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To what does it answer? Verbatim and site-specific playwriting

Abstract:

Kershaw and Nicholson ask whether “research in theatre and performance does anything different than what goes on in other ‘fields’ where humans desire to better understand why on Earth they are here” (2011, p. 14). This paper responds to this question by charting the development of a new verbatim and site-specific play, *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* and describes the fluid, collective and reflexive processes inherent in the creation and performance of the work. It suggests that as creators, actors and audience members interact with and haunt the script, archive and site, playwriting as research results – not solely in a fixed script or critique, but in a palimpsest of writing and performance. Finally, this paper asks how the open-ended, documented assemblage of script/s, data and understandings, arising from playwriting as research, might be collated and made available for interpretations and imaginings in new contexts.

Biographical note:

Julia Jarel is a Creative Writing PhD student at The University of Western Australia. Her current research investigates contemporary women of the Western Australian wheatbelt and their concepts of home, belonging and landscape. Julia has collaboratively written and directed numerous research-based theatre works inspired by sites including Rottnest Island, Kulin and Hale School’s Memorial Hall. She is an experienced playwright, theatre educator and researcher, and has a particular interest in the intersection of landscape, history, personal story and community connection.

Keywords:

Playwriting, practice as research, assemblage, site-specific, verbatim

Introduction

In August 2023, actors and invited guests assembled in the historic G20 Lecture Theatre at The University of Western Australia (UWA) to perform, hear and respond to the reading of a new play entitled *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023). The origin of this work was a creative writing exercise which experimented with applying verbatim playwriting techniques to a literary text and resulted in *Wilton* (Jarel, 2022), a one-act play. Serendipity and intuition (Sullivan, 2009) then saw this work evolve into the longer play, *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words*, which was both verbatim and site-specific.

This play was performed as a rehearsed reading, in a century-old building where Barbara York Main and many of the audience members had once attended and delivered lectures. The site therefore connected the subject of the play with the audience and the history of the university. Images and words of the past reappeared “uncannily in the midst of the present” (Carlson, 2001, p. 1) as the actors and audience members interacted with the “haunted text” – a verbatim “weaving together of preexisting textual material” (p. 17) spoken on a stage where Barbara and audience members had spoken before. By “continuing to work their power on the living” (p. 1), the “ghosts” of the haunted site and text prompted the sharing and assembling of memory, imaginings and interpretations.

This paper suggests that the fluid, collective and reflexive processes inherent in playwriting as research might result not solely in a fixed script and written critique, but in an open-ended, documented assemblage of script/s, data and understandings about “why we are here” (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011, p. 14). Finally, it asks how such a palimpsest of writing and performance might be collated and made available for future interpretations and imaginings in new contexts.

An introduction to Barbara York Main

Barbara York Main was born in 1929 in the Western Australian wheatbelt, on a farm in Kellerberrin. She was the only girl in the family and, while her brothers played sport and helped around the farm, Barbara had plenty of time to read the books sent by her correspondence teacher. She also developed her interest in “the small things, insects and small reptiles”, which were on a scale she “could relate to”. Barbara decided “very early on” that she was going to be both an entomologist and a writer (Main, 2012, Tape 1). After graduating from Northam District High School, Barbara enrolled in a science degree at UWA in preparation for a career in zoology or entomology. She hoped to be able to “pick up the literary interests and history and so on” through her own reading (Main, Tape 1). Barbara went on to become the second woman to earn a PhD from UWA and the first woman to do so in zoology. During her lifetime, she described more than seventy new species of spider and preserved ten thousand specimens in ethanol for future research (Burdick, 2019). In 1980, David Attenborough made a film about Barbara entitled *Lady of the Spiders*. In 2011, she was given the Medal of the Order of Australia for her service to the nation. In 2018, at the age of 89, Barbara was awarded the Medal of the Royal Society of Western Australia – making her the first woman to win it since its inception

in 1924 (Burdick). In addition to the publication of numerous scientific articles, Barbara wrote several books and short stories inspired by her work and experiences growing up in the wheatbelt. It is this literary writing, comprehensively examined in Tony Hughes-D'Aeth's *Like Nothing on This Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (2017), that inspired the playwriting as research central to this article.

An introduction to verbatim playwriting as research

Practice as research is defined as the use of “practical creative processes as research methods (and methodologies) in their own right, usually but not exclusively in, or in association with, universities and other HE institutions” (Kershaw et al., 2011, p. 63). This form of research originated in the “practice turn” of the 1960s which emphasised a “post-binary commitment to activity (rather than structure), process (rather than fixity), action (rather than representation), collectiveness (rather than individualism), reflexivity (rather than self-consciousness) and more” (2011, pp. 63–64). At the same time, the art world saw an increased exploration of the concept of “assemblage”, which can be described as creative, pluralistic and inclusive processes which produce work constructed using found materials (Niziołek, 2021, p. 272). A specific form of practice as research, which can also be seen as artistic assemblage, is verbatim theatre; named by Derek Paget to describe the theatre which flourished in regional Britain in the 1960s. At this time, the rise of the portable cassette recorder facilitated the use of meticulously transcribed, tape-recorded interviews to create theatre which was sourced and delivered verbatim (Paget, 1987). These plays told complex local stories by “distilling diverse personal narratives woven into a theatrical framework” (Anderson & Wilkinson, 2007, p. 154) and were developed so that specific communities could tell their stories through a variety of voices. With advances in technology, the form has continued to enjoy prominence at local, national and international levels, but its data collection and shaping practices have diversified. Source material may now be found “either in a community or an archive or elsewhere” (Valentine, 2021, p. 2) and blend interview material “with quotations from politicians and original writing” (Edwards, 2020, p. 68). Similarly, shaping techniques have been expanded to include compression, shaping, editing, juxtaposing, framing, the drawing of parallel storylines, amalgamation of characters and stories and the creation of fictitious dialogue to link verbatim material (Peters, 2017, pp. 118–119).

Despite this significant history of creative practice as research, Dallas J Baker (2018) claims that playwriting “is a nascent and undervalued research area” and that few who have completed PhDs in Australia, the UK and the US have “focussed [*sic*] on performance writing as a *writing practice*” (p. 175). He suggests that the study of playwriting might thrive within the creative writing discipline, which would lead to a playscript being studied “both as a text in, and of, itself (irrespective of production and performance) and as an artefact coming out of a specific writing and research practice” (p. 175). This observation is particularly relevant to the *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* project, which evolved from a Wheatbelt-focused playwriting research exercise within the creative writing discipline at UWA.

This exercise served as preparation for a research project which will use playwriting as research to investigate contemporary women of the Western Australian Wheatbelt and their concepts of home. As the research was yet to be conducted, the exercise proposed experimentation with applying verbatim techniques to a narrative text rather than interview material. The short story *Marginal Country* (1971) by Barbara York Main was chosen as the source material for this exercise because it is set in the Wheatbelt and is the author's "longest and most complexly realised fictional work" (Hughes D'Aeth, 2017, p. 427). This experiment had precedents in theatre works such as Nanni and James' play *Coranderrk – We Will Show the Country* and Alana Valentine's *Letters to Lindy*, which applied verbatim techniques to written, archival material rather than interview transcripts. It proposed "experimenting with script as a narrative form" (Debra Beattie et al., 2015, p. 2) and would allow the research candidate to "test and play with ideas" while also using "research methodologies to both understand and expand their existing writing practices" (p. 3).

Experimentation then began with applying contemporary and traditional verbatim techniques to the short story text. These included "direct address", which Peters (2017) describes as the "hallmark of the verbatim theatre" (p. 117). Direct address "provides an opportunity for the actor/character to speak directly to the audience, often positioning them as a friend/confidant" (2019, p. 45). On the first page of *Marginal Country*, for example, Wilton, the protagonist, is introduced to us:

In the region of their uneasy fusion he would find sometimes, in the headlights, tiny native mice. "Amazing that they should still be here, but they hang on." Gently he would lift them and place them through the fence. (Main, 1972, p. 21)

In the opening scene of the play, this text is used as stage directions and dialogue. Wilton is introduced to the audience as the protagonist as he addresses the audience directly:

Wilton, a young farmer, walks into the light of the headlights and crouches down to pick up something very small from the earth.
 WILTON *to audience* Amazing that they should still be here. But they hang on. (Jarel, 2022)

A second example of a verbatim theatre technique being applied to the literary text can be found in the creation of a composite character, "Bill". Peters (2017) explains that composite characters are often generated in verbatim theatre "to make thematic links to broader truths" (p. 119). In this exercise, "Bill" was created to represent the Nungoolin community and its beliefs:

"We're ploughing on Goodings' today", or "We start harvesting on Goodings' top paddock next week", and "The fence is down again across Goodings' creek". The Goodings themselves would be gone and forgotten but years later, try as he might to feel as his own, that stretch of low, grey, salt-scabbed country and the higher slope of stone and rock, Wilton knew with irritation, that it was "Goodings' Place" (Main, 1972, p. 22–3).

CEDRIC We're ploughing on the Goodings' today.
 BILL We'll start harvesting on the Goodings' top paddock next week.
 CEDRIC The fence is down again across Goodings' creek.
 BILL Years later, the Goodings themselves would be gone and forgotten,
 but try as he might to feel as his own,
 that stretch of low, grey, salt-scabbed country
 and the higher slope of stone and rock,
 Wilton knew, with irritation, that it was still
 WILTON *irritated* Goodings' Place. (Jarel, 2022)

The playwriting exercise also experimented with the repetition of text and speaking in unison to highlight moments of connection and bring the mood and tension from the short story to the stage (Peters, 2017, p. 119). In *Marginal Country*, for example, Barbara York Main writes poignantly of Wilton's wife Sylvia's pain as she roams the "half lived-in rooms waiting for school holidays" (1972, p. 35). This text was echoed and canonized by the three women in the play – Wilton's mother, Edith, his wife, Sylvia and his brother's wife, Joan:

EDI Leaving half lived-in rooms waiting for the school holidays.
 EDI/SYL Half lived-in rooms
 EDI/SYL/JOAN Waiting for the school holidays. (Jarel, 2022)

Interestingly, however, contemporary shaping techniques, particularly those which required created text, were repeatedly abandoned and replaced by the words of Barbara York Main. In a very early draft, for example, this text from *Marginal Country* – "It was here that Wilton Workman grew up, from here that he went away to school, to here that he returned and continued to live and work." (Main, 1972, p. 21) – inspired the following scene:

Kitchen "The Pines"

Lights up on an old wooden chair inside the farmhouse at "The Pines". Young Wilton is sitting on the chair while his mother, Edith, finishes cutting his hair.

EDITH Wilton Workman! Stop fidgeting! I'll be much quicker if you stop your
 infernal jiggling. *She snips.* There now. Done. That'll have to do.

WILTON Yes!

Wilton bolts for the paddock and trades places with his older self.

A subsequent draft reveals that the imagined dialogue and action in this scene had quickly been discarded. It had seemed inharmonious and jarring amid the words of Barbara York Main and was replaced with words taken directly from the short story text:

Kitchen "The Pines"

SENTINEL It was here that ...

WILTON Wilton Workman.

EDITH grew up.

WILTON picks up his suitcase.

EDITH And it was from here that Wilton went away to school.
WILTON walks out of the light. EDITH watches him go. Silence. Almost too long.
WILL SNR And it was to here that he returned
WILTON returns to the light of the kitchen without suitcase.
EDITH and continued to live and work.

The iterations of script which evidence this experimentation with verbatim theatre techniques now exist solely in a set of files on my laptop – yet they materially represent playwriting as research as a palimpsest. This term was “originally used for documents where text had been covered with other text, making the lower, older layers partially illegible” (Callahan, 2022, p. 162). Yet it can be equally understood as an archive of digitised drafts, with each one writing over the one before, revealing what is hidden behind the writing and what might come after it. In this case, the palimpsest reveals the historical processes of becoming, “the continual process of assembling and reassembling” (McHugh, 2018, p. 2) which resulted in an unpublished one-act play entitled *Wilton* (Jarel, 2022). While the use of a literary work as source text might prevent *Wilton* from being classified as a verbatim play in the traditional sense, *Marginal Country* (Main, 1972) provided a rich source of material for experimentation and practice with verbatim techniques. Unexpectedly, the attempt to bring *Wilton* to the stage then resulted in a longer work entitled *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023) which required the application of the practised verbatim techniques to both interview and archival material.

Serendipity, intuition and site-specificity

Despite Barbara’s significant scientific and literary achievements and strong connections with UWA, her literary writing is not as well-known as one might expect, even within the university. As “the scripted dramatic form has the potential for making research data far more accessible” (Debra Beattie et al., 2015, p. 4), the possibility of staging *Wilton* (Jarel, 2022) therefore offered an opportunity to bring Barbara York Main’s literary writing and connection to her alma mater to a new audience. This performance, preferably on campus, could take the form of a rehearsed reading – which Paget describes, in his discussion of documentary and verbatim theatre, as a “very specialised, stripped-down performance-for-a-purpose” (2010, p. 180). The script was therefore forwarded to Helen Munt, historian and heritage consultant, who currently manages the Callaway Centre, UWA’s international research centre based at the School of Music. This site, on Park Avenue, houses the historically significant, first fit-for-purpose buildings ever constructed for the university. Helen and I have previously produced a number of site-specific theatre works (Bottcher & Ludewig, 2015) and it was hoped that she might hear of an opportunity for the play to be performed somewhere in the university where Barbara had once studied and worked.

Soon after reading *Wilton* (Jarel, 2022), Helen Munt conducted some preliminary research herself and discovered that the Park Avenue buildings at UWA had once housed the zoology department. Remarkably, Barbara York Main had conducted much of her research in the very building where Helen now worked. This discovery inspired the possibility of mounting the reading of *Wilton* at the Park Avenue site. Such a theatrical event would serve three objectives.

Firstly, it would move the verbatim playwriting as research process forward by assembling an audience to hear and respond to the work. Further, such an occasion would provide an opportunity to introduce Barbara York Main’s writing to a new audience or, in a new guise, reintroduce it to those already familiar with her work. Finally, by mounting the performance at Park Avenue, the historic significance of the site, and Barbara’s connection to it, could be celebrated.

Kershaw and Nicholson note that “Performance happens in more types of theatres than ever before, and in many other places than in theatres” (2011, p. 14), while McLucas (2000) points out that site acts as “host” for the “work that theatre makers create” (cited in Wilkie, 2004, p. 97). It was now our task to find a venue at the Park Avenue site which might be suitable for the reading. Initially, we considered one of the many grassed areas at Park Avenue which are backed by Kings Park and overlook the Swan River, but were concerned about possible inclement weather and the lack of lighting and amplification. We then visited the G20 Lecture Theatre which is now used for podiatry lectures. Remarkably, apart from the (removable) technical desk, it has remained virtually unchanged for almost a century. Whiteboards have been inserted into the original frames which once held blackboards, but the string pulley system for those boards still functions and the original desks, benches and shutters on the windows remain. Despite the “inherent aesthetic limitations” (Paget, 2010, p. 181) arising from the lack of theatrical technical capacity, the raked seating and clear space on the floor at the front of the lecture theatre suggested that this would be a suitable space to host the performance and celebrate the historicity of the site. In case we remained in any doubt, on this, our first visit to the lecture theatre, we even encountered a plastic spider on the tech desk!



Figures 1 & 2: G20 Lecture Theatre, The University of Western Australia, 2023.

In yet another instance of serendipity and intuition (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48), later discussions with Monica Main, Barbara’s daughter and manager of her literary estate, revealed that the G20 had been Barbara’s favourite venue at UWA and one where she had given and attended

lectures. Monica reported that Barbara “had loved that building and been sad to leave it when the zoology department moved” (personal communication, January 13, 2023). By choosing to perform the reading in the G20 Lecture Theatre, we would be overlaying Barbara York Main’s previous presence in the building with the performance of her writing. The “space that previously was thought of as something else” would have the potential “of ‘bleeding through’ the process of reception”, a process Carlson calls “ghosting” (2001, p.133).



Figure 3: Barbara York Main on the steps at the entrance of the zoology department at UWA in the 1940s.



Figure 4: The same steps in 2023, through which the audience entered for the reading.

Verbatim/site-specific scriptwriting as assemblage

Once the G20 Lecture Theatre had been selected as the venue for the performance of *Wilton* (Jarel, 2022), the “foregrounding” of the site immediately became instrumental in developing the form of the scripted work (Wilkie, 2004, p. ii). We decided to illustrate the connection between the G20 Lecture Theatre and Barbara York Main by extending the length and scope of the play. We would include biographical information, examples of Barbara’s writing and oral history recordings and use the “lecture” as a framing device for the work. This longer verbatim/site-specific play would cast the audience member and actors as “students” attending a lecture about Barbara York Main. In this way, the actors and audience members would be asked to take on “hybrid identities” as spectator/performers, as critics who would be invited to respond to the work and perhaps even as revisitors, “(time-) travellers” and “day-dreamers” (Wilkie, p. 208). The play would begin with the “actor/lecturer” giving some introductory information about Barbara York Main and then inviting the “actor/students” to deliver readings of Barbara’s writing. Excerpts for these readings would be selected from Barbara’s essays, short stories and scientific writing, arranged to correspond with different phases of her life. The previously created *Wilton* would be included as a play within a play.

Early notes for this new play reveal the beginning of a palimpsest of writing as research. It began with a “mixture of heterogeneous elements” (Nail, 2017, p. 24) waiting to be systematically and creatively expanded upon, abandoned, linked and assembled:

Barbara kept spiders in her room at the University Women's College, deterring many potential suitors. (Hodgkin, 1995, p. vii)
clicketty clack of the typewriter
room of my own
little office at UWA
the world expert in trapdoor spiders
combined poetry and science (Notes on researcher’s computer, January 2023)

As the research process continued, these elements were joined by an aggregation of written and oral material arising from conversations and emails with Helen Munt and Monica Main and the detailed perusal of the existing archive of digitised recordings, books and papers. Meanwhile, listening to Barbara’s voice on radio and interview recordings and physical visits to the site where Barbara had previously studied and worked fired the imagination. Callahan (2022) describes this relationship between the work of the contemporary artist/researcher and the archive as one where the “intuitive, inspired, wild and unstructured co-exist with the systematic, detailed weighing of sources” (p. 171).

As early drafts of the play began to emerge, experiments with created text were evidenced.

Draft script, January 26, 2023:

ACTOR Due to the remoteness of the family farm, Barbara started school with correspondence courses.

As in the experimental exercise which had led to the writing of *Wilton* (Jarel, 2022), however, the created text was deleted in subsequent versions:

Draft script, February 15, 2023:

BARBARA ACTOR My early education
because of the semi-isolation
was through correspondence classes.

Future iterations of the script contain no created text. The title *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023) soon emerged.

As the script continued to evolve, new material and connections became apparent. Further discussions with Monica Main led to the readings of Barbara's writing being linked or underscored by a soundscape of Barbara's favourite music. When Barbara speaks for the first time, for example, a section of Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, Op. 68 (1808/2009) softly underscores the text.

The excerpts of Barbara York Main's writing were also interspersed with material gathered from interviews conducted by John Bannister with Barbara in 2012 (Main, Tapes 1, 2, 3). To theatrically emphasise the great contemporary relevance of Barbara's life and work, a decision was made to present this interview material alternately as voice overs and as read by the actor playing Barbara. At the beginning of the play, for example, to establish this convention, the "Barbara/actor" speaks in unison and then in counterpoint with the recording of Barbara's voice.

SFX 1 Excerpt from Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, Op. 68:

BARBARA VO *My full name now is Barbara York Main*
BARBARA ACTOR *but I was born Barbara Anne York in the wheatbelt*
BARBARA VO *central wheatbelt.*
I was very much a child of the depression
which marks people for life I think
but at that time of course it was just accepted,
it was life
you didn't think about it.
BARBARA ACTOR *I grew up on a farm ... (Jarel, 2023)*

Elements of set design suggested by the G20 Lecture Theatre are also evidenced in the palimpsest of scripts. The following stage direction, for example, appears in a draft dated January 31, 2023:

LECTURER who has been in the building and preparing to begin the whole time, flicks a photo of BARBARA up on the screen and then addresses the audience.

This direction disappears in subsequent versions after a decision was made to forego the use of projection in favour of highlighting the historicity of pulley-driven boards and Barbara's meticulous line drawings:

BARBARA turns off her lamp as the VO ends and the houselights come back up. Images of the farm and farmhouse on the boards at the front of the lecture theatre are revealed. (Jarel, 2023)

Even the length of the script was dictated by the site as the comfort of audience members sitting on the wooden benches was considered. To keep the work to a one hour running time, in different versions of the play, Barbara York Main's stories about welcoming spiders back into the family home (1976, p. 262–4) and “trespassing” on her childhood home (Main, 1971, p. 35–43) appear and then disappear as pieces are included and deleted. In perusing the layers of script, we are reminded that “the potential meanings made by” both playwriting as research and the archive “are in continuous flux” according to who chooses to assemble it “and in what manner and context” (Gale et al., 2011, p. 21).

The process of writing for performance offers unique opportunities for self-reflexivity within this dynamic. The date of the *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023) reading approached and scenes and dialogue were reconsidered, deleted and edited as I read the evolving play aloud at my computer. They were adjusted again as Helen Munt and I read the play in preparation for the reading and again as the actors read the lines aloud at the rehearsal. Finally, at the performed reading itself, the attention of the large audience and the relationship between actors and audience meant that the words were heard anew. The leaning in of the audience, audible reactions and even yawns and sighs led to further edits then being made “to compose a new meaningful entity” (Niziołek, 2021, p. 271), an assemblage.

Verbatim/site-specific performance as assemblage

Before the performance

Sullivan reminds us that “Cézanne saw that we lived in a dynamic world where space, time and light could never be isolated or rendered motionless” (2009, p. 41). While the date and venue for the reading had now been “set” and the extended version of the script “written”, the playwriting as research process progressed in a manner which was “anything but still” (p. 41) as the focus began to shift to assemblage of performance. The G20 Lecture Theatre exerted its influence on directorial choices for the reading. It would need to reflect the architectural layout and technical capacity of the building's “end on” configuration, static raked seating and fluorescent lighting. The scheduling of the reading, too, would depend on the availability of the lecture theatre. Interestingly, despite the date being chosen as a matter of practicality, we were later contacted by an invited audience member who informed us that we had unknowingly, but fittingly, scheduled the reading on the eve of the centenary of the laying of the foundation stone for the Park Avenue buildings. Once again, it seemed that serendipity was at work.

Sixteen actors, including Barbara’s daughter, Monica Main, professional actors and UWA alumni and alumnae, were invited to perform at the reading. They were emailed playscripts and background information and immediately reacted to and haunted the performance by bringing their pasts to the text and imagining lending their voices and bodies to its performance. In this way, the actors began to create the “ghost”, or “performative actions that ‘haunt’ the site for a short while and through which the site can clearly be seen” (McLucas, 2000, as cited in Wilkie, 2004, p. 200). As the actors began to read and then rehearse the text, they began to assemble stories, emotions and traces of memory which expanded beyond the script and site (Niziołek, 2021 p. 271–272). Sarria Butler, for example, responded to the invitation as follows, “Having just read the script, I have to say I feel a lot of things. I grew up on a farm in rural South Australia and feel like I know a lot of Wiltons!” (S Butler, personal communication, June 20, 2023).

Another actor, Richard Tongue, responded to the following segments of playtext with personal memories:

<i>SYLVIA</i>	<i>The iron from the house and shed rooves was used to roof a new shed at The Pines ...</i>
<i>and</i>	
<i>SYLVIA</i>	<i>Could they pick wool? And they would set off, slowly on foot,</i>
<i>WILTON</i>	<i>dirty sugar bags tucked under their arms</i>
<i>SYLVIA</i>	<i>the woman and the child ...</i>
<i>WILTON</i>	<i>... to search out the sorry remains after the flies and beetles had had their share.</i>

Remarkably, Richard, who was to play the part of the farmer who established the Wheatbelt property named “The Pines”, grew up on a property called “Pine Grove”. He recalled that:

We had a well where everything that was considered junk went in ... We lived in Tamworth, New South Wales, and the old family farm was called “Pine Grove”. Like “Wilton”, it was a family in turmoil. When Mum and Dad were married, they build a little cottage on the farm but just after the war they could not get iron for the roof so they found iron wherever they could and had it re-rolled ... As children we would collect dead wool, usually off fences but occasionally we could find a carcass and that was like gold. (R Tongue, personal communication, October 4, 2023)

At the next phase of the playwriting as research process, the space was prepared for the gathering of cast for rehearsal. As described by Paget, “the rehearsed reading will almost always need to happen on a bare stage, with seats set for the actors and a basic lighting state (actors must see scripts; audience must see actors)” (Paget, 2010, p. 181). This was the case for the *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023) reading where, apart, from Barbara York Main’s line drawings on the whiteboards, the only alterations made to the lecture theatre

to create a more traditional theatre space was the removal of the lecturer's desk and IT equipment. The wooden lectern which resided in the lecture theatre was used by the "lecturer" in the play and 16 matching chairs, found in the podiatry laboratory behind the stage, were arranged in a semicircle on the stage for the actors. A chair of a different style was placed on the far right, and another on the far left, to symbolically distinguish the actor reading the stage directions and the actor playing Barbara from the rest of the cast. In addition, a few simple wooden crates and a blanket were set to the side of the stage to be used as props in two of the more theatricalised readings.

As the actors gathered for the rehearsal, which was held two weeks prior to the performance, they were introduced to their fellow cast members, explored the historic space and heard Barbara's voice on the recordings for the first time. All actors were given identically bound scripts and the synchronised page turning technique was practised. Conventions around sitting, standing and stepping forward were established. During the *Wilton* (Jarel, 2023) segment of the play, for example, the eight actors who were involved throughout the piece would stay standing and then step forward slightly when the focus was on them. In the other readings, while not actively performing, the readers were invited to sit and actively attend to their fellow cast members rather than look down at their scripts. While listening is a vital element in any acting, in the rehearsed reading – with its bright light, ever present actors and "absence of other layers of signification" – its importance is "ratcheted to a new level" because it is "more starkly evident" (Paget, 2010, p. 186–187).

As the rehearsal began, discussion arose around how much the readers should "act". Performers asked questions such as, "Should I wear a hat or not?", "He's very sad, isn't he?", "Should I gesture here?" This mirrored Paget's description of the rehearsal of *The Illegals*, where the actors were keen to "acquire useful 'backstory' and define characteristics". They used "rehearsal as exploration ... by trying things in different ways" and asking, in action, "Like *this*, or like *this*?" (Paget, 2010, p. 183). As we only had one rehearsal for *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023), these discussions were brief but highlighted the importance of "even small gestures and expressions" and flourishes of costume in enhancing the performance (Paget, 2010, p. 187).

The presence of Barbara's daughter – Monica Main, a professional actor – reading in the room with the other actors added another layer of haunting and expanded the research. On several occasions during the rehearsal, Monica spontaneously told the other performers stories of her mother which were prompted not only by the text but, unexpectedly, by artefacts present at the reading. These included the half-sized pencils made available for the actors to use to mark-up their scripts, which prompted a story about how Barbara had pencils of every description but never wasted even a portion of a pencil, using the stubs until she could no longer hold them.



Figure 5: The actors warming up before the reading. Monica Main is on the far right.
Photo credit: Dave Nicolson.

The performance

In addition to the “host” and “ghost”, McLucas (2000) explains that site-specific theatre “doesn’t exist as an event until you have a Witness – an audience – coming to see it” (cited in Wilkie, 2004, p. 234). On the evening of the performance of *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023), the performers gathered in the podiatry laboratory behind the lecture theatre, which served as the green room, to await the arrival of the invited audience. When all were seated, after a brief introduction to the play, the actors entered the stage.

As the reading began, the actors’ preparation in the two weeks since the rehearsal became immediately evident as they delivered their lines confidently and thoughtfully. This reflects Paget’s experience with *The Illegals* when he reported that it was “remarkable to see what the actors had done in particular with ‘aria’ set pieces (monologues) between rehearsal and performance” (Paget, 2010, p. 185). The interaction between actors and audience members, all clearly visible to one another in the space, also charged the performance.

The penultimate segment of the play was not a reading but a planned, unrehearsed piece by Monica Main who took centrestage, introduced herself as one of Barbara’s daughters and shared memories of her mother. This example of direct address by Monica was not traditional verbatim theatre as it did not directly use Barbara’s words as source material. However, the sharing of Barbara’s work, life and writing in her daughter’s words added vitality and resonance to the performance, particularly as everyone in the space was hearing Monica’s words for the first time. Further, these stories, which were recorded on film, meaningfully contributed to the assemblage of data and understandings.

The finale of the play was highlighted by two elements which had been added as an intuitive response to the rehearsal and were quickly practised during the warm-up for the performance. During the concluding reading, which references the stars of the Wheatbelt, the cast made their way from the stage and lined the left-hand staircase of the lecture theatre. They used the pulley system to open the almost century-old shutters onto the night sky so that the stars above Kings Park were visible behind them and delivered their lines. Penelope Colgan then sung an acapella version of *Don't Fence Me In* (Porter & Fletcher, 1934), a song which Monica Main said “definitely summed Barbara up” (M Main, personal communication, March 24, 2023) as the actors made their way back to the stage for the lecturer’s closing remarks and questions. These small but intuitive directorial adjustments added theatricality to the reading and highlighted both the elements of Barbara’s writing and the historic, architectural aspects of the G20 Lecture Theatre.

After the performance

At the conclusion of the reading, audience members and actors were invited to join one another for supper on the veranda of the Park Avenue buildings and share their memories of Barbara York Main, her writing, the site and the Western Australian Wheatbelt. They were also invited to offer feedback on the play during supper or after the event. This important element of the playwriting as research generated discussion and continued the process of assemblage.

In the same way that the actors had responded to and enriched the text before and during the rehearsal process for *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023), the audience members haunted and were haunted by the reading as their own memories and movement overlapped and collided with Barbara’s. Don Bradshaw, for example, who had been invited to the reading as an ex-staff member and Head of UWA Zoology, replied to an email giving parking directions to the event, saying that he “should be able to find his old parking space” (D Bradshaw, personal communication, September 1, 2023). This provided an almost tangible example (if there can be such a thing) of the haunting of theatre performance by an audience member. After the reading, Don also added to the archive by sending through a note sent to him by Barbara in 1995, thanking him for making her “an Honorary Lecturer in the Department in 1979 and thereby giving her some official standing” (D Bradshaw, personal communication, September 1, 2023).

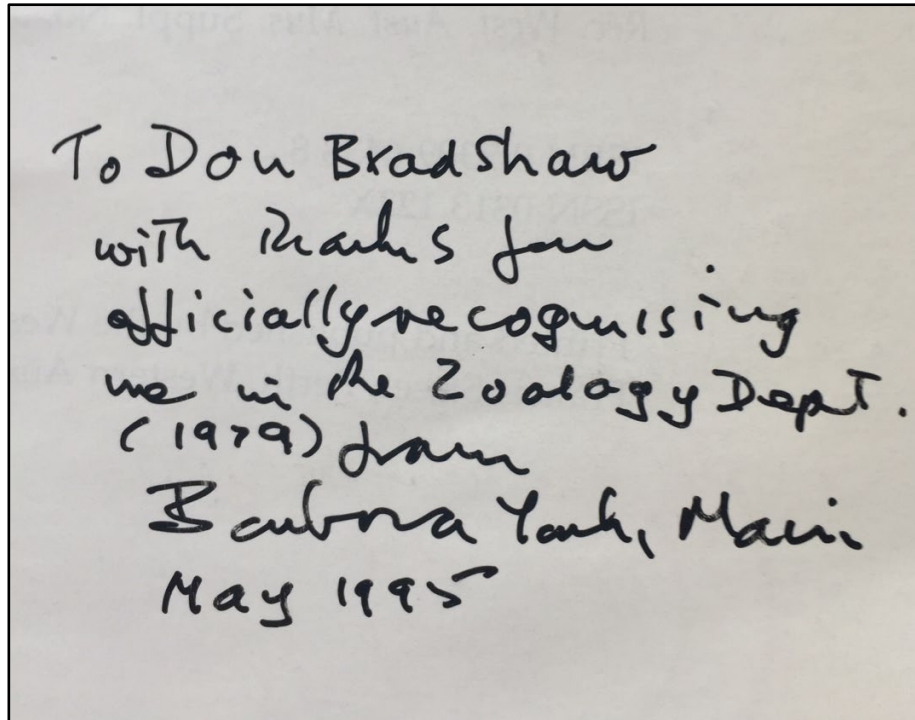


Figure 6: Note written by Barbara York Main to Don Bradshaw in May 1995.

Don's action in sending the note was a direct response to the following voiceover played during the reading:

BARBARA VO

I think that I was probably the second girl to get a PhD. Women were not overly encouraged. Hmm. Professor Waring, when he came, he would encourage women to do a higher degree, but he would not encourage them to, for example, he didn't like employing women in the department as such because he took the line that well they'll only get married and then you'd have to get someone else to fill that position and so on. He encouraged me, in a sense, to do research even after I'd done my PhD but there was no possibility of me ever getting a formal position ... when my husband was there, particularly, that was, it was a no no.

The G20 Lecture Theatre as site also prompted memory and additions to the archive. In his email, Don remarked that, when he and his wife – Felicity, a fellow scientist – had arrived at the reading in the G20, they “worked out that it was actually 65 years from when they had first sat down in that same lecture theatre as first year zoology students!” (D Bradshaw, personal communication, September 1, 2023).

Felicity Bradshaw added that:

This was a piece of theatre that “belongs” ... a theatrical work in a science lecture theatre! But, of course, no ordinary lecture theatre; this is where Barbara gave her lectures. We are in Barbara's “place”. We are captive. We were transported into her world”. (F Bradshaw, personal communication, October 6, 2023)

Other audience members, who had not known of Barbara, responded to the readings with childhood memories. Sally Winfield, who grew up in on a farm in the Wheatbelt, reported that hearing Barbara’s words:

coaxed wonderful memories ... so evocative in creating a memory of warm afternoons, bush walks and of finding the shiny gooey gum on the jam trees, hardened on the outside by the sun but soft and chewy on the inside”. (S Winfield, personal communication, October 7, 2023)



Figure 7: The actors take their bow as the audience applauds. Photo credit: Dave Nicolson

Other members of the public were also inspired by the event. David Bean, who only heard about the event after it had occurred, responded with the following email:

I can only say I wish I had been there! I have my mother’s copy of *Twice Trodden Ground*, bought when it came out in 1971. My mother Helen Bean nee Pearson was, like Barbara York Main, born in 1929, and graduated BSc (Zoology) from UWA in 1950. In her case crayfish not spiders, was the research focus. She knew Bert Main and Barbara”. (D Bean, personal communication, September 15, 2023)

These examples of the audience and community members haunting and expanding research before, during and after the performed reading support Wilkie’s description of site-specific spectatorship as both “hybrid and reflexive” and resulting in “an imaginative experience, which cannot be wholly contained by either the space or the performance” (2004, p. 210). Like theatre,

the archive is not stable. Both fluctuate materially and immaterially and are defined by research meaning making (Gale, 2011, p. 21). Iball (2002) asserts that “live performance, in particular, demands shapeshifting to access posterity” (p. 59). The living archive arising from the writing and performing of *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023) raises questions as to why and how this assemblage might be stored and shared.

Conclusions and considerations for future imagining

Kershaw and Nicholson ask whether “research in theatre and performance does anything different than what goes on in other ‘fields’ where humans desire to better understand why on Earth they are here” (2011, p. 14). In the words of Barbara York Main, they ask, “To what does it answer?” (1971, p. 28). As the *Barbara York Main: In Her Own Words* (Jarel, 2023) project illustrates, playwriting as research – through serendipity, intuition and haunting – can lead to numerous iterations of script and an assemblage of data, interpretations and understandings which move far beyond the scope of the original research. In the performance space, an actor sits in his chair on the stage and listens to the words of his fellow reader and remembers his childhood, then speaks about it later with his fellow actors and the researcher. Another audience member sits in the audience and thinks of her family on the farm and speaks about it at work the next day. Ex-colleagues of the subject of the research remember the first time they sat in the performance space which they once shared, with her and with each other, and email the researcher about their recollections the next day. As these examples demonstrate, the collective liveness of the play reading is an integral part of playwriting as research. It offers unique opportunities for interaction between actor and audience member, researcher and researched, visitor and site and promotes the sharing of memory, imaginings and understandings.

Traces of performance are, of course, difficult to document and archive. Some remain intangible and unrecoverable and there is always the question of what is worth keeping. Should the palimpsest of playwriting be retained by the researcher as evidence of the process of becoming and in readiness for any future iterations or performances? What about the invitations, advertising material and programme? Do an actor’s performance notes accidentally left inside the pages of the researcher’s copy of *Twice Trodden Ground* – which had been purchased from a second-hand bookstore and displayed another reader’s name and address inside the front cover – have any imagined relevance in the future? (Gale et al., 2011, p. 18). In attempting to view playwriting as research as fluid, active and collective, there will always be questions of what to retain, what to discard and how to store and transmit material for subsequent interpretation. According to Ledger, Ellis and Wright, “few other research topics in theatre and performance have attracted such sustained discussion as that of documentation and its uses” (2011, p. 162). Yet, we are impelled to acknowledge that “scholars discover in the ends of performance something becoming” (Iball, 2002, p. 59) and to seek effective ways to assemble, archive and share knowledge and data arising from the “new associations” that “occur in situations where there is intense concentration, but within an open landscape of free-range possibility rather than a closed geography of well-trodden pathways” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48).

In his discussion of Barbara York Main's essay *Farmhouse* (1971, p. 5–6), Tony Hughes-D'Aeth describes how Barbara “begins a new dialectic by asking the question, what is it we give to the next generation?” and suggests that, “it is no longer the farm that is in question, but what is framing and holding the farm – the environment” (2017, p. 415). In the same way, it is not solely the fixed script or critique arising from playwriting as research which begins to answer the question of “Why on Earth are we here?” (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011, p. 14) but the rich store of material that frames the play and provides bountiful opportunities for future interpretation. The question that remains is how to best assemble this material so that it may be accessed by artists, from within and outside the academy, and reimagined. If this can be achieved, research in theatre and performance has the capacity to “take us to where we’ve never been, to see what we’ve never seen” and then “bring us back and help us look again at what we thought we knew” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 62).

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