

**WARWICK**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

**Alecky Blythe** Hon DLitt

**Oration by Professor Andy Lavender**  
**School of Theatre and Performance Studies**




## Alecky Blythe Hon DLitt

Alecky Blythe, whom I have the pleasure of introducing to you this morning, once said she thought she might have 'a nose for a story'. So you might expect her, since graduating from Warwick in the 1990s, to have pursued a career in journalism or become a reporter. In fact, she is a playwright – but a playwright whose distinctive style requires many of the qualities of a good journalist: the ability to persuade people to open up and talk, to sift through and evaluate what they say and, of course, to be able to spot a good story.

Alecky Blythe is one of the playwrights pioneering a groundbreaking form of documentary theatre in the UK. Known as 'verbatim theatre', it involves a journalistic approach to interviewing people about their lives and experiences. Subjects she has tackled include prostitution for her play *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008), the discovery of a serial killer in Ipswich for *London Road* (2011), and the London riots for *Little Revolution* (2014). The material is edited and shaped into scripts, which are played live to the actors through headphones during both rehearsals and performances. At no point do the actors 'learn their lines'; instead, they copy exactly what they hear – every nuance of speech, stutter and cough.

In 2003, she founded her company, Recorded Delivery and produced her debut show, *Come Out Eli*. Since then, her plays have been produced in major national theatres such as The National, The Royal Court and The Almeida. At the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2010, her show *Do We Look Like Refugees?* won a Fringe First, while her innovative musical, *London Road*, won the Best Musical Critics' Circle Award in 2011; she later adapted it into a screenplay for BBC Films, released in 2015, for which she won the National Film Award for Best Screenplay. For television, she wrote *A Man in a Box* for Channel 4, and wrote and directed *The Riots: In Their Words* for BBC2 in 2012.



Yet Alecky never actually set out to become a writer: her ambition since childhood was to be an actor. Having studied theatre here at Warwick, she spent a year of postgraduate drama training at the Mountview Academy of Theatre. But the parts she wanted didn't come her way. She was becoming increasingly frustrated when in 2002 she hit upon a Drama Without Paper course run by actor and director, Mark Wing-Davey. Here she learned the verbatim technique – the defining moment in a career which quickly attracted critical interest and acclaim. It's a career that has involved a great deal of sheer hard work in difficult, sometimes risky, locations – an East London siege and the red light district of Ipswich. Her techniques are 'precise and forensic': she spends days sifting through and editing her transcripts until she is left with a version that is both true to the speakers and dramatically interesting. She has likened her work to that of a psychiatrist or a private investigator: with verbatim, she says, 'listening and discovering are key to finding a good story'.

Alecky Blythe's pioneering drama explores contemporary social situations, meticulously capturing the authentic voices and speech patterns of those involved. Her work has been instrumental in establishing verbatim theatre as a political art form in Britain and beyond. We are delighted to celebrate her achievements today.

Chancellor, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, Alecky Blythe.

