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On writing massaged verbatim or close work theatre: *Letters to Lindy, Made to Measure, and Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*

Speaker: Alana Valentine

Chair: Felicity Collins

Abstract:

This is the edited transcript of Session 2 of the Symposium on Creative Collaborations in Intercultural and Intermedial Spaces, convened by Creative Arts and English, La Trobe University, 7-9 July 2020.

Biographical note:

Alana Valentine is a writer, director, and dramaturg who grew up in Sydney and is best known for her contributions to verbatim and close work theatre, including *Run rabbit run* (2004), *Parramatta girls* (2007), *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* (2010), and *Ladies day* (2016). She is the author of *Bowerbird: The art of making theatre drawn from life* (2018). She worked with Ursula Yovich and producer Vicki Gordon as writer/director of *Barefoot divas* (touring from 2012-2015 in Australia, North America, Canada, and Hong Kong) and as co-writer/songwriter with Ursula Yovich on the multi-award winning, *Barbara and the camp dogs*. As a dramaturg, Alana has worked with Bangarra Dance Theatre's artistic director Stephen Page on *Patyegarang, ID, Bennelong*, and *Dark emu*. In 2019, Alana shared the Helpmann Award for Best Musical Score with Ursula Yovich and Adam Ventoura for *Barbara and the camp dogs*.

Keywords:

Verbatim theatre, writing from life, community, archives, premise

Introduction

Felicity: Welcome everyone to the second session of our three-day symposium on Intercultural and Intermedial Creative Collaborations. This morning we had the privilege of joining Ursula Yovich in conversation with Alana Valentine, highlighting both creative and intercultural aspects of their multi-award winning collaboration, *Barbara and the camp dogs*.

This afternoon, Alana is joining us to discuss her extraordinary body of work as a playwright whose source material includes interviews recorded within particular communities – from South Sydney football fans (*Run rabbit run*, 2004) to gay men living in Broome (*Ladies day*, 2016) and people who got married at Sydney's Wayside Chapel (*Wayside bride*, scheduled to open at Belvoir in April 2022).

In the prologue to her book, *Bowerbird: The art of making theatre from life* (published by Currency Press, 2018), Alana makes a sharp distinction between writing fiction and writing from life: 'fiction can feel like drawing something out of yourself; verbatim playwriting can feel more like structuring the transcripts of the party that brings all your disparate interviewees together. [...] If they begin to brawl or riot – so be it'.

Alana has produced an original and impressive body of verbatim or 'close work' writing, by which she means 'work drawn closely from a source – either in a community or an archive or elsewhere'. Her aim as a playwright is to present 'insights, perspectives, and voices not otherwise heard, or at least not in the way you sieve them through your original voice' (Valentine, 2018, pp. 1-3). This afternoon Alana will focus on three of her 'close work' or 'massaged verbatim' plays.

The archival-based work, *Letters to Lindy* (2016) brings a new perspective to the story of how the Australian public responded to Lindy Chamberlain and the loss of her infant daughter, Azaria. *Made to measure* emerged from Alana's residency at Sydney University's Charles Perkins Centre, drawing on the centre's research into obesity and bringing an unexpected character, the wedding couturier, into play. And finally, Alana will show us scenes from *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah: Soft revolution* (2010), a play that examines a young Muslim woman's decision, after 9/11, to wear the hijab – even though it will alienate her much-loved aunt.

A very warm welcome to everyone on Zoom, and over to you, Alana.

Letters to Lindy

Alana: Starting with the Lindy project: Azaria was taken in 1980; Lindy Chamberlain was jailed in 1982 and released in 1985. The National Library of Australia holds a collection of 199 boxes of letters sent to Lindy, and I was taken to see the collection on the first day of a three-month fellowship. There's quite a lot of academics who go down to the National Library and take a look at the collection. I got the Creative Arts Fellowship and I phoned Lindy and she said that quite a few had had a look (but nothing had come of it) – and that a publisher had looked through the files one day and said there wasn't enough there for a book. But me being me, I wanted to make my own assessment of the potential of the material collected there. I was really interested in the NLA collection as a snapshot of 1980s Australia. I'd been working collaboratively with both communities and individuals – this morning's session was about working with another artist, Ursula Yovich on Barbara and the camp dogs, and this afternoon is about a different kind of collaboration: working with a community where I'm in the driving seat, but I'm also there to bring the community along with me, and to give them as much of a voice in the process as I can. So, I started by looking through the collection. Soon after I'd had the fellowship, I gave a lecture at the National Library – the Ray Matthew lecture. It's called *Enter the playwright*, and the transcript and recording are online. I'd like to quote from the lecture now.

[Alana reading]

I found a community not in the flesh but in archive boxes, their voices metaphorically struggling to get out. I found poets, supporters, and vicious detractors [...] pornographers, eccentrics, and the voices of children [...] and thousands of international correspondents.

What is it in human nature, I ask, that makes someone push past their inarticulate, choked ability and write to someone they have never met? And, is the fact that they do, I conjectured, not a cause for genuine hope, not a characteristic of our species to give us sincere and durable reason for optimism? Is the beauty of this mercy, this tenderness, not a remarkable thing, even when it is crude and ill-shaped and gauche? But more intriguingly still, what is it in Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton's nature that made her compile this remarkable collection? Was she a saver, a filer, a hoarder all along, or is this almost obsessive retention of every single piece of paper evidence of her having been marked by her experience? This is a collection that includes even a credit card receipt, which Sam Neill had torn up and thrown into a bin and Lindy had retrieved. As well as the wrapping paper which with Meryl Streep had wrapped a gift to her. Meryl played Lindy in the film. Nothing that had even the smallest relevance to this story had been discarded. And I asked, why?

I read that to you because I thought it was an economical way to try and dive into what I was doing and thinking and feeling, what I wanted to try and say in this afternoon's session about working in the archive, which is this: my profound belief is that you have to have a premise for your investigations. I know many of you as academics will understand what I mean by that. You have to know what question you are asking. Because that helps to corral and control the process of investigation.

I will play part of [a video of] *Letters to Lindy* for you in a minute. We'll have a look at that, and then I'll talk about how I discovered what the dramatic premise of the investigation was – how it became about more than just information, or about the letters. It's about how the letters became like found-objects for me to use in the play. So, I often talk about Rosalie Gascoigne, an Australian visual artist who you'll know. She works with found objects. And sometimes I talk about verbatim theatre as that kind of artistry – that you actually are working with found objects, but it's no less art the way you combine them.

[Video recording: opening scene from the beginning of *Letters to Lindy*]

Alana: The scene we have just watched sets up the play, and it shows you how the actors were letter-readers in the play. They play characters, but they don't go into fully-fledged naturalistic characters. They never stop being understood by the audience as actors reading out the letter of someone whom they're embodying. It's this very interesting relationship with the audience where you accept that the actor is your conduit for understanding who this person is – who's writing. The actors made small – minor – changes to their costume, and of course, Jeanette Cronin, who played Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton, just gives the most magnificent performance. I wanted to show you just how Cronin changes from Lindy in the present back to different stages of Lindy's life: 1980 when it happened, 1982 when she's pregnant and on trial, and 1985 when she's released, and subsequently.

All of the Lindy monologues, all of the speeches in the play, are more or less verbatim from Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton herself. We used to talk about the play as the first time Lindy had actually told her story in her own words. This was a person whose story had been told – in *Evil angels*, in a television adaptation – but always mitigated through fictional writers. For me, one of the real reasons to make the monologue – which runs through the play – verbatim was that we just haven't heard the story in Lindy's own words. And I think it gives incredible insight into this woman when she talks about 'the dingo's got my baby' – delivering the news in the way people could understand, because that's what Lindy's like. She's incredibly pragmatic, and also extremely funny, which is why I start with that. I thought we'd start with the comic relief – that's what Lindy herself calls 'the comic relief' – the nasty letters.

We should leave *Letters to Lindy* soon – you might have some questions. But first, I wanted to say something about the premise of the work. And before I do that – Jane Phegan, Glen Hazeldine, and Phillip Hinton were the other actors, and the play was extremely beautifully directed by Darren Yap. Darren and I talked about the premise of the work – that there's this night when Lindy is about to put all these letters into the National Library. The story plays out as if she's sorting through the letters and telling her own story. Ultimately, when we get to the end of the play, Lindy puts some of the baby clothes into the archive box and she sings a lullaby to Azaria. It's based on a poem that a woman called Gloria Kimber-Childs wrote, O sing the child to sleep now. It's a moment, not just of Lindy letting go of Azaria and putting her in this archive box, but of Australia metaphorically letting go of the pain and the shame that we visited upon not only Lindy but ourselves in this story.

What is kind of amazing is that Lindy – early on in conversations that I had with her – said to me, ‘There was nothing else left of her’. There was no body ever found, as you would know. She said to me, ‘So I started putting the letters in a box because they were all that was left of her’. And from this one comment came the premise of my play: that the archive – the 199 boxes that are in the National Library – are Lindy’s memorial to Azaria. Every single letter that she received for the last 30 years has its own individual folder. All letters that were sent to her were put in blue folders, as you saw in the stage play. And on the side, it not only has the name of the person – they’re filed alphabetically – it has a precis of what’s in the letter. People said to me, ‘Has she read all these letters?’ I said, she’s not only read them, she’s filed them, she’s precis-ed them, you know, with what’s in them: ‘first trial’, ‘apology’, or whatever. And then she’s colour-coded them: the letters that were sent to her and Michael are in red folders; the letters sent to the children are in purple folders; the ones that were sent to her are in blue manilla folders. A special collection is all the letters that she thinks are of special interest to a researcher. It’s the most incredible, meticulous act of filing.

For me, it was looking at the collection itself that made me ask, ‘Why has she done this? What has this been?’. I see it as an act of grief, of memorialising her grief. At the end of the play, there’s a scene between two librarians, one of whom is still saying that he believes she killed the baby, and the other who says that this is the most loving act of a mother in Australian history – that the woman we have publicly condemned, as the mother who would kill her child, has actually spent 30 years carefully and preciously archiving everything with her daughter’s name on it. So, just to say, for me, it’s never about the information. It’s never about the letters and what they tell you, and it’s never about telling, again, the story of what happened to the Chamberlains. Although those are your duties as a writer, it’s always about having a theory or premise, and dramatising that in action.

There’s another little bit I want to read from the NLA lecture if you’ll indulge me. It sums up what I’m trying to say.

[Alana reading]

It’s my belief as a playwright – a belief I have given my life to – that we do not understand something because someone explains it to us in words, but only when we experience that realisation for ourselves, in a moment of insight into which we have been artfully led. Any great teacher will tell you that it is when a student makes the connection themselves that you have true pedagogy. Any neurologist will describe the synaptic leap the brain makes across the tiny nerve cells or neurons in a moment of realisation. Synapse, derived from the Greek word *sum* meaning ‘together’ and *haptain* meaning ‘to join’ – it’s the space across which nerve cells can join together. And in the theatre, that place where we join together as a community – when we embrace that synaptic leap – is the moment when the audience suddenly realises what the playwright and the creative team have been doing for the time that you have given them, what they have been building towards. When you’re in a theatre and that kind of revelation dawns on you and you see that insight – that perception that you can’t put into words but only know, like in life. When theatre is that good that it kicks inside you like a second

heartbeat. It overwhelms your rational experience like awe, like joy, like love. It takes you out of your preconceptions and individuality and joins you to something elusively larger and more purposeful than yourself.

It is my sincere belief, and I saw this as we toured – we toured 23 venues around Australia – people came to see the play in a way, not just to see the story of Lindy but to let go of their own shame and their own pain in a kind of act of collective gathering. So, I feel it's another of the great privileges of my life to have worked with Lindy on this work. On the opening night, I was too scared to sit next to her. Simon Hinton offered to sit next to her – Merrigong Theatre Company commissioned the play and he is the Artistic Director – because I was too nervous to sit next to her. At interval I came out and said, 'What's she doing? What's she doing?' and he said, 'She's commentating the whole time to Reagan', who's her son, 'Saying oh that's that letter, and talking, and then she's crying a lot of the time'.

At the end of the play, because it was an opening night, there was a function in the foyer. Simon asked Lindy to speak and she said publicly that the play was the closest to her experience of anything that she had ever seen. I burst into tears and she said (jokingly) that she'd got me back for making her cry in the play! So, I just want to say, again, it was a very close collaboration with Lindy, and people ask me how I got her to trust me – people will often ask verbatim playwrights, 'How do you get people to trust you?'. My answer is quite simple: it is just to be trustworthy. That is to say, do what you say you are going to do, which is actually the hardest and the simplest thing to do. I know that sounds sort of light, but if you say you are going to do something, then you just do it. You don't change as you go along. So, that's *Letters to Lindy*.

Made to Measure

The Charles Perkins Centre in Sydney is a world-class science facility. It has scientists working there on obesity, kidney disease, metabolic syndrome – all sorts of issues to do with contemporary relationships to food. It's not run by an artistic director; Steve Simpson is the CEO of the Centre. He got the bright idea that there was all this science happening, but scientists weren't finding a way to communicate this incredibly important science to the world. So, he decided he wanted to have a writer-in-residence and he would advertise for that. The first year I applied, and Charlotte Wood – who's a novelist some of you might know – got the fellowship. But Judy Harris, the philanthropist who funded the fellowship, liked my idea so much that she decided to commission the play separately. And then, the next year, I was actually awarded the fellowship to keep working on it. And I shared the fellowship with another novelist, Mirelle Juchau, who some of you might know, wrote the brilliant, *The world without us*. So, I spent a year talking to scientists about body image, relationships to food – and I spent a lot of time talking to people living in large bodies and how they felt about the way they were portrayed, the things that were said about them, and about negotiating their relationships to health.

I was very clear with the Charles Perkins Centre that I wasn't going to proselytise for them, as it were, and there was never any expectation that I would do that. I mean, scientists are extraordinarily clever and creative people, and they understand that there's an ethical integrity around having to write the play that you need to write. I got this idea – the idea I mentioned that Judy Harris really loved – to talk to wedding couturiers about their relationship to their clients because – for the wedding day – often people will splash out and get a wedding dress made. I'd had a conversation with a wedding couturier and she talked to me about how it was this incredibly intimate relationship; that people did speak incredibly confidentially about their bodies.

I think it's probably best if I show you the clip and we can discuss how, again, I used the information but had a premise that allowed me to interrogate and privilege both points of view in this play.

[Video recording: opening scene from *Made to measure*]

Alana: That was the extraordinary Megan Wilding playing Ashleigh, Tracey Mann playing the couturier, and it was directed by Tim Jones and presented at the Seymour Centre in 2019. I guess it would be a good to get an idea now of what questions you have, having seen those two clips, and me having spoken a little bit about my process.

Alana: [Reading from Chat] 'Loved that idea of inviting people into the theatre' – is that Kelly? – is the question about *Made to measure* or about Lindy?

Kelly Gardiner: That was earlier on, you were talking about the idea – in that second part of the speech that you read [from NLA lecture on *Letters to Lindy*] about inviting people into the story and the theatre.

Alana: Yes, I was making the point that the audience are actually bringing themselves to the work; you're not just there to tell them something; you're there to interact with them. That is one of the ways to define the work: there's quite a lot of definitions of verbatim theatre. In my book, *Bowerbird* (which Felicity mentioned in the introduction), Victoria Chance, the editor at Currency Press, said to me, 'Alana, the way you talk about verbatim, it's so different that we need to find a new term. Can you coin a word for what you do?' And I said, 'Well, I'm going to call it close work'. And the reason I call it that is because a part of my philosophy – of my process – is to bring the audience and the community along with me.

What often happens, at the shows that I work on with the community, is that there's a lot of those people from that community there on the opening night. And, generally, I invite them onto the stage. It's always really interesting to me to hear about writers who have problematic relationships with the community. I don't think you can always mitigate against that, but I do think there are strategies for bringing the community along with you. And again, I talk about those strategies quite a lot in my book, *Bowerbird*. I say, 'Bring them along with you', for instance, in the play *Parramatta girls*, which was about women who were incarcerated in state

homes. In Sydney, the play was called the Parramatta Girls Home, but I know that Melbourne and all over Australia had just as many of these homes.

When I first started speaking to the women and doing the research, I found that many of the participants had never talked about their story. They weren't believed. They didn't think anyone would believe what had happened to them. This was a long time before the Forgotten Australians Royal Commission which was about children in institutions, and certainly a long time before Julia Gillard started the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse and institutional responses to that. You know, they just didn't think they'd be believed. So, when we did the first public reading at Belvoir St, I literally transcribed what the women had said to me and invited them along to hear it. It was probably about 30 women I'd spoken to. The reading was to make this moral pact with them; that I could hear them and that I would put their voices on stage.

What was great about that first reading was that they realised 30 was too many voices for the human brain to try to and take in. For it to make sense, if I can put it that way, the brain starts to collapse the stories into each other – because people had similar kinds of stories. So, that's what I did after the first reading. I collapsed all the stories into eight characters who had a part of some women's stories, and parts of others. I did this with their permission. And of course they understood, having seen the first reading, having realised it was too much to take in thirty characters in one play.

Then, we had a second public reading, and in that public reading I had created other characters who were the guards, and the children of the women who had been institutionalised. A lot of the women had talked to me about the effect of the institution on their child rearing. Particularly, and most vulnerably, they said it meant that they had sometimes hit their own kids – basically, from what had happened to them. So, I had these characters, and we did this second reading and that's when Neil Armfield (the Artistic Director of Belvoir who commissioned the work) said to me, 'We're really only interested in the women's stories. I know, Alana, why you want to hear the children's stories, and why you want to put the guards in, but really, we just want to hear from the women themselves'.

That's when I got this idea that they (the actors) would play the women at the age they were incarcerated – 14, 15, 16, and 17 – and then the women when they were older. Again, it had a very simple premise: that of the women returning to the site of the home – that the place itself contained memories and contained their pain. And it was the act of going to the place that threw them back into their childhoods. So, it was a clever – if I can put it that way – conceit to see this virtuoso acting where the actors toggled between playing the women in the present and playing the women in the past. I say that because it was about bringing the women along with me, so that, by the opening night, when we had these actors on the stage just playing eight versions of themselves, the women in the community, whom I'd interviewed, understood what I was doing and were completely in support of what was on stage. It was what I call 'massaged' verbatim. It's not pure verbatim. They're not literal transcripts. They're 'versioning' what the characters were.

That's also an example of what I did with *Made to measure*, where I collapsed all the wedding couturiers into one character. Most of the couturiers were pretty much 'tough love'. They would say things that I would never say – where angels fear to tread! Also, a lot of people living in large bodies said to me: 'Alana, the most important thing you can do is not to sugar-coat it. Like, we are harder on ourselves and more vicious than anybody from outside. You need to represent that'. They gave me permission to do that, and as the play goes on you'll see there's also a character who is an inner voice of the Ashleigh character. I don't know whether that explains some things.

I'll just have a look at the Chat question: 'How do you work out the premise or question to begin with, and does it change?'

Look, that is the sixty-thousand dollar question. My answer would be: I usually have a premise that I start with – that I think the play is about. And then, after talking to people – the beginning of the research – the premise can sometimes change. I was once asked to work on a play about cross-dressing, about women cross-dressing at the turn of the century. And I said 'no' to the commission because I thought, 'Look, I'm not really interested in cross-dressing'. I mean. 'After the first five minutes, what's the problem?' And then, I suddenly had this idea about a woman who was what they call a soubrette in theatre – a young woman – who was ageing and was forced to become a cross-dresser because there was no other way to keep working. And she hated it. Then, as the play progresses, she learns to love it and to embrace how it liberates her. The play was about the ability of life to surprise you. So, what I would say to you in all honesty – and I say this really sincerely – is that you have to find a premise that investigates something that you personally, as an artist, are interested in. I know that, as academics, you will interrogate what it is that you are investigating. At some point you realise why you want to spend three or four years of your life on this thing.

So, with *Parramatta girls*, I often talk about what I saw in the Parramatta Girls Home. I saw a television journalism piece about three Aboriginal women returning to the home – and when I went to meet with one of them, she said to me that, at the Parramatta home, there was no black and white, there was only black and blue. And it was, you know, a fantastic thing to say. I hoped that would be something that Neil Armfield, who was doing a lot of First Nations work at Belvoir, would be interested in giving voice to on the Belvoir stage. Right at the start though, I knew that I had to go and get permission, so I went and met a whole lot of the First Nations women (from the Parramatta Home) at a reunion dinner. And they said to me, 'Alana, we'll let you tell this story, but only if you don't skip out the hard bits. And also, you make us Parramatta girls first. Because that's what we are'. And, you know, it was really a gift to do that.

I wanted to work on this play because it's such an important story to Australia. But if I dig down into my personal motivations there's also this. My mother died three days before her 50th birthday, and my grandmother is also dead, and there was a point during the making of *Parramatta girls* when I realised I just wanted to hang out with a whole lot of wise old crones! Because I just didn't have those female influences in my life. And I wanted to tell the story. I knew it was politically important – all of those things – but right, deep down, it was because I personally wanted that contact with the women. It's the same thing with Lindy. I read that bit

[from the play] because – in the middle of all that pettiness and mob horror of what was done to Lindy – I wanted to believe that there's a part of human nature that we can also celebrate, which is a rational kindness, and a rational generosity. I loved your project, Hester [audience member], about the 60-year-old daughter and her 90-year-old mother, and your disclosure of what it means to you [discussed when symposium participants introduced themselves before the recording of the session began]. Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton is one of the most extraordinary people I've ever met. I guess it's an interesting thing, for an artist – you don't always realise what is going to come up. Certainly, going into *Parramatta girls*, I just thought, oh yeah, you know, I reckon Belvoir might find this an interesting story. But then, as I kept going, what it meant was revealed to me.

I suppose the question is about the dramatic premise. I talk to students about this a lot. I talk about the initiating premise for the drama; that is, what slaps the play into action? With *Run rabbit run*, it is the Souths who are ejected from the National Rugby League. But the dramatic premise, the question that you are trying to answer – confidentially, the best premises are ones that you can't answer – the premise of *Run rabbit run* is: what is more important, tradition or change? Well, there's no answer. With *Parramatta girls*, the question is: what influences you more, the past or the present? Can you feel/heal the past? Well, who can solve that? I hope that answers your question about the premise.

Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah: Soft Revolution

I just want to try and play a little bit of Shafana if we've got time. Maybe if you could just play, Nicole, the second piece from Camilla's monologue.

[Video recording: Camilla Ah Kin's monologue from *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* on fighting for breath when made to wear a chador to escape the Taliban through Pakistan]

Alana: Some of you will know Norm and Ahmed, a 1968 play by Alex Buzo that led to a High Court case. It was written in 1969 and it was banned because the last lines of the play were 'fucking boong'. It was banned because of the f-bomb, not because of the racist expletive. It's about an encounter between an Australian man and a foreign student – it was very provocative. So, in *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, I wanted to look at conflict within communities. When Emma Buzo asked me to write a companion work to her father's play, as a commemoration after his death, I said that I had no interest in writing 'Shelia and Shafana' as it were – because Emma asked, 'What did I think had changed in the years since Alex had written his play?'. And I said that what interested me was conflict within communities.

I was privileged to go out to Auburn and meet a woman called Makiz Ansari who told me about her journey of putting on the hijab. And that the most vehement opponents to her doing that were her own aunts. I went and interviewed her aunt and a lot of what's in the play was verbatim from both of those women as well as other Afghan-Australian and Arab-Australian women I spoke to. They're all credited in the front of the play [available from Currency Press].

The play is on the NSW drama syllabus and I want to say that one of the things that the students talk about, now, is that we're living in a world about 'who can tell whose story'. That was 2009, when those women asked me to tell that story, saying that they weren't writers. I'm very interested, now, in students interrogating me about my relationship to that question: who gets to tell what story? And at what point? Even now, I think, I can still be an honourable tool to tell stories that other people ask and invite me to tell. But that's a much longer discussion. I've opened up that can of worms right at the end of the session. I know! But I just want to say that I think those are important questions and they should continue to be asked.

I played that scene [from *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*] because students will often look at that moment on the page, where the stage direction says, 'Shafana puts on the scarf', and just dismiss it. Whereas the entire play builds to that moment – and you can hear the whole audience is incredibly silent. What we found, at that point, was that the play is not about putting on the scarf at all: it's a play about telling someone you love, which is the aunt's character, that you want to do something that is going to pain them or hurt them. I talk to students about my own experiences of coming out to my grandmother. Obviously, their experiences are completely different, but I encourage the students to think about moments in their own life when they've revealed something to a loved one that was really difficult to do, and to look at that as part of the context of the drama in *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*.

Alana: So, I haven't had a chance to look at the Chat [...] yeah, all of those comments are good. I can't read them out, they're long! Does anyone have a question?

Felicity: Thanks so much Alana – you have raised so many tricky issues about collaboration here. I'd like to ask what happens when you go from researching and obtaining your material – say, with Makiz and her aunt and the network of women around them? Writing a script from that research, seems to be a different process from writing in collaboration, a process you talked about this morning in the session with Ursula Yovich. I'm also thinking about what changes when you hand the play over to the director and actors. Do you stay away? Do you come into rehearsals? Do people who have given you their stories come into that process, or is it a more traditional theatre hierarchy, at that point, with a play like *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*?

Alana: Just before I answer that, I want to say that was Camilla Ah Kin [in the video recording we've just seen] playing Aunt Sarrinah in that amazing choking scene where she is putting on the niqab, and Sheridan Harbridge playing Shafana. The play was directed by Aarne Neeme and produced by the Alex Buzo Company at the Seymour Centre in Sydney.

The truth is, I stay around for the first week and then I tend to leave – and I come back in. The pact is, I get to write it and they get to perform it and interpret it, and I stay away. In that process, we actually had Makiz, and quite a lot of the Afghani Australian and Arab Australian women come into the rehearsals. They talked to the actors – about why they thought this play was important – to give them confidence about telling this story. That kind of cultural liaison and community work was really important to the process. But that's a much longer session about the role of the writer in the rehearsal room.

In *Bowerbird*, I talk about ‘amenable Alana’ who is there in the first week, listening to every comment and every suggestion, who gradually becomes ‘aloof Alana’ who – when the actors can’t figure something out or are getting scared of going on stage or feeling like they can’t solve something or want to change things – becomes very removed from the process. It is a changing thing that you learn over many years of working.

I just remembered I wanted to finish with something that is important to collaboration and the effect on the writer, and it goes to your question Felicity. I’m reading again from my lecture, on how to cope with anxiety and the transmitted trauma of doing community-focused theatre work.

[Alana reading]

One of the things that did happen to me from having daily contact with these letters was an increase in my levels of caution, oh alright, let’s say my anxiety. I hesitated to use that word because it seems somewhat melodramatic and my anxiety was, I’m sure, specifically related to being in almost constant contact with a situation that was at least appalling, at worst perversely and maliciously unjust. Cognitive behaviour therapists will tell you that ninety percent of what we worry about never happens. But here I was, exposed every day for three months to a situation where the worst-case scenario, for the Chamberlain family, comes true.

I don’t think it helped that in recent years my work has been concerned with children of prisoners, child sexual assault victims, train crash survivors, and incarcerated teenage girls. As well as marine pilots negotiating a shipping disaster, same-sex domestic violence survivors, people grieving the loss of relatives in war, and the massacre of Aboriginal people in Western Sydney. Therapists might call it transmitted trauma. The way it manifested for me was to make my already fastidiously wary nature go into hyperdrive.

On any project of this nature, I do take legal advice. Much of what is in the archive are orphan works; that is, works for whom the copyright owner cannot be found. But I still posted, combed the electoral rolls, the yellow pages, every avenue possible to try and contact the letter-holder – the letter-writer. In the end, I have to hope that anyone who wrote to Lindy [Chamberlain-Creighton] will want to be publicly acknowledged for their thoughtfulness, for taking the trouble to write, and will give me the benefit of the doubt.

But then the anxiety began to leak over into the rest of my life: turning off all the power points when I went out of the house, making sure I knew where all the insurance documents were kept, pulling a cover over the built-in camera in my laptop. I think that there is a legacy in doing work that involves daily empathy with the pain and suffering of others. I think that is the work that artists do for the community. We hear those stories. People may think that it is out of respect that I always involve the communities that I work with so strongly in the work that I do, and certainly respect is part of the

equation. But the far greater truth of this work is that these community members, the people to whom these things have happened, are the ones who can most safely and sympathetically guide you through it. And so, it was with Lindy.

Without having long conversations about it or placing any more demand on her time than I thought was reasonable, Lindy herself became my exemplar of strength with regards how to deal with the anxiety I was feeling. I never asked her or told her of the effect on me. I simply watched how she coped with the material, how she reacted and responded, how she resolved to go on. In my copy of her autobiography, *The dingo's got my baby*, Lindy wrote a very beautiful and personal dedication. When I read it, I thought to myself, 'She will never know how much that means to me'. But the point about Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton is that she does know. She knows the value of a line or a verse or a thought, and that is why she has filed them here, all so meticulously.

Alana: I wanted to end on that note. I think the final thing to say about collaboration is that you need to be careful. You need to protect yourself, and you need to be really aware of what the transmitted trauma of opening up all these people's stories, en masse, can do to you. And to take strategies to deal with that. My strategy has been to watch the community and how they cope. A lot of the time it is through humour. I mean, the women whose stories are told in *Parramatta girls* are the funniest women you will ever meet. And they have been through the most astonishing sort of trauma. The very final thing I want to say is this: be complicit with them in the way you debrief about their stories. I don't know if any of you have also had that experience from your research and your work. But, yeah, it's a really important part of it for me.

Felicity: It would be really nice to close the session with everyone coming back on screen so we can see your faces, because we've really shared – I'm reaching for cliché after cliché here – a very precious two hours with Ursula and Alana this morning, and now these two absorbing hours with Alana this afternoon.

I can see there's a Chat message from Rob Conkie [on his iPhone and bike]: 'Looks like my Australian drama class is getting a total overhaul'. That really resonates with me – and I think it might resonate with a lot of people who have Zoomed into this session in terms of seeking out a wider range of theatrical experiences. I hesitate to use the word 'community-based' but what I want to say is that, Alana, in your work over the last two decades, you've given us a model for something the university is asking us to do around engagement and participation. And you've shown us how research and creative practice, as engagement, require us to bring all of our being to the process, which is also what's asked of us when we do good teaching.

I want to invite final comments before we conclude this session with a very sincere thank you to Alana.

Anna Dzenis: What's the lecture, because I want to hear more of you, talking?

Alana: It's the Ray Mathew lecture and it's given every year by a different Australian author. It's on the National Library of Australia's website. The other thing I've done recently is the Philip Parsons lecture. It's on the Belvoir Theatre site, and it's about my relationship with audience. I talk a lot about audience and why I love mixing them up – mixing community members with middle-class (as it were) theatre-goers. There's a video of the Philip Parson's lecture on the site, and I think it's on YouTube too. There's another one – the Alex Buzo lecture – but that was years ago and I probably said scurrilous things [laughter]. But no, I didn't! It goes into more detail about *Run rabbit run* and *Parramatta girls*.

Anna: I want to keep hearing you talk, so those links would be great.

Alana: *Parramatta girls* is on the national drama syllabus, and *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, so I have spoken about them to schools and young adults.

Felicity: Huge thanks, Alana, for a brilliant start to our three-day Zoom symposium on Intercultural and Intermedial Collaborations. It's been wonderful to catch up with you again, since we first crossed paths in the BA Communication at NSWIT in the early 1980s. Could we have a big show-of-hands for Alana, and a standing ovation [laughter] in this Zoom space?