

**Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven**


**Dr.Hala El-Sayed**

The most thought-provoking kind of testimonial theatre enables its audience to understand the complicated and irreconcilable truths and lies that inform history and disrupts the assumed relationship between truth and fact. (Carol Martin)


Testimony has been increasingly used in the creation and implementation of a variety of dramatic works and performances since 2001. The past two decades have witnessed a remarkable upsurge in the utilization and proliferation of testimony forms across Western theatre cultures. Focus on testimony in drama is a reflection of what Alison Forsyth identifies as, "an increasing appetite to gain a deeper personal, even more intimate, insight into the world we inhabit over and above the seemingly ceaseless yet perhaps superficially depthless access we have to rapid-fire, mass-circulated news' stories and journalistic reports via 24-hour television and radio, the internet and social media"(1).

Fact-based drama includes: testimonial theatre, tribunal plays, verbatim theatre, and documentary theatre. In testimonial theatre, an individual works with a writer to tell his/her own story; tribunal theatre, on the other hand, is edited from official transcripts of judicial proceedings; whereas, verbatim theatre is based on the spoken words of real people sometimes interwoven with invented scenes or reported and remembered speech rather than recorded testimony. Finally, documentary theatre encompasses newspaper articles, diaries and letters. However, the terms verbatim and documentary often overlap.

This paper tackles two works that represent two different approaches to constructing a play from testimony: the first, is the Australian play *The Fence* transcribed by Alicia



Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven



Talbot, Raimondo Cortese and Lina Kastoum in 2012 and 2013, and the second is the multi-authored play *Seven* (2012). *The Fence* preferred the testimonial theatre to revolve around things rather than state them directly, while the multi-authored *Seven* chose the verbatim theatre as the best medium for tackling major societal and political issues. *The Fence* is a testimonial play that takes the form of a fictional work to discuss the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians who have suffered the care of the State in past decades. It discloses a tale of belonging, resilience, love, healing and wisdom of the lives of five middle-aged Australians who spent their childhoods in orphanages, institutions and foster homes in Australia as part of what is known as the Stolen Generations and Forgotten Australians. On the other hand, *seven* is a documentary play that provides testimonial examples of the transformative power of women's leadership in the world. The performance is based upon interviews with seven extraordinary women from Russia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Guatemala, Northern Ireland, Cambodia and Afghanistan. The interviews were conducted separately, and then edited into seven dramatic monologues interwoven by the seven dramatists into one verbatim play. Both plays deploy testimony in order to draw a particular attention to human rights issues to allow for the diffusion of information, the stimulation of compassion, and the raising of consciousness.


Through examining the nature of testimony and witnessing, this paper attempts to identify where and how testimony is used in the two plays. It also studies the influence of testimony on the outcome of the plays as artistic products and its engagement with reality and fiction in ways that may clarify the nature of testimony as a way of making theatrical meaning. Besides, the paper explains how testimonial drama may position its spectators.

Testimony has been traditionally associated with a mode of speech used within the context of the courtroom: "Testimony is a statement of a witness in court, usually on oath, offered as evidence of the truth of what is stated" (Martin 20). However, over recent years, it has acquired a more general definition and application whereby, as Robert Audi clarifies, "formal testimony differs from the informal kind in the conditions of its expression...not necessarily in credibility"(405).


Unlike the courts' and journalists' evaluation, performance can question received facts and is valued in theatrical practice,"for its potentially complicating insights into how individual people involved in past events interpret these events and their implications" (Forsyth 2). Consequently, the word testimony can have a double connotation, "that of both something objective, judicial, public, or political, and of something subjective, spiritual, cathartic, or private" (Agger and Soren B. Jensen 115). Accordingly, testimony is far more than a dry and indisputable record of fact: "It can actually provide the very means to expose, to subvert, to complicate, to emphasize and to question a past that has not yet been mastered and find the story within the story"(Forsyth2-3). As a result, testimonial theatre permits its audience to realize the complicated and conflicting truth and lies, and provides the potential to gain a more thoughtful insight into recent or more remote historical events and experiences

As Forsyth puts it,

Instead of placing an emphasis on testimony as a means of accessing data on a purely cognitive level, theatre consciously engages its many performative and creative tools when utilizing testimony, in order to move us beyond a merely fact-bearing exercise. Testimonial theatre strives to engage the spectator on an emotional and affective




## Testimony in Performance of The Fence and Seven



level so that the particular circumstances of the past may be illuminated by, for example, more intimate, personal and even conflicting perspectives which, in turn, highlight the complexities of any one given historical event as well as sometimes exposing the fallible mnemonic foundations of testimony...this form of theatre can prompt an interrogation of our often all too easy acceptance of the supposed inviolable relationship between fact and truth...testimony, and by extension, testimony in performance, can create the potential for us to know differently. (1-2)

Traumatic events refer to severely distressing situations that exceed the individual's ability to cope and eventually lead to psychological trauma. Jon Allen, a psychologist at the Menninger Clinic in Houston, Texas and author of *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding* argues that there are two components to a traumatic experience: the objective and the subjective: "It is the subjective experience of the objective events that constitutes the trauma...The more you believe you are endangered, the more traumatized you will be...Psychologically, the bottom line of trauma is overwhelming emotion and a feeling of utter helplessness. There may or may not be bodily injury, but psychological trauma is coupled with physiological upheaval that plays a leading role in the long-range effects" (14).

In addition, the individual might feel cognitively, emotionally, and physically overwhelmed and psychological effects get severe when the trauma is human caused, repeated, versatile, or undergone during childhood: "The most personally and clinically challenging clients are those who have experienced repeated *intentional* violence, abuse, and neglect from childhood onward. These clients have experienced tremendous loss, the absence of control, violations

Dr.Hala El-Sayed  Art Magazine - Issue 40  
of safety, and betrayal of trust. The resulting emotions are overwhelming: grief, terror, horror, rage, and anguish"(Giller1). Sigmund Freud asserts that hysterics basically suffer from recollections, memory. It is the memory that makes the event hysterical. He emphasizes fantasies triggered by traumas rather than the trauma itself. He mainly sees trauma as a supporting factor to neurosis. (*Trauma in Freud 2*)

Still, even when the traumatic event is over, the person's reaction persists:"The intrusion of the past into the present is one of the main problems confronting the trauma survivor. Often referred to as re-experiencing, this is the key to many of the psychological symptoms and psychiatric disorders that result from traumatic experiences. This intrusion may present as distressing intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, or overwhelming emotional states" (Pearlman & Saakvitne 60).

The theatre event can provide the trauma event with clarity much like 'testimony', or 'bearing witness'. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela identifies the "process of transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory [widely known as] 'bearing witness'...As an important part of healing trauma, 'working through' trauma and overcoming its effects" (71). Speaking truthfully and openly about traumatic events would bring about reconciliation. This can be achieved by bearing witness:"This bearing witness is an important part of healing...working through trauma and overcoming its effects "(Madikizela71). Testimony initiates individual recovery. Sandra Gilbert explains that, "to tell the story is to attempt to relieve the pain of reliving the pain...to write the untellable grief...Traumatic experience is silenced pain that demands a voicing"(260).

In their book, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Felman and Laub

## Testimony in Performance of The Fence and Seven

argue that, "testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history [...] As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). As Felman points out, "contemporary works of art use testimony both as the subject of their drama and as the medium of their literal transmission" (Felman and Laub5). Testimonial narrative and poetry give a voice to the witness, who thus has the chance to "transgress the confines of the isolated stance, to speak for other and to others" (Felman and Laub3).

Literature prompts the testimony to become the voice of an observed reality, of a reconnection of history with personal experience. It aims at finding a listener who is prepared to bear witness of what he or she has to say. Likewise, the listener vigorously agrees to consider what the testimony has to say, and he or she simultaneously becomes a witness of the story as well as a witness to him or herself. In their book, *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, Nancy K. Miller, and Jason Daniel Tougaw illustrate that, "Testimony attempts to bridge the gap between suffering individuals and ultimately communities of listeners, whose empathic response can be palliative, if not curative"(11).


Oxford English Dictionary defines witnessing as "Attestation of a fact, event, or statement; testimony, evidence. The action or condition of being an observer of an event"; this implies that the witness is "one who is or was present and is able to testify from personal observation; [also] one present as a spectator or auditor" ("Witnessing").

Tim Etchells the English writer/performance artist and the director of the experimental theatre group Forced Entertainment claims that the group has struggled to "produce witnesses rather than spectators." Moreover, he views this aspiration as an "ethical act": "To witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, an onlooker...The spectator experiences this event as event rather than as a repeat of a prior event...Theatre should aspire not to give an account of the accident, but to be the accident itself" (17). For Etchells, the performance event should function in the same way as the accidental event does: "As a type of trauma that renders us speechless, then garrulous"(17).


Theatre enables a more direct face-to-face encounter of performers and spectators, where, the active watch enables a reconnection of "perception and experience" (Ridout 58). Being the site of a real gathering, theatre helps force the audience to reflect on the world and its incidents. Ridout notifies,

Theatre inserts its ethical questions into the lives of its spectators in a situation in which those spectators are unusually conscious of their own status as spectators, and thus as people who may exercise ethical judgment. It also takes place in the presence of spectators who are aware of their status as spectators who are engaged in reciprocal spectatorship. We watch ourselves watching people engaging with an ethical problem while knowing that we are being watched in our watching (by other spectators and also by those we watch). Because so much ethics is concerned with questions such as the relationship between





## Testimony in Performance of The Fence and Seven



how people seem and how they are, this situation of mutual spectatorship raises the ethical stakes in theatre in a way that is not quite possible anywhere else. (15)

Thus, theatre represents a thoroughly 'ethical' way of listening to the other, of "accept[ing] an ethical responsibility for the other"(Ridout 64)

After an ideal performance, a spectator should feel the impact of the theatrical experience in a way that is responsible (Kear 199) and enduring (Phelan 13). Etchells emphasizes that the transformation from spectator to witness, " will be manifested when we are left unable to stop thinking, talking and reporting what we've seen ... borne on by our responsibility to events" (18). Indeed, in his book *Performing History*, Rokem explicitly states that "the actor performing a historical figure on the stage in a sense also becomes a witness of the historical event...In order to make it possible for the spectators to become secondary witnesses"(9). He repeats this formulation in his more recent article "Witnessing Woyzeck" where he argues that "the spectators in the auditorium are, in a sense, second-degree witnesses, one step removed from the fictional world"(169). In trauma studies the secondary witness is typically defined as someone who is "a witness to the testimonies of others... [a participant] not in the events, but in the account given of them...as the immediate receiver of these testimonies" (Felman and Laub 75–76). Hence the secondary witness is best described as a witness to an account of the accident rather than to the accident itself.

Diana Taylor in her book *Disappearing Acts*, cites Laub's definition and restates that she understands the witness to be "the *listener* rather than the *see-er*" (27). That is, she understands the witness as someone who listens to testimony about a traumatic event rather than someone who sees the

traumatic event itself. Taylor argues that a performance that produces witnesses "engages history without necessarily being a 'symptom of history'" and that the best performances "enter into dialogue with a history of trauma without themselves being traumatic. These are carefully crafted works that create a critical distance for 'claiming' experience and enabling, as opposed to 'collapsing,' witnessing" (*Archive* 210). Similarly, in her account of Laurie Anderson's *Happiness* and the Atlas Group's *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair*, Govan argues that the spectators become "Witness [es] to the artist's act of witnessing and, as such, are actively engaged with the material but in a way which allows space for reflection"(58). She calls this "layered witnessing" and argues that it can be "an effective way in which to negotiate traumatic material"(58). Thus, one can say that while Etchells aims for engagement and immersion, Taylor and Govan seek "critical distance" and "space for reflection."

Both *The Fence* and *Seven*, in Karine Schaefer's words, consist of "short, choppy scenes" which alternate between "narrative reminiscences about and enacted re-creations of events" (9). Actors are cast as characters that describe events and the audiences become part of the events and witnesses to the artist's act of witnessing and listen to testimony about traumatic events. They become involved with what they see as if it were directly connected to their own lives, inspiring personal memories, identification, and recognition. They need to be fully conscious of their position as witnesses, because "the listener/witness...partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past" (Felman and Laub 58).

Alicia Talbot's *The Fence* has been stimulated by the possibility of creating and producing witnesses and employing performance, "to ignite the conscience of an ethical observer" (Phelan11). The spectator is placed in the position of receiver

## Testimony in Performance of The Fence and Seven

of the testimony and is transformed and formulated as an engaged witness. Talbot is interested in producing testimony to the act that has happened and also in positioning the audiences as witnesses in Tim Etchells' sense of the word, when she says, "To witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, an onlooker" (7). Yet, Talbot is not interested in soliciting testimony from consultants nor is she interested in seeking actors stand on stage and repeat those testimonies. According to Talbot, "To testify is to declare that something has happened and that it is real. So if testifying is telling the truth and art is a way of grappling with how we might perceive the truth, then that's where my work becomes testimonial-it deals with a set of truths that are fictionalized but embedded in some kind of reality"(76).

*The Fence* does not disclose people's stories and does not refer to particular events. Alison Forsyth argues:

*The Fence* avoids the standard reiteration and recitation of testimony to convey a particular slant or to factually inform audiences in the present about circumstances of a past event. Indeed, on first seeing *The Fence*...one may well be forgiven for questioning as to where and how testimony is used in this play. There are neither lengthy descriptive monologues dedicated to voicing the injustice of the Australian government's policy of forcibly institutionalizing children, nor identifiable real life witnesses within what appears to be a seemingly fictional work about a group of people at a drink-fuelled barbeque. (8)


The play is a combination of fiction and reality where the text is based on real, often traumatic, events in real people's




lives. It focuses on the ways in which ordinary people deal with trauma; especially that stimulated by the experiences of The Stolen Generations and Forgotten Australians: children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were forcibly removed from their families and placed into the care of white families and institutions; and children who, between 1930 and 1970, were forcibly removed from their families and placed in institutional care: "Talbot's Urban Theatre Projects obscures the distinction between fact and fiction, truth and dream and has been especially literal about the way in which we suture our histories from scraps of fictions and reverberating echoes from the real world"(Phelan 11). Talbot embraces Etchells' notion which suggests that ethical action might not be completely dependent upon empirical truths. Such truths, Wake explains, "can rarely be separated from the fictional; witnessing a shooting on the street is framed by our many rehearsals of witnessing shootings in the cinema, on television news, and indeed, in theatre itself (76).

The play focuses on the present and explains how a small group of friends and family members have searched to make sense of their need for home and belonging: "It chronicles a night, and through it a lifetime, of loss, survival and reconciliation"(Wake, *home is where the hurt is*, 16). Michelle Kotevski writes in his article, *It's Only Theatre-Women, Human Rights, Laughter and Resilience*, that in Australia, there is little understanding of, or public discussion about, the experience of torture and trauma...*The Fence* is regarded as one of the productions that are artistically rigorous and respond to the hunger of audiences for work that matters on a humanist level"(Para.7).

Because the two stories of the Stolen Generations and the Forgotten Australians were difficult to be put together, they were told separately more often than they were told together.The whole idea came to Talbot when she was



Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven



working on another play when one of the consultants told her about his experience of institutional care. He was removed from his house at the age of six and he said simply that all what he had seen for the next eleven years was a fence. Talbot explains:

The phrase stayed with me. That same man was also a security guard at the nearby housing estate, where he was renowned among the young Indigenous and African residents for his tough tactics, even though in a way his experience of disadvantage was not dissimilar to theirs. I thought to myself, how could I bring their worlds together? How could we have a discussion? (77)

Devised in collaboration with Indigenous and non-Indigenous community consultants with related experiences, this show has tackled a large contemporary theme: institutional care as experienced by both the Stolen Generations and the Forgotten Australians. Alicia Talbot works with people who are experts because of their passion, profession or life experience. However, Caroline Wake notifies, "Talbot does not place these experts onstage but instead works with them backstage, casting them in the role of consultant or dramaturge. These consultants are not asked to disclose their personal stories, "but rather invited to share their opinions and observations about the world as they see it"(75). They attend rehearsals regularly for dramaturgical and critical feedback; and they are paid fees for their contribution to encourage a sense of ownership and acknowledge them as cultural workers.

In developing *The Fence*, *The Australian Magazine* illustrates, the creative team spent twelve weeks working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians who had grown up in orphanages, foster homes and other forms of State care. These individuals are part of the Stolen Generations and

Forgotten Australians. Industry professionals also took part including health professionals, peak organizations, advocates, activists, cultural thinkers and academics. Urban Theatre Projects that produced the text has described the process as public dialogue, and positions the collaborators as experts within the process. Lead by Alicia, the artistic team has engaged in regular open dialogue to develop the script and images throughout the piece.

These people had lived experiences of the Stolen Generations and the Forgotten Australians. Talbot's task, then, as Wake puts it, "became to create a rehearsal environment and through that a theatrical work that could hold the stories of two traumas, which although similar in some ways, are profoundly different in others"(75).

Such experience intersected with Talbot's interest in reconciliation and the possibility of Indigenous and non-Indigenous having an honest conversation. This explains why Talbot was keen on having a black-white marriage at the heart of the work. This marriage provided the basis on which everything else was built: "*The Fence* is about them and their friends, who've all been touched by the experience of removal or institutional care in some way or another, remaking family without family"(Wake77).

The Consultants themselves were pleased with the idea of putting the two experiences together; especially those who belonged to the Stolen Generation. One said, "You took the time to seek us out, to authenticate stuff. To make it real. That's a major thing-it validates us and gives us recognition. That's unique for us" (*Partners Report*). Someone else said, "I felt overwhelmed by taking part in the project. I feel that deep down; there was a spiritual belonging place for me. It was a great honor hearing and seeing it from both sides of the story. Being Stolen Generation myself, I congratulate everyone who

## Testimony in Performance of The Fence and Seven

played a part and I dearly thank Urban Theatre Projects for putting it on" (*Community Consultant Interviews*). On the other hand, the consultants identified as Forgotten Australians felt that by calling the play *The Fence*, the work focused too much on the experience of the Stolen Generations and paid little attention to the Forgotten Australians. Thus, finishing up the experience for Talbot has left a sour taste in her mouth because she felt that there was a story that had not been told yet.

One of the actors had some experience of the Stolen Generations. Thus his life story overlapped with that of the character. This was not deliberately done by Talbot who believes that she does not look for actors, "but for performers who can carry the energy of testimony, who can be testimonies themselves" (Wake79).

Outside in the night air and with the aid of a suggestive setting and rich soundscape, action and images slowly and concurrently unfold in this piece of fictionalized reality. Wake demonstrates how *The Fence*, unlike traditional testimonial theatre which typically privileges story, balances story against site, silence and music. (79)

The performance arena is a former institution that is not revealed to audiences. Instead, they are directed to meet at a nearby theatre venue, where they were given a map which provided both a history of and directions to the performance site. Wake explains:


On the ten-minute walk there, audiences passed between buildings boarded up for decades, alongside sandstone walls made by convicts and onto a disused tennis court surrounded by wire fencing. When they finally took their seats, they could see a small purpose-built house perched in front of the large and looming walls of the institution. Sitting in the background, these walls

evoked a sense of past experiences, which were almost never mentioned during the piece. The overall effect was compelling: as if the back wall to the house had been removed and the audience had become witnesses to the events. (76)


In the beginning of the play, Talbot describes the site and the setting saying, "Looking down from the racked seating, we see a structure that looks like the realistic back of a modest fibro suburban house. Dollhouse-like, with its entire back external wall removed."(*The Fence* 86).The audience can thereby see a furnished open-plan kitchen and dining area, a lounge room and a hallway that leads to the imagined bathrooms and bedrooms. There is a set of steps connecting the house to the backyard and represents the back door of the house. To the left, the audience sees an old timber garden bench sitting behind a rusty oil drum that contains a steadily burning log fire. To the right is a wooden outdoor table and plastic chairs. Set further back to the left of the house, sits a prefabricated steel garden shed with a stool near the doorway. A plastic banana-lounge chair lies in the foreground of the shed. (*The Fence* 86). When asked about the relationship between testimony and site in her work, Talbot answered:

The site is the testimony, the land is the testimony. The entire work, its silence and its images, is made in dialogue with the land... This land always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land...*The Fence* was very much about the ancestors of the area being in the audience. There is also the institution:Here we are in front of an institution that housed children or to which they were committed...that location-that institution-is in fact the first testimony for me...This the area where convict women and children were held...This is where children were confined in the





Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven



Roman Catholic Orphan School...One of our consultants was institutionalized in that very building. That's why the journey to the site is so important: it reminds the audience that this is not fantastical, this is real. The building is real, the air is real, the moon is real, and the wind is real. (81)

On the other hand, though the institution and its surrounds are real, the house is not. Talbot asserts that the house is obviously not real to reinforce the duality or the theatricality of the situation:

By the time you arrive at a seating bank, you know you're at the theatre, there's a real-looking house placed artificially. The next artificial level is that it's fourth-wall theatre, in the sense that there's no direct address. But at some point in the night the dramaturgical framework collapses, the trappings of theatre recede and the ritual of witnessing takes over. In this, the whole set up reveals itself as an elaborate, expensive, time and resource-intensive process to have a bare moment of testimony. (82)

Wake confirms that Talbot has created a piece of neo-naturalistic theatre in a non-traditional theatre space: "The site functions to blur the line between theatre and reality...Set in a purpose-built suburban-Sydney home, on the grounds of a former institution, with the audience seated in the 'backyard', the protagonists engage the audience in an honest, poetic and poignant portrait of contemporary life." (*Home is where the hurt is*, 16). This allows the audience to undergo the experience of trauma. Hence, the term trauma would describe both: those who have suffered directly, and those who suffer with them, through them, or for them.


Besides, silence, is one of the techniques Talbot relied upon to produce an outstanding testimonial work. It was essential for both the consultants and for the personae alike. Talbot explains:

I am very clear from the outset that they do not need to tell me their personal stories. They may emerge in part during the devising process, but people are never expected to provide those stories; they are there to give the artistic team their opinion of the world and of the work, not to rehearse or rehash testimony. Similarly, even as the fictional characters in the work speak I also like to give them the space to speak, as the silences and the unsaid often conveys a stronger emotional impact, opening meaning rather than containing it. (79)


In order to avoid familiar theatrical and testimonial forms, Talbot took at least half of the words away. The result was a work that, "had an emotional fabric and that wasn't just people talking or testifying for that matter...I tried to take out everything that was explanatory, because the work had become too obviously meaningful. Once it had been edited, the piece worked better because it carried less historical weight"(80). Besides, silence offers space that involves the audiences and leaves them something to do:"There was more space within and around the work, which left space for the audience to do some of their own work"(80). For instance, one line in print, "I've lost my earring", takes ten minutes in performance.

Moreover, the existence of whole moments of silence makes the performance natural. This is just as there would be in a normal home. As Alison Forsyth puts it,

As the play progresses, one becomes aware that a preponderance of pauses sharply truncated



Testimony in Performance of  
*The Fence and Seven*




sentences and confusing non-sequiturs are affectively displacing any clear, lucid and simplistically descriptive statement of the plight of the indigenous Aboriginal and non-indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their natural parents. The deafening testimonial silence which suffuses *The Fence*, albeit set against the characters' often awkward and hollow banter, listless and repetitive actions and a number of eclectic musical interludes, has the effect of...opening rather than containing meaning in relation to the horrifying state policies which took place from the 1930s right up until the 1970s. (8)

When the audience arrives and settles into the outdoor site, 'In the Colors' by Ben Harper and *The Innocent Criminals* is playing. It is early evening, dinnertime, on a summer night in western Sydney. The house belongs to Mel and Joy, who have been married for more than twenty years. They have a flaming partnership; and watching their relationship in action is what carries the audience throughout the piece. Their home is a refuge for long-time friends, Lou and Chris. The night starts out like any other: TV, dinner on the couch and a couple of drinks. The unexpected return of Mel's sister, Connie, after a ten-year absence reveals the past and an ordinary night turns upside down:" Like a ghost with borderline personality disorder (part-poltergeist, part-angel), she rattles the skeletons and shakes all the rotten fruit from the tree. But all this unfolds slowly; in real time, at the very pace we all know and live"(Syke 1).


The first to meet is Joy, a forty-six-year-old Anglo Australian- wife. She is preparing dinner in the kitchen:"Joy, shoes off, though still in work clothes, is in the kitchen preparing dinner while half-watching the TV in the lounge."(86) She manages the bar at the local club, and still

looks good for her age; she loves a post-work drink and a good time. Mel, the forty-three-year-old Indigenous Australian-husband, is outside sanding down the garden bench, stopping only to stoke up the fire in the oil drum. He used to be a football player but is now working for the local council. A hard-working man, Mel is proud of his home and his shed. Another woman is seen in a dressing robe, on a mobile phone, moving between the doors of the hallway. It is Lou, Joy's best friend, a freshly-broken heart. She is a forty-four-year-old-Greek Australian. She is full of energy, though insecure of her looks, losing romantic prospects and ageing. Joy moves to the steps, looks out to Mel, and announces that dinner is ready. When they settle on the couch eating and watching TV, they are interrupted by Lou, emerging from the bedroom crying with the phone in hand, her boyfriend has just broken up with her. Meanwhile, Chris, Mel's best friend from work, rocks up, as he often does, hiding out from the three women he lives with: a wife and two daughters. He is a forty-two-year-old-Indigenous Australian who is childlike described as, "a bit of a drifter who has troubles at home with his wife." When the four friends finish dinner, they split up, the men are watching football; the women are in the kitchen joking. While their voices flow through the fading light, a shadow enters the backyard, sinks into a garden chair and drops a bag. It is Mel's long-lost sister, Connie. She is the surprise visitor who has been gone for a long time.

All the characters have been extremely suffering, and have undergone shocking events and violent emotions. Thus, as Wake explains, "Over the ninety minutes the characters who are gathered at this place reveal, as much in their silences as in their speech, a deep past of neglect and loss. The effect is very powerful...The scene is set for a night of reunion, remembrance and occasional disagreement." (*Home is where the hurt is*, 16).



Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven



Characters drift in and out of the house, and sometimes there are two conversations going on at once: (The dialogue between Connie and Lou in the lounge overlaps with the dialogue between Mel and Chris out by the fire). (92) This only happens when Talbot splits the stage and places Lou and Connie inside while Mel and Chris speak outside. Apparently, Joy has a history with Connie "There is unease between Joy and Connie...Joy and Connie don't see eye to eye on a few things."(91) She re-emerges to reproach Chris for not being at home and Mel for not being inside talking to his sister: What are you doing out here? Your sister has just arrived. Don't you think it's rude? Oh come on Mel!(92) Lou passes by, asking if she is interrupting anything and everyone dances dreamily around the living room to Steve Miller's "The Joker: "Mel begins dancing and singing along to the music...Joy and Lou are now tipsy, laughing and on their feet, dancing slowly to the music. Connie is on the garden bench moving jerkily to the music, in her own world."(98)

Obviously, music functions in several ways in the play: in the development, the performance, and the audience's affect. Dancing, singing, and favorite recordings help give the performance depth, context, and character. Talbot illustrates the role of music in her work saying:


Within *The Fence* music operates in a few ways. In development, it functioned to facilitate and sustain the long-running improvisations the performers and I do in order to devise the work. In performance, it's about the characters singing to themselves as well as the actors singing to the spirits present. The didgeridoo was magical every night because Kelton was in conversation with the spirits and ghosts in the real institution that rose up behind the set. Similarly, for Richard, his song was about talking to that particular piece of land.

Music was how protocol and business were housed within the show; and for the audience it's really great theatrical material. Beyond that, music is about affecting the audience and shifting the way they are listening. (80)


Talbot has collaborated with a brilliant sound designer who managed to manipulate the live sounds of the environment and combine them with pop songs, silence and original compositions to produce "haunting" soundscapes: "Liberty's soundscapes in combination with pop culture music embeds the work in an emotional terrain, whereas dialogue and words can reduce our capacity to listen and when we listen to songs float out over the backyard, we're not being told; we're just witnessing an evening unfold"(Talbot 81). Lloyd Syke asserts, "It's rare to encounter a play so judicious, restrained, and thoughtful, in its selection of music and songs...the drama lent shape and definition by the lyrical and melodic succinctness of the music; the songs reborn, informed by the extraordinary stories being told, intuited, and deeply felt"(1).

Moreover, music helps cut the dialogue short. Talbot explains, " I took out the words because I felt certain theatrical and testimonial forms are becoming too familiar to audiences, which means that they can't always hear anymore even when the stories are true, but it is a difficult conversation to have"(80). For instance, the wife's story was edited out to avoid being over-spoken. On the other hand, some of the performers and some of the consultants were upset because they wanted testimony and felt that the work was unable to represent the Forgotten Australians' experiences.

Accordingly, as the performance goes on, one feels that nothing is stated directly and the whole performance is seen to



Testimony in Performance of  
*The Fence and Seven*



be talking around something rather than about it. This makes testimony different. As Alison Forsyth puts it:

Conscious of the ongoing memories and trauma suffered by those who were forcibly institutionalized, *The Fence* concertedly avoids hastily retrieving, representing and thereby further 'containing' traumatic stories about these past events, for to employ such a narrative strategy could risk the erasure of the continuing traumatic experiences it seeks to evoke. Instead, through the concerted observance and use of testimonial silence and site specificity *The Fence* takes the time, care and respect to acknowledge the victims' ongoing trauma and to explore what Diana Taylor identifies as "...the transitional space between remembrance and future project".(8)


The result is that this site-specific performance, played out beneath the shadow of a ruined and empty part of a building which once hosted a disreputable children's orphanage, "does not insensitively and erroneously consign these events to a distant historical 'past'; rather it observes the still unresolved presence of a transitional space through which the incessant but muted refrain of 'if walls could speak' continues to reverberate in a palpable and meaningful way"(Forsyth 9). Joy for instance says to her husband Mel, "I am not the enemy Mel."(110) Later, Joy is miserably telling Connie that Mel is all what she has:"He is all I have. He's the only family I have."(114) Mel loves his wife but as in any tortured family,"there's the inevitability and constancy of conflicting tugs, in wildly different directions: is baby brother *Mel's* first loyalty to his big sis, *Connie*, or lover, *Joy*?"(Lloyd1). Mel loves his wife and hints at her tragedy saying:"Joy, you keep taking the poison...wanting them to die. It's not your fault, babe. I feel your pain. You don't like to talk

about it but I do understand. My mum was taken away. My nana was taken away. My nana's mum was locked up because she went looking for her. My sister...and you. I couldn't go through what you went through...I just couldn't." (114) Connie confesses to her brother that her life has been miserable but she still has hope: "You think I'm a big success. I'm not a big success. It's like I'm Santa Claus. Well I'm not like Santa Claus. I had a job...I fucked up and I got fired, but it's not the end of the world for me." (115) All the characters lack love and compassion: Lou explains, "Maybe they're just too self indulgent to nurture a child Connie...to receive love...to receive love, Connie. No one in this household knows how to receive love."(111) she herself has announced earlier that she is going out to find a man, and Connie and Joy decided to follow her to watch her find that man but the moment passes before they get out the door.


When the men move back to the shed, the audience sees true pain: "There are echoes of loss, pain, grief, dispossession, suspicion, broken trust, shattered expectations, jealousy, competition; and the promise of forgiveness, redemption, peace, love and compassion"(Lloyd 1). The characters have been haunted by a collective memory of painful events and the audience, "secondary witness", empathizes with them: "As the play unfolds, the cumulative oblique conversational references made by various characters about their own or others' disrupted childhoods begin to form a discernible, albeit muted, pattern"(Forsyth 8). Such references, Forsyth confirms, "have evolved as a result of a long collaborative and consultative process between real-life survivors of the state-driven institutionalization of children and the Urban Theatre Projects' ensemble"(8).

Trauma never happens only once. "The story of trauma," Cathy Caruth has argued in her reading of traumatic temporality, should be understood as "the narrative of a





Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven



belated experience," and in that sense also can be followed through "its endless impact on a life"(7). As the women's conversation turns to children, biology as destiny and the hazards of population growth, the situation goes beyond control. Women share the burden of narrating the extreme, and of giving shape to what once seemed overwhelming and incomprehensible:


LOU. In my culture women have babies right up to their fifties. In fact I've got an auntie who had her last baby at fifty-three.

CONNIE. No personally I'm all for zero population growth myself.

JOY. I reckon there's plenty of women who should never have kids. My Mother for starters...and most of the homes I grew up with...their parents... (105)

Joy is provoking Connie by saying, "I turned out okay; you're pretty fucked up though;" Connie is replying, "Don't speak for me, my mother loved me. Number 184 doesn't need a mouthpiece", and Joy is threatening to throw her out of the house. Connie then goes outside to confess to her brother that she and Joy have had a blue, and simply says. "Ten years come and gone in one fell swoop." (107)

Through this intimate improvised family, director Alicia Talbot introduces a natural portrayal of contemporary life. Themes, argues Lloyd Syke, are explored, gently, compassionately, non-judgmentally, patiently and thoroughly, via the experiences of a tight-knit group of friends and family members: "The suffering of these groups diminishes us all. And yet provides a profound opportunity for catharsis, healing, learning and growth. We are one and all, victims of


Dr.Hala El-Sayed  Art Magazine - Issue 40  
circumstance; the fickle finger of fate. It is how we deal with  
the circumstances that shape us that counts"(1).

The play ends with Connie walking off into the night  
and Mel placing leaves in the burning barrel. Syke comments:


Structurally, there is no particular adherence to  
dramatic trajectory: we look through a window,  
into the current and past lives of several people;  
after an hour-and-a-half, the window gently  
closes, with the shadowy, ephemeral figure of  
*Connie* disappearing into the night, as  
surreptitiously as she arrived. Indeed, the whole  
pathetic mess is so utterly, disarmingly  
naturalistic, with nary a hint of hyperbole or  
melodrama, one almost feels like a voyeur; as if  
one is peering through the windows of one's next  
door neighbors, secreted in an impenetrable  
lantana infestation...over the span of around 90  
minutes, there is an undulating emotional  
landscape, just as there would be in a normal  
home: peaks of laughter; sharp spikes of  
disagreement; troughs of withdrawal and  
sulkiness. (1)

Syke confirms that *The Fence* is not merely real  
Australian theatre, "but the theatre of real Australia; the  
Australia too often ignored, lost, or overshadowed, in our  
quest for glamour and artifice...This is an astoundingly  
important show- a show which lingers and leaves an  
impression- a sticky residue – like that of our history"(1).

On the other hand, *Seven* is an entrancing piece of  
documentary theatre based on verbatim extracts from personal  
interviews with seven women's rights activists from around the  
globe hosted by Vital Voices Global Leadership Network.  
These women have long fought to effect change in the world



Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven




and have overcome colossal obstacles to produce major changes in their home countries of Russia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, Guatemala and Cambodia: in Russia, protecting women from domestic violence; in Cambodia, rescuing women from human trafficking; in Guatemala, giving voice to the poor; in Afghanistan, empowering rural women; in Nigeria and Pakistan, fighting for women's education and rights, and in Northern Ireland, promoting peace and equality.

Inspired by real life stories of triumph, and through the influential medium of theater, seven accomplished award-winning female playwrights-Paula Cizmar, Catherine Filloux, Gail Kriegel, Carol K. Mack, Ruth Margraff, Anna Deavere Smith, and Susan Yankowitz- gave voice to these women's experiences to highlight domestic violence and violence against women. As Etchells puts it, "*Seven* tells the women's heart-wrenching stories of triumph over abuse, oppression, adversity, and threats to their lives, families, and livelihoods...It is a commanding reminder of the transformative power of women's leadership in our world" (225).

Hilary Clinton introduces the play saying, "The play powerfully portrays the transformative way that seven courageous women have changed their societies for the better – from peace-building, to fighting corruption, to combating violence against women".

The play uses transcripts as the dominant source of its dialogue. After each playwright had created a monologue revealing the life of her interviewee based on many interviews run for many months, playwrights met, tried out the monologues and started weaving the individual monologues of these seven compelling stories together into a single script. The monologues have been edited, arranged and re-contextualized

Dr.Hala El-Sayed  Art Magazine - Issue 40  
to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used.


Unlike *The Fence* that basically relied upon dialogue and site selection in producing a testimonial play, *Seven* is flexible and is created to be performed in any number of ways, including, "tiny rooms, large or small theatres, outdoors or even on a bare stage with no set, with performers in chairs or moving through space, with theatrical lighting and projections or no tech at all. All parenthetical descriptions of settings or physical locations in the script are included to evoke a sense of place, mood and atmosphere. Much of the text is direct address"(Seven 269).

The actors occasionally form a group and become voices or characters in one another's stories: "The actors most often speak directly to the audience but at times also engage with another 'character' in the stories they recount"(Seven 270). Like *The Fence*, sound effects, songs, and music from cultures around the world are employed. Additionally, a sample of the original language of the seven women is also used to support their real stories.


Like *The Fence*, *Seven is* based on real, traumatic events in real people's lives. However, *Seven* discloses people's stories and refers to particular events: Relating the terrible and the great events in their lives, the characters tell their personal stories with humor, seriousness and passion.

As the play begins, the actors take on the characters of the real individuals: each actor steps forward and introduces herself; and testimonies overlap, intersect, and fade in and out of each other, using culturally specific music and props.

When lights first blink, Inez McCormack from Northern Ireland introduces herself. She is, "highly educated, speaks eloquently, passionately, with feeling and ready humor, 60's"



Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven




(*Seven* 270). She was an internationally celebrated and hugely influential human rights and trade union activist. She was known to be the first female full-time official of National Union of Public Employees, the first female President of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, and the first female regional secretary of Public Service Union. She played a critical role in the 1998 Good Friday Peace Accords and continued to advocate for equal rights and fair labor practices for women and minorities (*Seven-* a documentary play, 2). She addresses the audience saying: "That word inalienable, it means all these rights we're reading, they're part of every human being! What do we have to do to get these rights?"(271) In 2006, she founded the Participation and Practice of Rights Project, helping the disadvantaged access resources and services in Ireland, both North and South. Inez continued to advise and support PPR (Participation and the Practice of Rights) until her death in 2013(*Seven-* a documentary play, 2): "So much of my work came from these women cleaners... The idea of it: to enable people on the powerless end, the bottom of the heap, the invisible to be part of the making of change! That changes how they see themselves and...that changes everything..." (289)

Frequently, lights blink and telephones ring to signify the shift from a character to another. (*Lights blink. Telephone rings. Lights then come up on Anabella in her office. A line of people wait to see her.*) (271) It is Anabella De Leon from Guatemala: "Glamorous and theatrical, with inborn confidence, uncompromising conviction, 50's" (*Seven* 270). Going to college and earning a law degree, Anabella has become a perfect representative of her people in Guatemala. She pulled herself and her family out of poverty and became a member of congress in 1995. She has received death threats because of her unrelenting fight against corruption and never-ending demand for equal rights and protections for all people,


particularly women and the poor: "In my country, poverty has a woman's face. They are the most damaged of the population, the lowest in education. Myself and thirteen congress women submitted a set of bills aimed at improving women's programs. When it comes time for the vote, the men in Parliament hide in the bathroom. I open the door, the other women storm in, and we pull them out one by one!... The bill got passed."(289) The actors become characters in one another's stories such as Mary, Anabella's assistant and Mrs. Posada, one of her clients who uses the local Guatemalan language while telling Anabella her problem.

While Anabella is asking another client about her problem, testimonies overlap: sound of wind is heard and Fareda walks downstage wearing a burqua, indicating that she is from Afghanistan. Fareda is: "Beautiful, private, and highly intelligent, rarely revealing her emotional scars, 40's"(Seven 270). She became an activist fighting the marginalization of women under Taliban rule in her native country. She often traveled alone to rural districts to bring medical supplies and instruction to women who otherwise would have no care and would have to convince Taliban fighters that her work was of value to the local communities. Fareda provides her testimony saying:

In the night wind when I think of home, I think of mountain shadow, as I hide in the borders of Afghanistan to walk so many times at night. It is the faces of the women that will always move me, guide my footsteps through the landmines...I see a woman giving birth all by herself because, under Taliban, male doctors are forbidden to treat women and women cannot be trained as doctors. (*Re-experiencing*) I see her face as she dies in front of my eyes. And I cannot stay calm. What can I do? The only way to bring basic health care



Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven



to these women is to walk...When I feel the mujahedeen watching me across the mountains, I find they are not all against women. Sometimes they tell us where the landmines are or not to go a certain way, they might be thieves! (272)

Because of threats on her life, and for the safety of her children, Fareda left Afghanistan and gained asylum and now lives in the United States with her two children and works on women's rights and peace-building in Afghanistan. (*Seven-* a documentary play, 3).

As Fareda crosses stage, a telephone rings. Marina picks up. Marina Pisklakova-Parker is from Russia: "Emphatic, intelligent, with a sense of destiny, operates softly, using her wits and her logic, 40's" (*Seven* 270). In 1993, she founded the first domestic violence hotline for victims in Russia at a time when there had been no laws against domestic violence or resources for its victims. Working with reluctant law enforcement and in the midst of threats from abuse perpetrators, Marina persisted and her efforts have since grown into Center ANNA (National Center for Prevention of Violence) and a coalition of hundreds of crisis centers that has provided counseling services for over 100,000 Russian women per year. (*Seven-* a documentary play, 3). The actors become voices in one another's stories such as the Caller in Marina's story:

MARINA. Crisis centre for women. How may I help you?

CALLER. I heard you on the radio. You were telling my story...My husband is beating me-he has beaten me for twenty six years.

MARINA. Where are you?

CALLER. I am in bed. With a broken back. From his beating me...I heard your voice. You sounded like someone I could trust.


MARINA. Tell me how to get to you. So I can send help.

CALLER. Girl, my husband is very powerful. He's in one of the government agencies...Before you can get to me, I will be dead.


MARINA. (*To audience*) She calls for about a month. Then she stops calling. She is one of the ones I could not save. (*Seven 27*)

Then, Mu Sochua from Cambodia appears in a pool of light. She has a string in her hand, winds it around her wrist thoughtfully. She is described as being, "Graceful, intense, with both humor and sadness visible, youthful 50's"(*Seven 270*). She is the former Minister of Women's Affairs in Cambodia: "I ask victims of trafficking, when did you lose the soul? They say that their souls left when trafficker took them away from their families...When you are raped you lose your pralung-someone takes it away. I have been working with trafficked women since I became Minister of Women's Affairs in 1998. Until that time only men held the position". (*273*) She grew up away from her home country, having been sent abroad for her protection by her parents, who perished under the rule of Pol Pot:"My life, it seems like a river with many bends. And it bends all the time, this river...I lead a team of rural women leaders to every house in four hundred and eighty villages to bring the message of democracy and justice". (*291*) Sochua was co-nominated in 2005 for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work against sex trafficking of women in Cambodia and neighboring Thailand: "Each year more than thirty thousand Cambodian children are forced into prostitution. Girls as





Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven



young as eleven are tricked-promised jobs, to help their poor families-then taken away to become sex workers. I'm working now with one of them, a girl called Mony". (273)

The sixth character, Hafsat Abiola, from Nigeria, then, interrupts: (*Hafsat talking into a microphone to an unseen interviewer.*) Hafsat is, "Tall, thin, dark-skinned, speaks quickly, softly, few pauses, light-hearted, very attractive, highly educated, 30's" (*Seven* 270). She became an advocate for human rights and democracy following the murder of her activist parents and founded the Kudirat Initiative for Democracy. The Initiative provides skills-training and leadership opportunities for young women across Nigeria. She now serves as the youngest member of the Ogun State cabinet in Nigeria and is also the Special Adviser on Millennium Development Goals to the State governor. (*Seven*-a documentary play): "How did I come to speak out? Well I was living in the US and you know a lot about any other place, even other parts of America, or Canada! Their nearest neighbor! So what is the chance that they're going to know about Nigeria and care?...The elected president of Nigeria is in jail...I thought I'd be speaking to a vacuum, that nobody would hear, but they cared and they listened and that is how I began to find my voice." (273)

Testimonies subsequently intersect and fade in and out of each other, using culturally specific music and props: Inez describes her country saying, "Northern Ireland was a profoundly unjust place to live. It still is. It's a very cold house for the poor. In the North if you challenge injustice and you're not on the side of the status quo, you have to be on the other side! A very rigid power system. The Guatemalan Anabella then repeats:

I won excellent grades which help me to win a scholarship to study law.'Discrimination' is that

period of my going to law school. My scholarship was to private university. When I got there, my school mates discriminate against me because they have money and I am poor people. They say to me 'You must go to public university. You are not our circle. I tell them: 'Just because you say to me that I must not go here? No! Forget it! Bye, bye!' I don't know what it is to be silent. I must all the time defend my rights. 'You do not have the same as I have between my ears,' I tell them. 'If you discriminate against me for being poor or being woman, I am going to discriminate against you for being stupid!'(274)

Likewise, Sochua applies culturally specific Cambodian rites in an attempt to help Mony, a girl rescued from a brothel, restore her soul by going through what she calls Calling of the Souls where the other actors ensemble to form the community and start chanting:

COMMUNITY MEMBERS. (Chanting)  
Oh precious pralung, what you see today to be the river bank is actually total darkness. You must beware all the trees which harbor evil spirits in disguise...I am tying strings around your wrist and mine, to unite you with your relatives, old and young, grandmothers and grandfathers. May each string bring back your soul and may your mind and body be whole...I am finishing my call, oh nineteen souls, come back all together now... (275)

When lights shift to Marina, one finds out how domestic violence in Russia has been spreading:

Testimony in Performance of  
The Fence and Seven

MARINA. I am talking to two other women—one is homemaker, the other is a computer programmer. I say, you know (to the women) I am doing a survey at the institute and we have these letters coming in, women talking about domestic violence.

FIRST WOMAN. Domestic violence?

SECOND WOMAN. What do you mean?

MARINA. (Aside to the audience) When I was growing up in the Soviet Union, no one talked of such things. We did not even have words for it. So I explain that it is... (Turning to women) when husbands are controlling, jealous, when they put you down and won't let you speak to other women or your family, isolating you. And the emotional abuse, the psychological pressure slowly comes to physical abuse. And sometimes not so slowly. (To audience) After I explain to them, both of them—both of them—say their husbands are abusing them. One for six years. One for ten—I feel something sinking inside me. Later the one who is a homemaker calls me crying.

FIRST WOMAN. My husband was putting on his suit. And a button came off. And he picked up his shoe and slammed me in the face. In front of the children.

MARINA. (Aside to the audience) Her face is bruised, swollen, for a week. (To the Woman) Why don't you just leave him?

THE FIRST WOMAN. (A long beat, lost) You know, where would I go?


MARINA. (To audience) So I start calling social services. I call different agencies and I ask: Who can help a woman in a situation like this? And everywhere the answer is

'No one. It's a private matter.' Well I am not ready to accept that. So I get an office and a phone and set up the domestic violence hotline-actually I call it a 'trust line'. Because all the women could do is trust. (276)


When Anabella discusses domestic violence, testimonies overlap again: "Ah, it is so hard. I am all the time declaiming, denouncing, but they don't investigate anything! Impunity is the queen of Guatemala. When the law has no consequences, then everyone thinks 'I can do what I want. I can steal, I can murder, I can beat up my wife.' The domestic violence is going to be a crime very soon because we are pushing to create this law."(276) Marina is complaining that fourteen thousand women are killed annually by their husbands and Farida, alone, walking in the mountain, carrying a pack, insists that if there is no clinic, hospital, transportation, there is nothing.(277)

Sochua wraps up the string to put it away and declares that she failed to restore Mony's soul because the man who first raped her has never been found. As a result, her soul will never return to her and she will end up in some other brothel.

Eventually, the seventh character, Mukhtar Mai from Pakistan, shows up: "Illiterate peasant woman, modest and delicate, becomes increasingly articulate and fierce, about 30" (*Seven* 270). She was gang- raped by four men and forced to walk home almost naked in retribution for an assumed honor crime committed by her brother: "I was raped by those four men of the Mastoi tribe...When they finished with me, I am thrown outside. My clothes are torn and I am nearly naked. I lie on the ground, alone with my shame...Now I am unclean and dishonored-in the eyes of the tribal elders, my family and the villagers. In that one hour on the stable floor, my life has been destroyed" (281). Mukhtar and her tormenting story won world attention. Instead of taking the traditional women's route



## Testimony in Performance of The Fence and Seven



of committing suicide, she audaciously pressed charges against her rapists and brought them to justice: "In Pakistan, staying alive is seen as more cowardly and shameful than the rape itself...But if I don't commit suicide, what will I do with my life?"(283) Instead of taking money as compensation, she built schools to improve the condition of women, and became an advocate for education in her country: "I don't need money. I need a school... A school for girls in my village. They must learn to read, to write, to know their rights as citizens...Help me build a school...And so begins my new passion, my mission in life". The organization she founded is the champion defender of women's rights and education in the Southern region of Punjab Province, Pakistan, a region with some of the world's worst examples of women's rights violations, such as rape, gang rape, domestic violence, honor killing, vani (exchange of women in settling the disputes), forced and child marriages. (*Seven*- a documentary play, 4).

The seven women have been occupying separate positions on the stage. Increasingly their words begin to overlap and they move in proximity, forming a community:

Anabella. Men, very strong, come to my office looking for me. They wear suits and coats to cover their gun. 'We are looking for Anabella. She is on the list. We know her death date!'

Mukhtar. I receive death threats. The government revokes my passport, forbids me to leave the country, place me under house arrest.

Inez. My car is surrounded by soldiers, paratroopers, my door flung open. I'm pulled out and thrown over the car and they're screaming: Who am I? What am I? What am I carrying?


Fareda. The husband pours acid on her face, the side of her neck.

Marina. The woman covers the baby with her body but the husband keeps beating her. She asks for a divorce, but he says: 'I will kill you and tell everyone you ran away with another man.' (293-294)


Then, each woman recounts her own achievements; and the play ends with the phone ringing. It is another call for help: "Suddenly a phone rings. Each woman on stage instinctively reaches toward it-then freezes. The phone continues to ring as lights fade to blackness."(294)

*Seven* is such an inspiring drama that proves the belief that one person could indeed make a genuine difference. The triumphant lives of these real-life heroines allow the audience to experience a variety of cultures and bear witness to the hardships these women have faced in fighting the exploitation of women and eliminating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, persecution, human trafficking, and child abuse:"*Seven* not only reflects the various distinctive regional, cultural and national communities from which the testimonies emanate, but also through the cumulative power of presenting the women's stories of overcoming injustice and hardship side by side, a wholly credible, cohesive and most crucially, inspiring celebration of international sisterhood across continents is created"(Forsyth 12).The play succeeds to attract new audience to the theatre and to encourage a commitment to human rights issues: "Thousands of emerging women leaders from around the world are inspired and empowered to fuel the engines of progress in their countries and mentor other women in the process"(Etchells 265).

Literature is one of the most effective ways of representing and rethinking identities, cultures and traumas.



## Testimony in Performance of The Fence and Seven



Testimony has newly become central and omnipresent. It is a speech act that draws meaning from its effect on the audience. Theatre of Testimony has been marked by the dramatic interpretation of individual and collective narratives, and of politically stimulating topics where the so-called second-hand events of history and literature are arranged, focused and ordered, for maximum clarity and effect. Over the past fifty years, theatre and performance have been positioned as fundamental practices with which to rethink gender, economics, war, language, culture and one's sense of self. Many people who have experienced a traumatic event and have felt the need to bear witness to it, have found in the theatre a means of survival and reconciliation with their past. Theatre has the power to invite the spectator to respond critically to what he or she sees, as it awakens in its audience a feeling of ethical responsibility towards the events they are witnessing.

Both *The Fence* and *Seven* show individuals' real attempts to cope the best way they can with overwhelming feelings. Though the two pieces represent two different approaches to constructing a play from testimony, they deploy testimony in order to draw a particular attention to human rights issues to allow for the diffusion of information, the stimulation of compassion, and the raising of consciousness. Writers in both works bear witness and speak for those who do not want to or cannot, and put history in conjunction with imagination and subjectivity.

Works Cited

- Agger, I., and Jensen, S.B. "Testimony as ritual and evidence in psychotherapy for political refugees". *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 3 (1), 115-128: 1990. Print.
- Allen, Jon G. *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1995. Print.
- Audi, Robert. "The Place of Testimony in the Future of Knowledge and Justification." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (4) (1997): 405-22.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Print.
- Cizmar, Paula, Catherine Filloux, Gail Kriegel, Carol K. Mack, Ruth Margraff, Anna Deavere Smith, and Susan Yankowitz. *Seven: The Methuen Drama Anthology of Testimonial Plays*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014.
- Etchelles Tim. *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Forsyth, Alison ed. "Testimony in Performance: Memory in Action." *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Testimonial Plays*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014. Print.
- Gilbert, M. Gilbert. "Writing Wrong." In Nancy K. Miller and Jason Daniel Tougaw's: *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Print.