

community narratives and social history as well as personal archives can provide material from which performances may be constructed. Chapter Seven goes on to explore how the dramatic representation of well-known narratives may serve as a platform for creativity that can be enjoyed by both audience and performers.

Hayden White has commented that 'to raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself' (White 1987: 30). The link between narrative and culture is frequently subject to radical questioning in devised performance; narrative shapes experience, tests assumptions and makes connections. The presentation of a shared story offers not only the potential for the establishment of a bond between the audience and performers, but also an opportunity for the spectators to partake of a creative aesthetic that challenges the patterns established by traditional plays. The examples chosen demonstrate how the stage becomes a flexible playground in which epic presentations of place, time and characterisation embrace the audience as collaborators in an imaginative journey.

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FIVE

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PERFORMANCE

Drawing on your own experience

Autobiographical narratives are spaces where an individual's private stories are offered up for public consumption. Since its identification as a discrete practice, autobiography, with its reflection on personal experience, has prompted discussion about the relation between fact and fiction, the nature of selfhood and the mechanics of representation. These concerns can also be related to autobiographical performance, which is the subject of this chapter. The contemporary practice of autobiographical performance can be traced back through the Happenings of the 1960s and 1970s where the relationship between art and everyday life was blurred and the focus was not on the skilled performance of a character in a narrative but on participants being 'themselves' in a range of situations.

Issues of self and identity have been central to discussions of performance practice in general but autobiographical performance throws up particular questions in that the selfhood of performers is explicitly foregrounded as they seek to represent themselves. While Stanislavsky and Brecht (among many others) have offered up theories of acting which are concerned with how performers may apply their own experiences to the roles they are playing, a discussion of autobiographical performance demands a consideration of the performance of self rather than the representation of another person. Indeed, this type of performance has even been termed 'non-acting', as it appears to work against a masking role and to communicate with the audience in a direct manner. Non-acting can be understood as functioning in the tradition of the modernist avant-garde in that it is not a mimetic

practice that seeks to represent a fictional character, but a reframing of reality that seeks to blur the boundaries of art and life. Furthermore, non-acting can be viewed as a performative practice that frames the everyday in a manner which reflects upon the constitution of identity itself.

Contemporary devisers often explicitly draw on their own experience when creating work for performance and such work can be seen to engage with issues of authenticity, selfhood and reception. Questions of authenticity are raised when fact is blended with fiction; selfhood is addressed as performers present a distinct persona to the audience; and the processes of reception are heightened as they invite the audience into an active relationship with the material. Methodologically, the use of personal interests and narratives as source material leads to a complex creative process that reflects upon real life data to shape a performance piece. As with other autobiographical narratives, autobiographical performance often fuses factual material with fictional elements. The processes of production which bring together truth and fantasy are highlighted by Louis Renza, a postmodern critic who, with reference to the bricolage that may constitute an autobiographical narrative, disputes the idea that the self is a coherent unity which might be called 'authentic'. Rather than viewing autobiography as a direct communication between the essential selves of the author and their audience as earlier commentators on the field had done, Renza foregrounds the process of creation which sits at the heart of the production and reception of autobiographical texts. He notes that the production of autobiography is a result of a reflection upon personal experience that is subjected to the filters of memory and personal editing. Instead of seeing autobiography as a direct reflection of reality or a purely fictional creation, Renza posits that:

We might say, then, that autobiography is neither fictive nor nonfictive, not even a mixture of the two. We might view it instead as a unique, self-defining mode of self-referential expression.

(Renza 1980: 295)

Renza highlights the way in which an autobiographical text may trouble the binary opposition of truth and fiction through inhabiting a creative space in-between. This blends elements of both factual detail and fictional fantasy around the persona of the performer.

A variety of reasons can be identified for the use of personal experience within contemporary devised work, ranging from ideological

impulses to artistic pragmatism. Some devising companies employ personal experience as a vehicle to explore sociopolitical situations. For example, feminist theatre company Common Ground drew on its collective personal experience of the peace camp outside the gates of Greenham Common cruise missile site to develop a production (*The Fence*, 1984) that examined women working together for peace. Such work holds to the feminist principle that the personal is political and employs autobiographical narrative as a means of substantiating an ideological message. Aesthetic concerns may also lead to the application of autobiographical methodology. Thus, as with the modernists, the practice of non-acting may be employed as a strategy to disrupt conventional modes of presentation and reception and encourage a fresh perspective on the relationship between life and art within the performance event. For example, British theatre company Frantic Assembly makes use of the personas of company members within its shows. Company members have used each other's given names within performances and even included sections which made reference to their everyday lives. This strategy encourages audience members to identify with the actual performers, something that may, in turn, heighten their anxiety about the level of personal risk the company members are taking in their highly physicalised performance. In short, the autobiographical element of the work is used as a device to encourage engagement as the audience's awareness of physical and emotional vulnerability in the performance is heightened.

Public witnessing is also a significant element within contemporary autobiographical performance practice. While American sociologist Scott Lasch sees the contemporary confessional mode as evidence of increasing narcissism, trauma studies scholar Shoshana Felman notes that the witnessing of personal testimony has become increasingly important. She argues that large-scale traumas such as the Holocaust can prove to be overwhelming and incomprehensible, yet, through the narration of a personal story, an individual may make sense of it within their own psyche. Within this process the listener has a responsibility to bear witness to the story and as such, '[break] down the isolation imposed by the nature of the event' (quoted in Anderson 2001: 129). Rather than being passive spectators, audiences for autobiographical performance are drawn into a relationship with the performer due to the authentic nature of the material and the fact that the story is being told directly to them. Autobiographical performance acknowledges observers and places an emphasis on sharing intimacies with witnesses.

Autobiographical performance is a distinct mode of working with an emphasis on a self-reflexive, creative methodology which itself has implications for the formal presentation and reception of the work in terms of the framing of intimate content. Those engaged in the practice are concerned with presenting personal material to an audience and, as such, work to fashion narratives from their everyday lives into an artistic product that may be presented within a public arena. In such work tensions arise from the public presentation of thoughts, feelings and behaviours which are conventionally considered personal and confidential. These tensions are explored and even exploited for their theatrical effect. The making, delivery and reception of the work are all shaped by an approach that centres on personal experience. This chapter will consider the implications of fusing fact and fantasy; the performance of self; and the notion of the audience as witnesses.

Secrets and lies

Sheffield-based Third Angel is an example of a devising company which explicitly draws on autobiographical material to develop creative work. The company describes its working practice as follows:

We are used to making work that borrows stories from our own lives and other people's lives. We're used to making work that strays into the grey area between the truth and fiction, memory and imagination. This is what we do: work that incorporates documentary detail and fiction but doesn't bother to point out which is which. (Kelly 2000: 49)

Third Angel's inhabitation of the 'grey area' between truth and fiction is exemplified in its piece *Where from Here* (2001) where a description of a room in the fictional story is an actual description of a performer's real bedroom. During rehearsal the company discovered that the rooms they fabricated lacked the detail that they felt was necessary to carry the action of the show. The director noted that they were 'not mundane enough' and so they looked to borrow from everyday life as they perceived that such material would provide an engaging aura of authenticity (Third Angel 2004). In its experimental work, Third Angel has continued to explore possibilities of blending the details of autobiography with fictional narratives.

Class of '76 (1999) is an autobiographical project that caused Third Angel to reflect upon its working processes. The show had its first incarnation as a fifteen-minute piece wherein performer Alexander Kelly presented information about his former classmates from Chucky Infants' School and what they had become. All the information – such as Lakhir Singh playing football for the world – was fabricated, even some of the names were made up because Kelly could not remember them. This prompted a research process which led to a second version of the piece that sought to present the truth and was witnessed by some of the people that Kelly was discussing. The final development of the work was a version that reflected upon the preceding process. In this piece Kelly introduced himself and his project to the audience and then explained about the making and reception of the work, taking time to reflect upon the role of memory in this process.

Memory is a key aspect in the creation of autobiographical performance. The human memory acts as a filter and, as a consequence, what is remembered may not be the truth but an embroidered version of the real. In *Class of '76* Kelly says of his classmates, 'This is how I remember them', highlighting the potential slippage between how they really were and how they are being represented (Third Angel 2003). Through such comments, the piece foregrounds the possibility of different versions of reality which arise due to different subjectivities. For example, Kelly allows for various perspectives of playground encounters. In other words, Kelly announces himself as a storyteller and actively engages in a mode of self-representation which also allows for the possibility of writing from other subject positions.

The practice of retelling and remembering can also lend a formal structure to the performance work. *Class of '76* was presented as if it were a factual encounter. Kelly often read from a clipboard, and pointed to faces from a class photograph in a manner that seemed to authenticate the information that was being delivered. Sequences within the piece were framed by comments such as 'What else can I remember?', which were then followed by a list of bullet-point memories such as: 'Mr Turner teaching us how to brush our teeth and cutting his tie in half in assembly' (Third Angel 2003). There was no attempt to recreate the action; instead, the emphasis was on the moment of remembering. This relationship between the past and the present indicates the ways in which autobiography is constructed. Renza notes that:

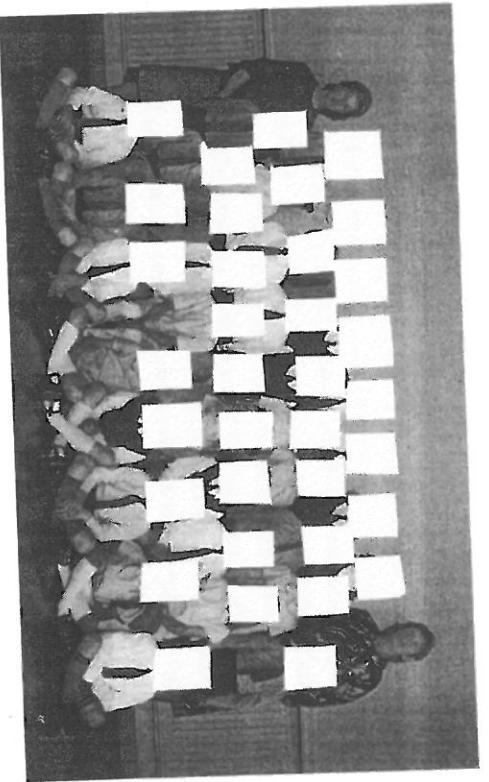


Figure 5.1. Third Angel: *Class of '76*. Projected memories served as the substance for the performance event.

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The content of the narrative set[s] up a screen between the truth of the narrated past and the present of the narrative situation.

(Renza 1980: 271)

In performance the present of the narrative situation is heightened in a way it might not be on the page as the performers stand in front of the audience and directly announce themselves as storytellers. Thus Kelly presented information directly to the audience in the present moment of performance and acted as a conduit for information about events that happened in the past. The audience was aware that his account of events may have involved a reshaping of facts. Indeed, the company commented that, in question and answer sessions, audience members often asked about what was true, even though Kelly had stated that he was telling the truth (Third Angel 2004). It seems that there is a concern in the minds of the audience to make sense of the narrative and to understand where reality lies.

Renza posits that an autobiographical narrative is always 'an incomplete literary project' in that, although it has a beginning, it has no middle or end (Renza 1980: 295). This complex relationship between the past and present affects the ways in which autobiography is constructed. Kelly notes that *Class of '76* has a sense of 'unfinished

business'. He does have all the information about all the people in the photograph and, within the piece itself, there is not time to give a full account of the information he does have (Third Angel 2003). Kelly offers his memories of the people but, as he states to the audience at one point in the piece, 'you might know differently' (Third Angel 2003). The reception of the piece certainly seems to indicate that audience members made personal associations with the material. Discussions of school life provoked laughter as the audience related to the performer's narratives. For example, it seems that many people can relate to a story about a school bully. Presenting authentic detail from the performer's experience opens up personal memories for audience members.

Performing self

Class of '76 is a good example of the practice of non-acting that is often seen in autobiographical performance. Rather than working to present named characters that are distanced from themselves, performers can be seen to be performing themselves – or at least versions of themselves. At the beginning of the piece Kelly introduced himself as a 'large part of Third Angel' and described how he always wanted to be a detective (Third Angel 2003). These are truths about himself. However, the presentation of these facts is framed by an editing process. So, for example, although he also always wanted to be a geologist, such information does not serve the thrust of the creative piece and so is left out. Nigel Charnock, a founder member of British-based physical theatre company DV8 and now maker of his own shows including solo work, describes how this performance of self might be negotiated. He states:

The shows I do are always about the people that are in the show, not about something separate from them. I don't ask them to play characters – it's always: What would you do? ... So on stage they are who they are only more heightened: bigger, with the volume turned up a bit.

(Charnock 1996: 31)

This is a common working practice, and performers in autobiographical work are often engaged in presenting heightened versions of themselves. Their identity as 'real people' and as performers is blurred as they do not have a mask of character, yet they are also clearly

behaving in a heightened and self-conscious manner. Howell suggests that 'acting [is] pretending to be someone else, and nonacting performance [is] concentrat[ing] on pretending to be yourself' (Howell 1999: 408). Thus autobiographical performance troubles the activity of presenting a role and does not delineate between the authentic person and the creation.

Autobiographical performance heightens an awareness of the complexity of the presentation of self and this is intentionally made explicit to the audience. This may, in turn, prompt the audience to reflect upon the performance of self within everyday life and its codes and conventions. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman discusses the way in which people shape their behaviour in order to suit the social drama they are in and, as such, play out particular roles. American performance artist Laurie Anderson, who has been creating experimental performance work for over twenty years, draws on this role-playing for her performance work. She describes herself as not acting but engaging in different 'talking styles' as happens in everyday life:

For instance, I've used about eight talking styles today, starting with a phone call about a death in the family and talking with my mother, then screaming at the lawyer in my most efficient, business-like style.

(quoted in Howell 1999: 407)

This conflation between real life and performer is a development of modernist avant-garde practice which Claire MacDonald notes has 'sought to close the gap between art and life' (MacDonald 1995: 191). The self-conscious presentation of self draws attention to the exploration of identity which is often at the heart of autobiographical performance.

The sense of reality in autobiographical performance lends the encounter a certain dynamic. Rather than pretending to be a character, performers are involved in narrating past events directly to an audience. This lends a vibrancy to the relationship between the storyteller and the audience; where actors address audiences directly, audiences become very aware that they are sharing space and a present moment. This demands a particular sense of presence from the performer. Anderson describes the texture of performing as herself. She says, 'You have to be right there and make it happen' (quoted in Howell 1999: 408). Being engaged in the moment is of course key to all performance practice but with autobiographical work this dynamic is heightened as

performers seek to make real connections with the audience through the revelation of self. So, for example, like much other autobiographical work, Anderson's performances often involve minimal staging so that the focus is instead on building a real rapport between the performer and the audience members.

Anderson's piece *Happiness* (2002) is one which explicitly engages with the exploration of selfhood and identity – both Anderson's own personal identity and the wider cultural identity of the United States. Anderson has long been a polemicist, producing work that is committed to exploring the contemporary sociopolitical climate, and *Happiness* is her response to the events of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Autobiographical material has been a key part of the artist's practice and she has developed a performance persona that is 'Laurie Anderson'. In *Happiness*, Anderson emphasised the personal resonances of the political situation and describes the work as her 'most autobiographical to date' (Anderson 2003a). Anderson's studio is a few blocks away from the Twin Towers site and, as such, she had a particular personal perspective on the international events. Anderson states that 'the shock of terrorism propelled me into a different place, (Anderson 2003a). *Happiness* is an intimate account of the personal journey that Anderson undertook and, as such, Anderson appears within the work as both subject and object. As in her other work there was no sense of the presentation of a character on stage; instead Laurie Anderson appeared as herself – or perhaps more correctly – as herself. Anderson wore no overt costume that might suggest character, but instead formal clothing – black trousers and jacket with a white shirt – which can be seen to suggest 'neutrality'. The series of monologues that Anderson shared with the audience focussed on identity and shape-shifting which served to heighten the audience's awareness of the performance of self that took place within the piece. Anderson describes how 'For the past year I've been looking for ways to escape my own perspective by putting myself in weird situations' (Anderson 2003a). Like many artists she carried out experimental work that generated material which she then assembled into a performance piece. *Happiness* is made up of episodic monologues in which Anderson gives account of her experiments in identity and recounts, among other things, her time with an Amish community, her work as a juror and her employment as a McDonald's server.

The McDonald's narrative in particular highlights the issue of everyday performance. Anderson described how her co-workers thought she was German and she did nothing to dispel that idea.

Indeed, she draws on the racial stereotype of German efficiency, stating that 'thinking of myself as German helped' as she endeavoured to meet McDonald's productivity standards (Anderson 2003b). This sense of shifting subjectivities and the exploration of the possibilities within the performance of self can be seen to be at the heart of both Anderson's project in particular and autobiographical performance in general. Heddon notes that:

experience, then, does not indicate some central core of identity, but seems to constitute subjectivity and, rather than being the reflection of some reality, should be the ground for an analysis of discursive systems. (Heddon 1998: 52)

Anderson's work, as with that of other autobiographical artists, opens up questions about the constitution of identity and the discursive systems that regulate it. The framed performance of self allows audiences the opportunity to consider how selfhood is created.

The staging of self demands a certain meta-theatricality as the performer demonstrates awareness that they are presenting an artefact for consumption by an audience. While this dynamic was apparent throughout *Happiness*, the closing section of the piece was explicitly self-referential. Anderson directly addressed the audience with the statement: 'It is the end of the play and the actors come out and look at you' (Anderson 2003b). This sequence acknowledged herself as a performer and heightened the audience members' awareness of their role as spectators through the manner in which she returned their gaze.

Audience as witness

The act of witnessing is central to the reception of autobiographical performance. Rather than being passive spectators, members of the audience are acknowledged as active listeners and the authentic nature of the material often draws the audience into an active engagement with the performer. In a review of Laurie Anderson's *Happiness*, Michael Betancourt notes that:

[Anderson's] stories leave us with the feeling that we have no answer to what we witness, and that simply bearing witness to these horrors through stories is a way of diminishing them. (Betancourt 2002)

The reality of the material that Anderson is presenting, as well as the intimate way in which she presents it in the first person, commands an active mode of readership. Betancourt identifies this as an act of witnessing.

Theatre is fundamentally predicated on the presence of an audience but the notion of witnessing suggests a different level of engagement. In examining the process of witnessing within performance, scholars have drawn on work within the field of trauma studies which is concerned with the analysis of emotional trauma and memory, and the relationship between these two. As in trauma studies, performance scholars acknowledge the efficacy of personal narratives and recognise the impulse within witnesses to bear testament to the story that has been presented to them. Witnessing is often identified as a response to catastrophe, but the performance scholar Peggy Phelan also notes that:

Witnessing in the theatre... can also help us discover the capacity to respond to the equally treacherous and equally urgent need to witness joy, pleasure, and the profundity of delight we feel in our mortal bodies, flawed minds, imperfect hearts, and impoverished tongues. (quoted in Etchells 1999: 13)

Witnessing, then, is an invitation to engage in two-way communication and, within devised autobiographical performance, that invitation is usually personal and intimate. Practitioners make the consideration of their audience a core element of their performance-making. Third Angel, for example, describes how it always asks the question 'who are the audience and why are they here?' (Third Angel 2004). In this manner the audience can be seen to be another character within the piece.

The emphasis on witnessing can be seen to shape form as well as content. Direct address to the audience has already been mentioned as being fundamental to autobiographical performance, as it recognises a dialogue between performer and audience within the performance event. Tim Etchells, director of devising ensemble Forced Entertainment, discusses the significance of the 'in-the-same-roomness' of theatre to the work that his company makes. He speaks of the:

struggle to produce witnesses rather than spectators [which] is present everywhere in the contemporary performance scene... an invitation

to be here and now, to feel exactly what it is to be in this place at this time.

(Etchells 1999: 18)

Forced Entertainment is based in Sheffield, UK and many of the performers have collaborated for twenty years, making a range of work from touring theatre pieces to installations. Their show *Speak Bitterness* navigates the concept of witnessing in a particularly challenging manner. The piece was first performed in 1994 and was made up of a litany of confessions both real and fictional. It has since been performed both as a theatre piece and as a six-hour durational work. The performers, dressed in formal suits, lined up behind a long table littered with papers and delivered their admissions directly to the audience – sometimes these were declared in loud voices and other times the confessions were barely audible. Within the theatre piece sections were also left unscripted allowing the performers the opportunity for spontaneous interaction with each other and the audience. The company decided that the audience should be lit throughout the performances in order to allow for eye contact between performers and audience members. It was the performers' desire to make contact with individuals within the auditorium in order to draw them into the performance work.

Etchells asserts that 'For us performance and confession have always gone hand in hand' (Etchells 1999: 219) and thus *Speak Bitterness* can be seen as a logical progression in practice, in that it experiments with the performative elements of confession. This impulse can be seen to arise from an autobiographical mode of working where, as Renza suggests, the orientation is towards what is usually kept secret (Renza 1980: 295). It can also be related to the cultural climate that feeds an interest in autobiographical narratives. Richard Sennett, among other cultural commentators, has suggested that Western society has become increasingly privatised and, in such a climate, critics have observed that access to the stories of others has been maintained through the media. What would have once been witnessed in everyday life is now only accessible as media products, a dynamic which has its apex in TV chat shows where guests present their personal stories for public consumption. Etchells describes how the text of *Speak Bitterness* draws on confessional forms such as chat shows, churches and public trials in order to create a piece where it appears that the desire is to confess to everything. A section of the text reads as follows:

We handcuffed Lee Morris to the railings in the playground and pulled his trousers down. We lived a harsh fast life; we were glad to be alive; we didn't have an opinion on anything except how crazy the world was. We're guilty of attic rooms, power cuts and bombs; we confess to statues, ruins and gameboys.

(Etchells 1999: 186)

The heady mixture of the outrageous and the banal, delivered in a self-reflexive manner that apes the confessional mode offers up a complex negotiation for the audience. MacDonald notes that this dynamic occurs within autobiographical performance in general and she states: 'In a society almost obsessed with self-revelation [such work] makes for interesting alliances and strange readings' (MacDonald 1995: 193).

It appears that the audience for autobiographical performance is looking to make an authentic connection with the material it is presented with. This is problematised by the fact that such performances are often a mixture of truth and lies and personal material is usually indistinguishable from the fiction. This authentic tone may prove seductive to audience members who, in the context of a confessional culture, want to believe that all they are told is real and this may backfire on the performers themselves. Third Angel, for example, was once confronted by an audience member who angrily stated 'You lied to me', despite the fact she had been aware that she was attending a performance (Third Angel 2004). In this way autobiographical performance work engages in complex negotiations with reality and fiction. This dynamic may itself be foregrounded within performance events. For example, in *Where From Here*, the female performer, having given her account of events throughout the piece, is left alone in the box set and delivers a monologue which begins 'I am a liar'. This charged moment highlights the performative quality of the work and heightens the audience members' critical awareness by asking them to re-evaluate all they have been told throughout the piece.

The concern to separate out reality from fiction relates to a desire to assess the skill of the performers, in that audience members desire to ascertain whether people are 'being themselves' or performing – a division that such work deliberately seeks to blur. In autobiographical performance there is always a play between what is truthful and what is make-believe. This reflects the processes of everyday life in that everyday performance may also embody truth. On another level, however, such practice raises questions as to what constitutes art and

where it differs from everyday life. The practice of non-acting can be traced back to the work of the modernist avant-garde and the anti-art movement where the negation of skill was seen to challenge and open up the limits of art practice. In this way the validation of personal stories through their framing in performance continues to develop a strand in radical art practice.

In conclusion, autobiographical performance can be seen to be a contemporary practice in the non-acting tradition of the modernist avant-garde. Like the avant-garde, the work raises questions about the relationship between truth and fiction and art and life as well as problematising the roles of the performer and audience member. Autobiographical performance relates to the current cultural climate, yet practitioners engage in autobiographical performance for a variety of reasons and this mode of working offers up particular methodological issues and formal conventions. The practitioners discussed in this chapter have all created work involving a complex fusion of truth and fiction. In performance they are involved in a presentation of self which is a heightened form of an everyday persona. They also all seek to engage their audience in an active reception of the work, a mode of witnessing that acknowledges the vibrancy of personal stories that are played out in a public arena.

SIX

NARRATIVES OF COMMUNITY

Concepts of community

Drama practitioners have long recognised that devised theatre is a good vehicle for shaping communities and challenging social injustice. Collaborations between professional theatre practitioners and community-based participants are often intended to improve the lives of the participants, to extend cultural democracy and contribute to the process of social change. Because devised performance emphasises participatory working methods, it has often been regarded as an effective and flexible way to move from the individualism of autobiographical narratives to more collective forms of community participation and social identification. The community arts movement is indebted to the aesthetic strategies of political activists and theatre-makers that were documented in Chapter Four as well as to innovations in educational theatre that encouraged members of diverse communities to explore and represent their collective and personal identities. The efficacy of much community-based theatre is built on the understanding that participating in drama enables participants' own narratives to be represented, reframed, rewritten and re-interpreted in ways which challenge cultural orthodoxies. It is a way of thinking about social change which relies on two highly contested concepts – community and narrative – both of which are complexly nuanced. This chapter offers an investigation of the role of devised theatre in representing and interrogating narratives of community.

Although the concept of community is generally regarded in positive terms – Raymond Williams famously described it as a 'warmly persuasive word' (Williams 1992: 95) – the actual experience of belonging