really nice to have somebody who was in control of what appeared. In fact, the speech about the hare was the first thing I wrote, because we needed something for auditions.

I'm making it sound like I'm really careful, that there is a really logistical step-by-step method to the way that I write and reconstruct things - there isn't. Of course those things sort of evolve as you're writing. And then the presentation of those characters only begins with the text and then is developed in rehearsals by actors.

Janet: But a lot of it is about gut instinct. It's about what jumps out at you. Because the table came from that first conversation that we had; I went away

thinking ‘we need to have a table as the central staging thing’, and that was just to do with the things that you had spoken about and how those work on your artistic instincts, if you like, and how you process them.

Peter: Yes, and because we’ve worked together quite a lot in different ways things like the first discussion that we had about the table that immediately gave me a starting point. So, it’s a table, and then we’ll smash all that to bits and we’ll have people standing on it as a prison cell because that’s interesting then. It’s theatrically interesting because it suddenly



becomes something that you don’t necessarily expect. And then the design and the visual, the sonography, and the sound, are all really important in creating the narratives as well as the material, so you are fitting those together.

Des: I suppose one thing that is common to everything we [Talking Birds] do is the idea of transformation. I could envisage a different company having a table, and it remains a table for the whole show and it’s about *12 Angry Men* or something, but the point was there’s a transformation which is visual, audio, character transformation and a layer of theatricality which takes it beyond the literalness of the table.

The other decision which sprang from the table was that it was then natural to perform in the round, and the audience would be participants in this debate, drawn in, implicated. Onlookers too, reflecting on the people who made the decisions about incarceration and the ripple effects from the experience of an individual in the cell to those that continue outwards – so to the women who are connected with them. Which became a theme, in the research and in the casting, because the characters were played by actors who were women.

Hilary: Casting all-women was an interesting choice. Tell us more about that decision.

Peter: Casting women was important to how the audience responds to the semiotics of the piece, you’re immediately saying to them ‘look, this is a game, this is a pretence, you’re going to have to come with us a long way on this’, and

because you do that, because you make that plain to an audience right from the very beginning, it liberates you quite a lot. It liberates you in terms of the kind of dramatic conventions you can use.

Also, because there is immediately a very clear explicit element of theatricality, this demands that you as the audience play the game with us. If not you may as well go home now. And that means you can use song, you can talk directly to the audience, you can become different characters, you can become different genders. And because it's making very clear right from



the beginning, we're women and we're going to be playing men. And we might be playing women, you don't know that, but we might be. And we're going to be playing Doctors and Chaplains and Prisoners. So in order for this to work, you as an audience are going to have to accept that, join in with it and see what goes. And so it's a very useful thing to do.

And then it sets up all kinds of resonances as well, about the fact that it was about men being from a female perspective, female researchers' perspective, and then from the perspective of the women that were connected with the men, as Des was saying. And it's much easier for an audience, in some theatrical concepts, to get beyond the gender if it's women playing men then the men playing women, because that has a different form of semiotics.

And it means that you can also, just by implication, by poetic implication, you can then go beyond the times of the play. So it's not period piece, an illustrated lecture, but it's not contemporary either.

Hilary: Absolutely, and I think there was a decision made that we didn't want to labour the point about contemporary resonances – we wanted the audience to start to reflect on those continuities.

Janet: If you set something in the present day, your audience immediately reads things totally differently. So if they'd been in modern day costumes, people immediately can go 'well I'm not like that person', because x, y or z. It's about

'I've sort of seen that person around but I'm not ...' whereas actually if you're setting it removed, in the past or wherever, then it gives you all of those resonances, you can consider it much more truthfully than you would if you recognise more of the stuff that is there.

Peter: It's also what you did with the design, because yes it was removed, but removed to where, removed to when? And this allows you much more liberty, as an audience as well, to interpret things, it gives you much more poetic resonance if you have the sense that, yes it is some time probably in the 19th century, but when? So actually this is a little bit timeless to allow resonance.

Hilary: Are there things you would take forward from working with us on this project?



Janet: Every project that I've ever worked on, every new project I work on, I am bringing all of the other projects I have ever worked on in some shape or another consciously or unconsciously. So there will be things that leech through into other work, or that have come from other previous work. Or from work I've seen other people do, you know, you kind of carry all of that all the time, I think.

Peter: I think that's the same for all of us. But for me specifically, it's about having the confidence to not be hamstrung by conventions that are apparently set in a particular piece if you're making something, to trust the audience more. As long as you let them know what the game is, you can do anything. It's the story, it's the narrative, it's the ideas that are important, not being true to a form or a convention. I suppose it's a confidence and affirmation in the type of ways that I want to treat material, and audience/performer relationships.

Hilary: Were there any drawbacks in working with historians or with our interventions? I remember a rehearsal when I first met Jen and I saw her character, and I said, 'Oh she reminds me of one of Oscar Wilde's 'pals'', I think she should be 20 years younger,' and afterwards I thought that was quite a big interference. Do you remember that?

Peter: I do yeah. We made her 10 years younger. It wasn't an interference, it's part of collaboration. Because those sort of things have a positive material effect,

because it immediately made Jen approach the physicality of the character in a different way. So it made us all very happy.

Janet: But if it had been an unwelcome thing, they would have just gone nah, that's not going to work.

Des: We formulated this actually, and we describe it as *The Best Idea in the Room*, and anyone is entitled to have it, which we apply to everything we do, particularly with children and young people. There has to be space for everybody's voice if they're part of a collaborative process and part of making a piece. It's part of our methodology really, that people are hopefully encouraged to say what they think. Because if people don't, the best idea, that one might have been the thing that made the difference, might be lost.

Hilary: We were really delighted that you were part of the creative and experts panels after the various shows, and you talked about the audience being participants and you talked about how by staging it in the round they were part of it. And then they were part of it, as part of the debate afterwards. We wondered what you felt you got from that interaction with the audience afterwards? Did any of the audience reactions surprise you at all?

Peter: The discussions were integral to the whole thing and an important part of it. They were part of the entity which was *Disorder Contained*, so you couldn't really separate them from the performance. And there was a certain performative aspect to some of them, so it was great.



We expected people to ask about the gender of the cast, we would have been surprised if they hadn't. The thing that quite often surprises us is the amount of stuff that people read into things. Like for instance the panopticon, the arrangement of things. That was an accident, which had not occurred to either of us until that person asked that question. But that was somebody who was watching this in a way that we wanted people to watch it, looking at the visuals of this and reading the signals in a really sophisticated way, so this is great, people are really paying attention to this in a way that we want them to.

Des: I found humbling the number of professionals in the field who came out to watch the show and talk about it. In Belfast there were so many people saying ‘, I work in the Irish prison service, I’ve been working in the prison service as a doctor for 40 years’, and so ... but it made me think that it’s good that there’s this situation where this dialogue is going on, and that we’d maybe galvanised a slightly more informal version of those conversations that probably happen professionally. It felt like we’d made a conversation starter and created the right conditions for those conversations to continue.



Janet: One of the key things that we’re interested in, in our work generally, is how you get people talking about things. And so in a way that is a perfect example of doing that, and it’s also much more interesting to do a post-show discussion with more weight to it because it’s actually engaging with the subject matter that you’re working with. I didn't attend any of them [the talks], but listened to all of them, and I was struck by how the same questions recurred.

Hilary: Theatre creates a space that’s not my space, but it’s not the space of the people in the audience or the artists either. It’s a place where you can all have quite open conversations and we saw degrees of empathy, and also interest, and people making those connections with the current day. We saw the opening up of conversations, which are normally quite difficult to have about mental health, and it worked incredibly well I think, in that respect.

Peter: The discussions wouldn’t have worked without the experts on the panel; if it was just the theatre company doing it, we wouldn't have had the expertise to be able to answer a lot of the questions that were being asked.

Hilary: But without the theatre company, the people wouldn't have come and had a discussion with anybody, so that’s what has been absolutely brilliant.

ENDS

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