



Oide

Tacú leis an bhFoghlaim
Ghairmiúil i measc Ceannairí
Scoile agus Múinteoirí

Supporting the Professional
Learning of School Leaders
and Teachers

In Conversation with Dr Michael Finneran

Form, Genre, Style (transcript)



Introduction

I might preface all of this conversation by saying that these are labels. We use them to help describe the work, but of course they do occur, sometimes numerous within the same work of art. But they're ways of helping us to understand what it is that we're watching and what it is that that we're making.

I think my first bit of advice in terms of dealing with these is to lean into it a little bit, not to fight it.

I think to recognise that all of these things (genre, style, form) are going to exist probably in multiple within a piece of work, and each of them represents a point of entry into the piece of work. So I think the trick is not to fight too hard to designate a single label or a single designation.

I think it's to embrace the kind of the overlap and the messiness of all of these things and to use them as points of entry.

So, you know, in approaching a, a performance, it starts saying, well, where do we begin with this?

And each of these then provide different gateways and different avenues for discussion and for analysis, I think.

And I think that would be to encourage colleagues and listeners just to embrace that and not to look for a singular designation.

FORM

Verbatim theatre is where we take the text, the testimony, the words of real life humans who are being interviewed or whose views are being captured for a particular reason, because they've been in a situation or because they belong to a particular group. And the theatre maker then harnesses those words and she manipulates them into a performed text, as opposed to the fictional process that Yates or Gregory might have gone through in terms of an imagining, a a, a, a, a dialogue or a story. This is very much based in the real world and based in the reality of people's circumstances.

I, I think it's a little moment in some respects for people who are beginning to make theatre to realise that they're crossing over into not just telling fictional stories, but that they are actually entering into a process of representing real lives.

And with that comes responsibility around representation. So if we choose to gather, for example, the stories of our grandparents, we have to honour those stories. You know, we have to honour them by ensuring that the way in which they are portrayed on our stages has integrity, honours their life in some respects, as opposed to simply uses it in the utilitarian way for little sound bites.

So a process that we often use in making for verbatim theatre is of what's called member-checking, where once the script is compiled or maybe as a as an early stage of rehearsals. The people who've actually contributed the stories and the dialogues are invited into a private showing or a work in progress showing in order that they can literally respond as the people who've offered to the text in the first instance and start to say to the makers, I'm happy, I'm unhappy and and so on and so forth.

So in a nutshell, it's about representation.

I think of representation as opposed to appropriation. Good practise would be to have perhaps members of a creative team or critical friends or other people outside the production who would keep referencing how you're doing what you're doing. So if you want to think of it in a visual sense, we are making the tapestry, but all the threads are really authentic ones, but the tapestry itself is our creation nonetheless.

My sense is that the the creator of that thread or of that particular colour should be able to look upon their presence in the tapestry and feel that it adds to the story and it adds to the sum total of who they are as opposed to taking from it. It's the kind of slightly more onerous responsibility of telling a real story.

A lot of verbatim theatre does use kind of Brechtine techniques, as we would call them, in terms of direct address and, and in terms of there's no pretence that we're in a play here. It's like I'm going to walk out and I'm going to speak to you directly. I'm going to tell you my story. It's a more exposed form.

It's wide open in terms of how you choose to stage it. In the last 30–40 years, we've seen a huge turn towards the social in our theatre and social issues are finding voice. And I think that the real importance of verbatim theatre is that I can directly address those things, bring minoritized and underrepresented voices to the stage.

I also think that the kind of hybrid theatrical form where you've got a bit of music, you've got maybe a monologue, you've got a dialogue, and kind of represents something of the fragmented nature of a lot of modern scrolling culture. You're moving to the next thing, you're moving to the next thing, you're flicking up, you're scrolling up and so on and so forth. I think this theatrical form actually mimics some of that.

There's no through line in terms of a narrative. So it's bit, it's episodic by nature because verbatim theatre is based upon a series of narratives that are stitched together and put together.

You never achieve the same sort of depth that you would achieve if you were right. A place straight off, you know, even though there's an authenticity, it never gets deep, it gets long. And we see that most of all in terms of the characters, whereby we have really lovely, vivid moments, but we don't know masses about them. We don't tend to know all of their backstories or what has happened to them.

GENRE

Well, very, very simply a blend of tragedy in comedy. This is with both of them present to some degree, to an equal measure.

But I think more than that, I think it's the way in which both tragedy and comedy, you know that the intention of the playwright and the intention of the makers is to make you laugh and to make you cry and to lead you on that roller coaster journey all the way through. As we see in our case, his work whereby you've moments of epic tragedy in one moment and then moments of uproarious laughter the next moment.

So it's the blend, isn't it? Neither of them play servant to the other. It's the way that they're there as equal partners.

Tragedy comedy makes us feel as if we're wrong in laughing. Whereas of course, unfortunately, life being what it is, we all experience moments of tragedy, whether it's death or loss or whatever it might be. And we know that even in the darkest moments, there's silliness, isn't there?

And I think O'Casey reflects upon this and uses this to great degree so that that for me would be the distinction as opposed to comedy just being used to serve the tragedy or to take the edge off a little bit and give us some like relief in tragedy comedy. For me, the comedy works hand in love with the tragedy to make us as audience members more complicit in the scale of that tragedy.

I think because of the presence of the likeness of the comedic moment, I think it can actually deal with bigger tragedy than just tragedy in some respects as well.

So like, there tends to be grim subject matter violence and tends to be present in a lot of tragedy comedies. And there tends to be, you know, comedy is found in the extremity and the absurdity of what's going on.

The humour can often be found in the language and in the moral ambiguity of the characters and in their very hilarious character flaws. Stupidity takes on a new light, shall we say, in tragic comedy because it's stupidity that can get someone killed.

Whereas if you look at Mr. Bean, for example, which is just incredible comedy in its own light, or I'm Alan Partridge or all of that Steve Coogan body of work in the televisual sense, that's comedic. But there's never any sense of peril, is there?

Whereas tragedy comedy it, it's always right on the cusp, it's always right on the edge. So I think that makes it more compelling because it heightens and intensifies the nature of the tragedy, really.

So as makers, I think the first challenge to make them both good, It might seem really obvious, but comedy for me is really hard to achieve. Comedy, particularly where there's physical elements, requires physical intensity, it requires speed, requires a huge amount of rehearsal and all the rest of it. So I think that that's the first point.

If you want to make good tragedy comedy, you have to have good tragedy and good comedy. And they need to counterpoint each other and run seamlessly and transition quite quickly from one end to the next, but never to a point whereby they compromise each other. So it's that idea of counterpoint as opposed to compromise.

Because obviously, at the end of a scene where a character has been arrested or, you know, the point in shadow where many lose their life, if you're laughing at the end, you know, right in that moment, it diminishes the moment, but it's the point of which you laugh immediately afterwards or immediately beforehand, if that makes sense.

You know, we have a very strong visual in the Druid production. The banality, I suppose, of the exchanges in the tenement, for me offer a kind of a little lightness and a comedic nature which all of a sudden turns tragic instantaneously.

STYLE

This is one that I've played around in my mind a little bit because of course, as colleagues listening, we'll recognise it's a definition. Definition, isn't it? We're defining something by what it isn't, as opposed to what it is.

So let's dwell for a minute on naturalism, this idea that one could more faithfully depict the human condition and the various challenges and travails of what it means to be human by replicating the environment in which humans find themselves. You know, that's the basic idea of naturalism. Naturalism and realism are very, very close siblings, and naturalism strictly speaking, has a little bit more representation of gods and the supernatural than realism, but it's a small little differentiation.

So what we're looking at then in non-naturalism every respect, not in some respects, but the whereby some elements of naturalism in terms of dialogue and in terms of a story are present.

And obviously Tóraigheacht Diarmuid agus Gráinne is part of our mythology, it's part of our heritage. And these characters exist very vividly in our mythology.

But the way in which Phibín have chosen to tell the story and Michael Murphy has chosen to direct the story is not done because of course it couldn't have been done in any kind of realistic way. And because of course this happens if it happened, you know, such as the nature of myth thousands and thousands of years ago.

So we had no idea how Fionn related to Diarmuid than how Gráinne related to Diarmuid and so on and so forth. So of course you can't describe it in naturalistic way because we can't do that. So we have to rely upon non naturalistic methods.

So naturalism in a nutshell is the the attempt to faithfully replicate the world as it was. Non naturalism then means that we use other modes and other methods beyond naturalism in an effort to do that same thing.

So it's a broad-church definition. Anything that interrupts realism or naturalism and shakes it from its lethargy really, you know, non-naturalism just frees the maker and freeze the the creator of a piece from the spoken word.

Not everything has to be captured authentically or you're not even striving to capture everything authentically in dialogue. You don't have to worry a thing about it.

So with a massive story like a myth or like a legend, it's like pantomime. Pantomime is inherently non naturalistic because of course we're trying to tell incredible stories.

If you take Jack and the Beanstalk, you've got a giant, you've got a castle up in the clouds, you've got magic beans and beanstalks and so on and so forth. You can't possibly because most of those things don't exist in reality, you can't possibly tell that in a naturalistic way. So we use non-naturalistic methods.

So I directed a panto of Jack and the Beanstalk a number of years ago in the Lime Tree in Limerick and we didn't have a giant. Pat Shortt played the disembodied voice of the giant.

But we had an outside the pair of boots and we had a huge chair. So this is how the giant was represented by the empty chair and this massive pair of boots. And of course the audience, and particularly the young people and the children and the audience absolutely bought into it.

So Tóraíocht, it follows very much that same intent and it allows makers to capture wild chases across the country and fights and boar hunts and all sorts of crazy things that are simply unstageable otherwise.

Non-naturalistic methods are both beautiful, they're fun, they're crack and they also allow us to stage the unstageable.

And it's to encourage a freedom. It's to encourage people becoming more comfortable with their bodies and using their bodies because in terms of non-naturalism, the most potent mode of engaging with that is through the body as an aesthetic and through symbolic use of the body.

After that, the second thing for me then would be using masks. Whether it's blank masks or some of the expressions masks made by companies, they're great starting points.

The real strengths for me lie in the staging and lie in that sense of ensemble work and lie in the way in which the company in Phibín and Michael Murphy very much lean into the non-naturalism, that image that we're confronted with the beginning of these kind of clouds, which are roots that visual dominates all the way through and it evokes a cave, It evokes another world.

I think the challenge is pretty straightforward on if I can use the analogy of being like a child in a sweet shop. There's just so many places you can go.

For example, just to pick the the idea of staging some sort of a play. Where does one begin? It could be done to through dance. It could be done through symbolic movement. There's infinite possibilities in some respects in terms of where to begin.

I choose to see that as an opportunity because I think if people are responding to non-naturalism in a creative fashion, I think this is where the strengths and the abilities really come to the fore in

terms of leaning to what you know, if physical style and movement is something that really pleases you.

But it might also be a place where projection or scenography or use of strong visuals might be really opportune and and I would urge colleagues to follow in that regard or R responding creatively to this one.