

# BOWERBIRD

*The art of  
making theatre  
drawn from life*

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Valentine**



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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be advised that *Bowerbird* contains images and references to Aboriginal people who have now passed.

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# Prologue

Mostly it feels like you don't know – like you're reaching for something that you can't quite grab. Some writers talk about their fear of the blank page, but the playwright who draws work from life can have the opposite problem. Spoilt for choice. Presented with myriad possibilities and competing ideas of how to condense the source material or arrange it in a theatrically dynamic, original and compelling way. Lost in a sea of options, yet perversely obsessed with the interview not done, the perspective not transcribed, the final piece of the jigsaw forever elusive. And it's not about a lack of confidence, although that can hum away in the background for longer than you might expect. It's about not *trying* to have clarity. It's about waiting until you do.

That's how you know you're working. Rewriting your script with a perpetual feeling that you are sinking into chaos – that is what creating feels like. It can take a long time, trying things out, until you begin to hear the voice that knows why it is speaking and what it has to say. And while writing fiction can feel like drawing something out of yourself, verbatim playwriting can feel more like structuring the transcript of the party that brings all your disparate interviewees together. The story as told by the people you have met, if they were in a room together; the way they would compete and interrupt each other, and cut off anyone who went on too long or encourage someone else who was really fascinating. If they begin to brawl or riot – so be it.

While there is an elegance to the artifice of a fictional play, the craft of verbatim playwrights needs to be even more seamless, even more invisible. Like the greatest actor, the verbatim writer needs to appear to disappear, so that the 'reality' of the story seems natural and authentic, as if there were no other way to present it. Erasing the individual to

privilege the collective – except when it serves the story to make it self-consciously theatrical, Brechtian, meta. And carefully, so carefully, oscillating between the suspension of disbelief and a playful rejection of it.

If you suspect that expressing the beauty of human dignity and the callousness of human cruelty begins with the tongue, you may be a writer for the theatre: ‘Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits’ (Proverbs 18:21). It’s an adage to build a writing practice on, a fascination with language as an armour, as a blanket, as a balm.

I have written *Bowerbird* for theatre students and writers, especially those interested in the many variations of verbatim or what I personally call ‘close work’ writing, by which I mean work drawn closely from a source – either in a community or an archive or elsewhere – and informed by the cultural and social dynamics of the world in which we contemporaneously live. It entangles my personal experience, reflections on writing and some best practice ideas. I hope it will inspire others to bring to the stage the stories under their own feet or in their own backyards.

Even if you don’t want to be a writer, I hope that some of the artistic values I espouse here – of working with community to disrupt entrenched privilege, thinking creatively and taking risks, working outside siloed organisations and conventional paths, constantly reinventing both yourself and your practice, investing in lifelong learning and curiosity, and diversifying your sources of income – will be useful in a century where all of us will work in multiple settings over a lifetime.

Finally I need to mention how the global, online context has changed the consumption, critique and creation of the performing arts. Clearly the internet is a remarkable tool for both community connection and research for theatre makers. Not only archives and libraries but a veritable flood of information and resources can be found online. As a writer you can check facts with a click. But the essential premise of this book is to urge you to suit up for what might be described as ‘old school’ research – actually getting out into the world and talking to real people, attending lectures, looking things up in libraries. Close work writers will want to find, collect and commit to the page original,

copyrightable work which presents insights, perspectives and voices not otherwise heard, or at least not in the way you sieve them through your original voice.

# 1

## Flushing out the ears

As a child I regularly had my ears flushed out. The doctor would fill a large metal syringe with warm water and gently squirt it into my ear canal while I held a small metal kidney-shaped dish at the side of my head to catch the discoloured wax lumps that obscured my hearing. Now I say warm water because that's how he described it, but to my sensitive childish skin it may just as well have been boiling oil. The first time he did this procedure, the doctor told me it would be 'uncomfortable'. He was wrong. It was painful. The ear is not an orifice you ever want anyone to put anything into. Ever. Think of being in rough surf with a fistful of ear buds being simultaneously rammed into your brain.

The cause, he said, was my 'irregularly shaped' ear canal which caught the wax and allowed it to build up instead of flowing onto the pillow as it did from the more regularly-formed ear canals of the children in our neighbourhood. My aural disability meant that I could look forward to a lifetime of inner ear washouts, the liquid rattling around inside my skull, surging against my brain and sometimes trickling down my throat.

The upside of these aquatic canaloscopies was emerging from the doctor's surgery with the most glistening, shiny new, clean-as-a-whistle hearing. The auditory world would rush in and suddenly I could hear everything – and I mean *everything* – in the most exquisite detail. The orchestra of summer cicadas, deafening to your common or garden variety ear canal, sounded to me as if they were physically inside my head, their legs and noisy thoraxes dangling out of my ear hole. The traffic roared, speech was a shout, the shower was a thunderous waterfall. I could hear the sound of a fly's legs rubbing as it scuttled



across the kitchen table, I could hear the neighbour's washing machine in its spin cycle two houses away, I could hear the thwack of the leather ball on the wood of a cricket bat in a front yard two suburbs over.

I attribute my early love of audio art to this experience of a world going quieter and quieter and then, post-procedure, ringing with presence. I did not grow up listening to the radio. My grandmother had a transistor but it was always tuned to the races, so I had no nostalgic relationship to what she called the wireless. But I first expressed myself as a dramatist in the then old-fashioned medium of radio, not in the more generationally appropriate medium of film. And from radio I learned an early love of superb diction in that most beautiful and lyrical medium for artistry, the actor's voice.

I have used this story, this revelation about my warped inner ear, as the starting point of my ruminations about my life as a playwright to illustrate the necessity of becoming a good listener. It is the foundation of all that I am and all that I still might be. Listening. *Carefully. Attentively. Hyper-sensitively.* And also to tell you that being a good listener is not about being silent. I mean, some of it is about being silent, having the self-discipline to shut up and let someone else talk. But good listening is an active process – a cat-and-mouse game where you draw out your subject by convincing them that in some ways you have become an extension of their own brain. So that when you speak you say something with which they either agree so entirely that it is a surprise to them, or something that articulates, in a distilled way, everything they have been trying to say.

Isn't that kind of conversation just the most inspiring, most world-shaking thing to do? To talk, *really talk* with someone and in that hour, in that forty minutes, be able to externalise all that has previously been residing only in their own consciousness. *That* is your aim in every interview. You have to listen closely, carefully, because this has to be the most interesting, most revealing, most self-revealing conversation that your interviewee has ever had. You are tuned to the tiniest clues about who they are, you are armed with the most sophisticated insights into how human nature works, and you are listening – with your ears, with your spirit, with your mind, with your gut. And when they pause for breath, when they stumble in their monologue, you will make the one

salient point that will set them off again into new territory, saying things they didn't know they knew, had not consciously thought before. You will spin a spell over them so they are fully alive in the present moment – not recalling things they thought before, or relating stories they have already digested – but jumping synapses in their brains to new thoughts, new insights, new revelations. And when you type that up and put it on stage, an audience will hear a person on the horns of a dilemma, on the brink of understanding, in the dramatic moment of self-knowledge. And that's what will make it good theatre: transformative storytelling, instead of dry, pre-digested, factual analysis.

So flush out your ears. Concentrate on what people around you say. You'll realise that people are more elliptical, incorrect, inaccurate and obfuscating than you knew. We are seduced by faces and tones – if someone looks friendly and speaks gently we think they are being honest with us. You need to ignore the persuasions of a person's external appearance or voice. If you listen to what they generalise about it will tell you their value system; listen to who they bitch about and you will know their fears.

Agatha Christie is perhaps the last person you might expect me to invoke as a literary role model, a worthy writing instructor. All those uber-polite, abominably-genteel BBC crime shows; all that appalling expositional dialogue and creaky plotting. And yet Agatha Christie, while not esteemed as such, is one of the world's most successful writers for theatre. Her play, *The Mouse Trap*, in continuous performance since 1952, is the longest running work of theatre in London's West End. Personally I don't much like her writing or the excruciating television adaptations of it. I don't wish to be Anglo-centric or genre-validating either, or to suggest that commercial success is the ultimate arbiter in valorising her. But I do want to choose an unlikely, unnoticed female playwright (she wrote more than twenty plays) and boil down Christie's main premise, her overarching message – which is 'pay attention'. Observe the signs. Watch carefully, listen carefully. Look at things in new ways, believe what you see and hear yourself, not what other people tell you. Don't judge by façades. See through people and their smokescreen defences. Pay attention.