

London Road: the 'irruption of the real' and haunting utopias in the verbatim musical

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***London Road*: the ‘irruption of the real’ and haunting utopias in the verbatim musical.**

Demetris Zavros

The use of documentary material appeared in musical theatre at least as far back as Joan Littlewood’s *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963), but it was not until *London Road* (Blythe and Cork, 2011) when the potential for a more experimental approach to the ‘setting’ of verbatim material was used in musical theatre. *London Road* began as an experiment, part of a scheme at the National Theatre Studio (in 2007), where composers and writers were brought together to workshop ideas and exchange practices; among them Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork. Based on Blythe’s purist approach to verbatim theatre practice, all the text was directly transcribed from a lengthy series of interviews she conducted in Ipswich between December 2006–July 2008, after the community of Suffolk became the epicentre of the events surrounding the tragic serial killings of five female prostitutes. First performed in the Cottesloe auditorium (14th April 2011), the stage performance transferred to the Olivier (28th July 2012) and was adapted into its cinematic version and released in 2015 (Live Film Premiere and Q&A, 9th June; general release 12th June)¹. Both the spoken text and song lyrics were derived from the interviews as recorded (including all the ‘ums and errs’) with the metre, pitch and rhythm of the music following the patterns of the original recorded speech as closely as possible (Original cast recording CD inlay, pp. 3-4). This practice can arguably be viewed alongside a long tradition of exploration into the relationship between music and language that has been at the centre of some more experimental music theatre work (e.g. Berberian, Berio, Stockhausen, Ligeti, Wishart, Maxwell Davies, Gaburo, etc.). The ‘verbatim’ aspect, however, offers new possibilities of examining this relationship through a different prism of critical and practical engagement especially within the context of musical theatre. The initial jarring between ‘verbatim’ and ‘musical’ (and the reconciliation between the hyper-naturalistic approach of verbatim and the heightened language of musical theatre aesthetics (Young 2012: 101-102), introduces only one in a series of initial binaries that this performance dismantles, and in doing so, I believe, *London Road* offers a very fertile space of research into how we can re-evaluate avenues of exploring not only aesthetic practices, but also political potential through this hybrid genre.

In his thought-provoking *The Musical As Drama* (2006) Scott McMillin suggests a conceptualisation of the aesthetics of musical theatre based on ‘disjunction’ rather than the more traditional idea of integration. The primary instigator of this disjunction is the existence of two distinct ‘orders of time’ embedded in the form: book time and lyric time. Book time is concerned with the linearity of the story to be told; lyric time

¹ All stage and film versions were directed by Rufus Norris.

with a different mode of expression that suspends linear time in favour of elaboration and extension through repetition and difference. Lyrical moments/songs/numbers break away from the cause-and-effect logic of the dramatic plot (and its connection to Aristotelean action, recognition, reversal, etc.) encapsulated in the book, and it is this insertion/disjunction between the two different orders of time that gives the genre its distinct aesthetic as well as its political potential. McMillin explains that 'the resistance that occurs between book and number wants to rule out simple answers to questions of identity' as well as invite the subversive and the 'multiple' (McMillin, p.191). Richard Dyer also proposes that the 'deeply contradictory nature of entertainment forms' (Dyer, 2002: 27) is what provides them with their political potential and situates this contradiction in musicals between the narrative and the numbers. The contradiction, he explains, is analogous to 'the heavily representational and verisimilitudinous (pointing to the way the world is, drawing on the audience's concrete experience of the world) and the heavily non-representational and 'unreal' (pointing to how things could be better)' (p.27). He supports that in order to 'fit with prevailing norms', the genre has a tendency to resolve 'contradictions at all levels in such a way as to "manage" them, to make them disappear' (p.27). At the same time, the film musical creates a utopian sensibility which lies at the core of its escapist aesthetics in a way that it creates a 'latent' possibility (Dyer 2002: 35) that solutions to the problems are not always normalised through the capitalist system which produced them in the first place.² The temporal distinction made by McMillin between lyric/number and book, as well as the distinction by Dyer between narrative and number seem to become problematized in *London Road* initially because the division between spoken and sung material is almost obliterated (in a near absolute integration), but I would argue that the result of this particular occupying of the 'troubled space between song and spoken dialogue' (Whitfield, 2011: 310) is a lot more profound than it may originally appear.

Lib Taylor's illuminating article (2013) examines *London Road* alongside other performances of contemporary documentary theatre which have introduced a critical frame (in this instance, the music) in their re-presentation of the primary source material to 'provide a dynamic strategy for the destabilisation of the real to promote critical insight' (Taylor, 2013: 370). Taylor suggests that while Blythe has constantly striven for the transmission of 'truth' and 'authenticity' through the exact replication of every vocal detail in the original utterance, in *London Road* 'the use of song becomes the mechanism for a reflexivity that Blythe had not envisioned' (p. 373). I will initially be expanding on this discussion in the context of the postdramatic³, that Taylor alludes to in her article, in an effort to re-think her assertion that 'voice in *London Road* both claims and defers authenticity and authority, in as much as the voice signifies presence and the embodiment of identity but the reworking of speech into sung tunes signals the absence of the real' (p. 379) and offer a slightly

² In musicals Dyer supports this contradiction can also be found *within* numbers (between the representational and the non-representational) 'owing to the differing sources of production inscribed in the signs' (2002:27)

³ In *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006), Lehmann refers to 'documentary theatre' as a genre in the genealogy of the postdramatic. He notes the documentary post-dramatic tendency in that 'suspense is not located in the process of events but is an objective intellectual, mostly ethical one: it is not a matter of a dramatically narrated, 'discussed' world' (p.55). In conjunction to this he notices that documentary theatre 'demonstrated a tendency toward oratorio-like forms, towards *rituals* (p.56). Interestingly, the discussion follows a section on lyrical drama/'poetic theatre' and the example of Tardieu's *Conversation-Sinfonietta* (1960) which 'builds a musical composition out of fragments of everyday language' (p.54).

alternative perspective into the performance based on my belief that ‘the reworking of speech into sung tunes’ does not signal an absence as much as an ‘irruption of the real’ as discussed by Lehmann (2006). I will consequently compare the stage and film versions of the musical in relation to their contiguity to the ‘real’ vs a utopian sensibility which accompanies the more traditionally escapist approaches to the film musical.

The re-composition of ‘the everyday’ into the aesthetic form; performing community through [a special type of musical] song.

London Road focuses on the coming together of a community ‘to heal itself’ (according to Blythe, Introduction to *London Road*, p. vii.) during and after the events surrounding the murders of the five female sex-workers. This is what becomes the central dramaturgical axis; not the events of the murders/the murderer or the victims as such. What we are presented with as the performance unfolds on stage is *the reactions* to the events; and this creates an interesting ‘peripheral’ focus of a near-postdramatic effect⁴. The ‘thematic centre’ supersedes the more traditional concerns with ‘plot’ as it focuses on exposing the multifarious ways we express ourselves as we per-form communities.

While the building of a community can be found at the core of a huge selection of performances throughout the history of musical theatre, and it becomes an essential component of the utopian sensibility proposed by Dyer, the difference here lies in that the coming together of the community and the variety of ways of performing that coming together is not offered as an ‘unreal’, utopian escapist vision. It is presented rather as a process under a magnifying glass; a musicotheatrical forensic examination that uses style and abstraction in a way that it unveils (and reveals in an exceptionally unique – if not unprecedented- way) aspects of the ‘real’ that partake in that performative situation. In this way, *London Road*, resists both the utopian as well as the uniformly constructed community often inscribed in escapist forms of entertainment. Instead of creating a shared space of shared wants, needs and opinions, and proposing through song and dance utopic alternatives ‘as solutions to real needs and lacks like scarcity or the lack of community’ (Nichols, 1985, 221), *London Road* carefully presents the formation of community as the residents come together to overcome the trauma of the murders, not as a uniformly constituted ensemble/chorus, but as a community that partakes in the ‘multiplicity’ of decent. As the audience witnesses this ‘coming together’, the reality of per-forming community surfaces as a real political and ethical dilemma.

Cork describes *London Road* as a choric theatre, where ‘the choral presentation of this story in particular seems to underline the ritual aspect of human communal experience’ (Blythe and Cork, *London Road*, x). In discussing his process of setting the source material to music, he explains that it progressed from a ‘slightly freer

⁴ In as much at least as it does not concern itself with ‘narrative in its linear organisation around conflict’, but a ‘reporting’ on the events in a variety of ways (Harvie and Lavender, 2010: 12).

hand' to a more 'faithful' approach to the verbatim ideals and a forensic detail in the transcription of the original speech material. The resulting melodic lines are composed together into musical structures which 'are often built out of key elements of the transcribed voice, translated into harmonic progressions, or rhythms in the accompaniment' (Blythe and Cork, *London Road*, ix). The 'poetic' transformation of the source material (the reframing of the prosaic and quotidian form of the linguistic document through a heightened aesthetic level), consequently, happens on a continuum of levels/degrees between the essentially unaltered absolute forensic transcription (austere replication of rhythm/pause, prosody and all other paralinguistic attributes) and the heightened moments of harmonisation, polyphony and counterpoint in choral numbers.⁵

In between these extremities, the composition retains several degrees of poetic relationships to the original document. But in their artifice, these variously heightened moments retain the connection to the source material in such a way that they don't only critically frame it (and I am not suggesting that this layer of signification is entirely dissolved), but crucially always point towards it; not so much as an 'absent' authentic original, but as a stylised repetition in itself. This musical re-composition is not *imposed* as a critical frame to only reveal the artifice and constructed nature of (the) performance. It is a poetic accentuation of the musical attributes that *already exist* in the language which comments on the artificiality of the source material itself; the performativity inherent in what we might usually assume to be (expressions of the) 'real/authentic/personal' in the everyday - in 'real talk'.

The nature and structure of the sung sections always point to the musical structural components as inseparably connected with not only the linguistic, but crucially the paralinguistic aspects of the prosaic text; 'how' it was spoken. As early as his 1987 article on verbatim theatre, Dereck Paget almost prophetically instigates that 'there is something almost musical in these idiosyncratic rhythms. Whereas "ordinary" speech requires the actor to learn, interpret and "play" them through his/her vocal physical skills, here it is a case, indeed of "the actor as instrument"' (Paget 1987: 331). In interview with Paget, Salt, Robinson and Thacker discuss the idiomatic everyday speech and the 'repetitiveness, the stumbling, the oddity' and the 'extraordinary juxtapositions, loops and circumlocutions' as a trademark of 'real talk' in verbatim theatre as opposed to other highly stylised dramatic language (ibid.: 330).

While 'repetition' is usually one of those attributes that pertain to the 'lyric time' domain and the 'unreal' that McMillin associates with musical numbers, here, the 'songs' supersede the traditional popular song function of representing a clearly delineated 'emotional, physical and formal excess' which occurs as a temporary disruption of the narrative (Laing, 2000: 10). Repetition (a notion par excellence musical)⁶ but also inextricably part of the nature of 'real talk' becomes thematised on a variety of levels which are specifically illuminated in *London Road* because of the

⁵ Cork also discusses those instances where the approach of building the song out of the musicality of the words themselves 'led towards the wrong sort of song', which led to the composition of a musical "'container' unconnected with the musical surface of the words, but inspired by their literal content, or the tone in which they are spoken, or the mood of the situation in which they are uttered, or that of the situation which they describe' (Blythe and Cork, x). Even in this instance however, the resulting container makes a clear statement on the artificiality of the original utterances, especially as they connect to specific professional jargon and etiquette (e.g. reporters fugue-like contrapuntal ensemble outside Ipswich Crown Court – 'The Five Counts of Murder').

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'refrain' as the 'content proper' of music (2007).

continuum opened up between spoken and sung vocal utterance in the compositional process.

STEPHANIE: But – ye know. (Pause.) Cuz I fink, if yer gonna dies, yer- gonna die-so... (Beat, laughs.) Thass that'ss **my** – point of view. (Beat.) Yeah.

(Blythe and Cork, 2012:12 , emphasis in the text)

Even when the words are spoken (as in the example above), the performative aspect of the prosaic utterance is magnified as a result of our becoming attuned to and aware of the musicality inscribed in 'how' the text was voiced. The musical intonation is what underlines in this instance the irony behind the statement that follows the trite truism: 'that's *my* point of view'. Repetition exists here on at least two levels; on the one hand, as part of the idiomatic quotidian utterance and, on the other, as we become specifically attuned to the citational nature of the 'apothegm' both in terms of content and expression (intonation, accent, etc.). So, contrary to more conventional uses of musical repetition, here, repetition does not create a temporal stasis that contradicts 'putative diegetic time' in a way that it makes the song enter the un-real, as much as it invites a different reflection upon every utterance⁷; a different kind of listening perception. In consequence, not only does [the abstraction in] repetition not absolve the utterance from its cultural baggage, but in fact *it is signalled as a process that produces it*. The musical treatment of the utterance exposes the culturally performative nature of repetition qua [musical] repetition. And this reflexivity is produced exactly as the musical component flirts with but constantly resists the full-blown entering into the unreal/utopian space of 'lyric time'.

Stage: 'Treading the borderline' between reality and construct *in actu*.

The potential inscribed in the treatment of the verbatim utterance is capitalised upon through the aesthetic opportunities of the theatrical medium (and the related notions of liveness and presence). In the stage versions, we are welcomed and invited to participate in this coming together and sharing of the community (in its performance). The experience is intimate and palpable (especially on the Cottesloe stage) at the same time as the theatrical/presentational frame is explicitly evident. Some of us handshake with the actor (Nick Holder) who 'welcomes' us into the theatre/ at the same time as Ron -the character- 'welcomes' us into the starkly minimalistic representation of the 'church hall just off London Road'. We hear the original audio recording of Ron's actual speech over the PA which slowly fades as Holder repeats and extends the speech into the first live utterance in the performance; *sung* (?)

⁷ Cork also suggests that 'hearing the natural speech patterns sung in this way can have an effect of distancing the audience from the 'character', and even the 'story', but in a positive way that alters the quality of listening. Making spontaneously spoken words formal, through musical accompaniment and repetition, has the potential to explode the thought of a moment into slow motion, and can allow us more deeply to contemplate what's being expressed. This seems particularly interesting when many different people speak about the same thought or feeling' (Blythe and Cork, x).

'Song –'Neighbourhood Watch AGM'.

RON. *Good evening. (Beat.) Welcome. (Beat.)*

The characters address the audience in a bewildering hybrid *Sprechgesang* without the clear signification of a different time order. The performance of the vocal hybrid happens in a quasi-'lyric time' order, which always retains a clear connection to a concrete reality that supersedes the 'book'. In the theatre space we come in direct 'encounter' with the performance which re-asserts its rights to multiplicity and subversion through a multi-layered experience of temporality as immediately 'it forces us to realise "that there is no firm boundary between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic realm"' (Lehmann, 2006: 101). It is exactly in the '*indecidability*' of 'whether one is dealing with reality or fiction' that the 'irruption of the real' resides (ibid.: 101). Here, the theatrical situation invites us to be immersed in its diegetic universe at the same time as it signals its connections to the past event and the liveness of the present.

In both the stage versions, the 'hyper-realist' approach of Blythe's transcription and performance of the words is to a certain extent coupled with the ostensibly stark (though expressly imaginative) theatrical staging of the interviews in different settings, always somehow incorporating a clear framing⁸, almost constantly presenting the spoken lines in quotation marks. The theatrical presentation indicates how the residents perform their community as it is in the process of becoming, but in essence also how all the different communities (residents/ reporters/ and sex-workers) are performed through repetition, stylisation and citation⁹. Due to the multi-roling in the stage version (as opposed to the film), the same actors are constantly seen to interchangeably perform different communities exposing the 'act of performing community' as a stylistic repetition, a performative aspect of our culturally shaped realities. It is because of the continuum opened up through the musical treatment of the documented text that the stage performance exposes the theatrical sign as 'always a "sign of a sign"' (Fischer-Lichte, 1992). But, in extension, the stage performance invites an 'irruption of the real' by creating *through the performance idiom itself* 'an awareness of the semiotic character' of the material products it borrows from the specific culture and 'consequently identify[ing] the respective culture in turn as a set of heterogeneous systems of making meaning' (to slightly paraphrase Erica Fischer-Lichte in Lehmann: 102).

Because the characters essentially never 'break into song', in the replication of the original utterance we hear/witness the labour (even as it is stylised) in finding the 'right words' to communicate/express opinions/ideas¹⁰. It is almost as if we witness the 'sign' in the process of becoming. And it is a sign that completely disorientates us when we first come in contact with it; it's not one that we can immediately recognise, categorise and ascribe meaning to it, but one we have to work for, to figure out. This disorientation in the initial encounter with the sign pierces the fictional frame by making us aware of our reception process.

⁸ Often by directly addressing the audience even in dialogic parts e.g. at the market place- between the Orange girl and the Radio DJ.

⁹ I will return and expand on the use of repetition on stage in the comparison with the film.

¹⁰ Expressed by Ron in the opening 'AGM' as: 'An' they always say "it's not the right choice a words". Yeah' (p.8)

The theatre audience role becomes unstable (at once participant/observer/witness) as we become aware of the sense of unattainability of the limit of an absolute/exact performance of the immensely complicated vocal score¹¹. By constantly witnessing the possibility of the 'accident', we begin to strongly invest in our participation in the event. We want the performers to get it right (as much as we –originally at least- like the characters who invite us into their 'space') and in an extension of that, we join into the experience of the community in a strongly visceral way.¹² And it is a rather visceral shock which results from our buying and investing into the frame of the community in the here and now of the theatrical event, simultaneously with being aware of the usual contract which expects us to 'willingly suspend our disbelief', when *indeed* in disbelief we hear Kate Fleetwood/Julie utter:

What's happened's happened but I'm not sad. (*Beat.*) Ya know (*Beat.*) I'd still shake his hand. I'd love to just shake his hand an' say 'Thank you very much for getting rid of them.

(Blythe and Cork 2012: 65)

The 'now of the drama' and the 'now of the theatre' (Robert Edmond Jones in Power, 2008: 43) fuse in the climactic moment of the stage version; the 'real' violently irrupts as three performers (clearly representing sex-workers who survived the events) creep onto the stage from darkness and stare at the audience for a chilling 80secs of 'un-organised' (un-stylised, non-categorised) time that opposes itself to both the musical, the fictive and even the theatrical. The threatening and unnerving silence that ensues floods the theatre along with our experience of their 'intrusion'¹³ in the space (among the dimly lit sofas representing the 'living rooms' of the community). We come face to face with the process of perception (as again we are thrown into a crisis of non-recognition) in this liminal, multi-temporal state, but through that we also become aware of our implication in the political and ethical dilemma; we are not involved in an act of 'reception' but we've become active participants in an 'encounter' (Boenisch, 2010: 171). The spectatorial distance that we normally assume is shaken as in the long chasmic caesura we are forced to experience the break from a closed off (but already porous) diegetic universe and 'to wonder whether [we] should react to the events on stage as fiction (i.e. aesthetically) or as reality (for example morally)' (Lehmann: 104).

¹¹ Michael Schaeffer is one of the cast members (stage and film versions) who have testified that the process of rehearsal and learning the material was rather challenging: 'It was incredibly difficult. There's some amazing musicians in our company. The girls were known to go off to the toilet for a little cry; I think some of boys were as well...' (Film, Live Premiere Q&A)

¹² There is actually a song entitled 'Cellular material' (Blythe and Cork, p.49) which thematises the notion of 'getting it wrong' in a musical dramatisation of the impossibility to report the newscast (by reporter Simon Newton) because of the complexity of the reportage language/phraseology while trying to avoid using the word semen. Interestingly, repetition is used here as part not only of the musical number (which works as a 'refrain' in development) but also the dramatic situation. The song, however, points directly to a very real possibility as it arises from the stage performance itself; getting it wrong [but, in this case, not being able to do a 're-take']. In addition, implicitly this variation on every repetition, musically indexes the inherent performative side of real-life language and the slippage involved in 'every repetition' of utterance which I will return to later.

¹³ This sense is indeed a result of their markedly noticeable absence from the performance (due to its 'peripheral' focus); one that has been criticized by a number of reviewers. However, [the politics of] their absence is indeed also presented in quotation marks on stage; an absence that is imperative for this moment of 'encounter' that erupts in their 'intrusion' and 'disruption' of our spectatorial gaze.

This moment not only provides the climax but also frames the rest of the performance and our experience of it in the theatrical now that already always lies underneath and threatens the surface of the 're-presentation'. The political inscribed in this 'poetic' reframing of the 'document' supersedes the didactic tone of the Brechtian estrangement techniques and does not propose specific solutions/answers.¹⁴ It makes us co-responsible not only in the production of meaning, but ethically implicated in the questions that are unearthed from the source material. We become aware of how the 'treading of the borderline of the real unsettles this crucial predisposition of the spectators: the unreflected certainty and security by which they experience being spectators as an unproblematic social behaviour' (Lehmann 2006: 104). At its core the performance is asking us to consider how we 'per-form community' without excluding 'the other'. And this happens not as we enter the un-real and utopian, but as we become fully aware of our reception process while we 'tread the borderline' between 'real' and 'construct'.

While I am not suggesting that *London Road* is a postdramatic performance per se, I think that it exposes some of those mechanisms behind the reality of theatre that Lehmann bestows to the postdramatic. The film differentiates - while not entirely separating itself from the original theatrical aesthetics - in ways that mean that the 'irruption of the real' as discussed here is marred in the transplantation into the new medium, as I will argue in the following section. And this happens in a variety of ways, as the film re-establishes connections with 'the dramatic' at the same time as it reconnects with the non-realistic/spectacular and more utopian aesthetics of the film musical.

Number and narrative in the film: expanding and demarcating.

The aesthetics of the film allow the creative team to play with an expansive pallet of interpretative possibilities, and 'expansion' indeed lies at the core of this film adaptation. While retaining a sense of 'theatricality', the film departs from the minimalist theatrical settings and staging solutions and takes advantage of camera traveling sequences, scale, editing and movement in a 'cinematic treatment' that clearly lies outside a realist orientation/approach. The multi-rolling which pervaded the small ensemble aesthetics of the stage version is now replaced by a substantially expanded cast which includes celebrity actors (Olivia Coleman, in the role of Julie; Tom Hardy and Anita Dobson). Chorus/ensemble sequences and choreography become a lot more elaborate to fill the more expanded filmic space mirrored in the musical space of the orchestrations. The film also departs from the original dramaturgical structure as it follows the linear chronological succession of the events. The result is the creation of dramatic suspense (and the expectation of a cause-and-effect logic) which begets a stronger sense of a 'book time', or at least the constant illusion of one, as well as a distance from the in-between temporality

¹⁴ For a very illuminating discussion of postdramatic 'Reality theatre' performances and a political engagement which supersedes the Brechtian in favour of the 'encounter', please see Garde, U. and Mumford, M. in Jurs-Munby, K, Carroll, J. and Giles, S. (eds.) (2013).

inscribed in the choric/ritual quality which was so crucial in the stage performance. As all these [expansive] changes happen, the rift between narrative/book and number/lyric broadens and we move from the 'irruption of the real' towards the utopian ideal, as I will be discussing in the following section.

Expanding: Ghosting celebrity and the cinematic 'tracing' of the speech/song continuum.

Actors with star quality change the audience perception of the relationship between actor and character. Marvin Carlson discusses celebrity status (in his celebrated *The Haunted Stage*, 2003) and the 'aura of expectations' (p.67) which ghost the actor based on role types in which they have appeared, but also expectations of their particular approach (ibid.:67). This often is seen to collide with the 'role' as Michael Quinn describes it (in his 1990 essay 'Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting') because it 'exceeds the needs of fiction, and keeps them from disappearing entirely into the acting figure or the drama' (Quinn in Carlson 2003: 86). The celebrity status of the star cast members here and the different types of 'haunting' related to that, create an 'overdetermined quality' that I believe potentially collides not so much with the role and the fictive dramatic universe, but, in fact, with exactly the potential disruption of that dramatic cosmos and the emanating politics of the 'encounter'.

Olivia Coleman, who plays the role of Julie in the screen adaptation, is an extremely popular and likeable actress. However, the fact that we can recognise Olivia Coleman's 'voice' in the role of Julie because we all 'know' Coleman's style of acting through a series of roles on TV and film (e.g. *Peep Show*, *Twenty Twelve*, *Broadchurch*, and BBC's *Fleabag*) adds an extra layer of complexity to the dynamics of perception and the notion of 'authenticity'. The ghosting of the actress' voice becomes disruptive of the process that Blythe was so categorically insistent on. Most importantly however, it is perhaps not the ability to re-enact the vocal utterance exactly as much as the audience's belief that the actor does - 'as an instrument' - that allows the critical reflection back onto the 'how' these utterances are signs of a community in performance. Because Coleman's voice is inadvertently haunted by her celebrity status, that belief is slightly unfulfilled.

At the same time Tom Hardy's celebrity status haunts his role in an additional way. In the film, the 'Shaving scratch' song is transplanted from the County of Suffolk pub (stage version) to the claustrophobic atmosphere of a taxi and re-composed. Hardy's casting as the taxi driver who seems a rather plausibly potential murderer¹⁵, lends the film more of the quality of an 'addictive forensic thriller set to music' (Bradshaw, Guardian review of the film). The audience almost expects that the star will have a central role in the 'action' of the film; 'is it him, is it him?'¹⁶ Here Hardy's celebrity status and 'remnants' of previous roles¹⁷ (States in Carlson 2003: 67) haunts our experience of the film and introduces a sense of a stronger narrative drive, dramatic suspense and linearity which becomes a lot more central to our experience of the

¹⁵ An expectation also supported by recent castings.

¹⁶ The question in the film acquires a double meaning. As the two girls on the bus look down into the taxi, we see him for the first time, like they do. 'Is it him?' connects to both the inquiry regarding the murderer simultaneously with the question about the star actor. One of the girls in the bus answers a twofold 'Yeah' in evident elation.

¹⁷ E.g. Bronson in *Bronson* and the Kray Brothers in *Legend*.

film. The separation between book and lyric times becomes more prominent; as a sense of a teleologic linear ('dramatic') narrative is introduced, the 'how' of the performative utterance becomes almost of a secondary importance and consequently enters the domain of the abstracted, the 'lyric' and un-real.

The difference in approach and a stronger separation between 'lyric' and 'book' time is signalled from the beginning of the film. The first few bits of interview material appear completely unaccompanied and 'in preparation'¹⁸; the musicality of the words is not at all pronounced. The indicative/indexical 'ask away then' by one of the characters/residents establishes the connection with 'the interview', ends the introduction and signals the beginning of 'the journey' as the music enters in true suspense-full filmic fashion. Words and music are initially entirely separate. This first instance of music originally appears as non-diegetic (accompanying the first view of 'the Road') as the orchestra is allowed to take on the usual allusion of omniscience (with the use of leitmotifs from pieces that will appear later in the film). However, as the camera moves from the street into the first house (in a rather oneiric fashion), we realise that the musical accompaniment could very well be diegetic, accompanying the newscast about the murders (the sound design supports this assumption). The play between diegetic/non diegetic continues as the music transposes in time with the camera traveling movement into the subsequent living rooms we visit, in a markedly filmic non-diegetic fashion. The reports only gradually begin to take on a more musical tone, eventually clearly in tune and in time with the musical accompaniment; and the collapse of diegetic and non-diegetic music happens at the same time as the lines between song and speech are obliterated. The reportage of the news stories/bulletins is composed into a contrapuntal chorus which enters the musical domain while also retaining connections to the dramatic situation, no less through the use of TV monitors and accompanying localisation of sound. This smooth transition and play with the conventions of music and song in film is indeed ingeniously constructed. However, it already heralds a big difference between the stage and film versions and their connection to 'the document'.

Even as this opening sequence exemplifies/traces the poetic continuum from speech to song, the 'transitory' manifestation is arguably *demonstrating* rather than allowing us to experience the in-between straight away (as the stage opening did) and, at the same time, is critically subsumed within a more linear dramatic framework. This initial separation of music and words in the opening of the film signals a different approach to the connection between the two which will persist throughout the film in its use of musical underscoring¹⁹.

After the climax of the contrapuntal news-reports (at the end of the introductory sequence), the camera follows Coleman/Julie outside, where she performs the first slightly more musicalized utterance by a resident: 'everyone is very, very nervous'. As she leaves the camera frame, we remain on the road to seal the filmic establishing of place, all complete with the orchestral eerie and ominous

¹⁸ Almost as the equivalent to the sounds of the tuning band instruments in pre-show of the stage version.

¹⁹ In addition, the residents' prosaic text does not undergo any poetic heightening/re-composition in this opening sequence; it is only the journalist reports that appear to be musically performed at the beginning of the film. The performative aspects of the journalistic utterances will, in fact, become a lot more central in the film, accentuating the critical comment on their stylised and formal performances as they perform *their* community, with all its ritualised (and vacuous) etiquette.

cadence/modulation from (f minor to a flat minor) -and the accompanying driving ostinato- with the close-up on the 'London Road' sign. The use of leitmotifs in the original stage music which is mainly comprised of the songs, is rather minimal. As Cork explains:

[...] I didn't foresee much cross-pollination of musical motifs from one song to another, although I did want the identity of each individual song to be clear; I felt this was the only way I could create musical meaning from this un-versed, spontaneously spoken text.

(Blythe and Cork 2012: viii)

In the film version however, the (admittedly masterful) fragmentation of some of the original songs (like in the case of 'everyone is very very nervous') and the underscoring required to accompany the expanded cinematic sequences results in the use of leitmotif material as usual 'to guide the listener through the performance, providing atmospheric associations with characters, and reminding the audience of earlier moments in the story' (Taylor M., 2009: 83). While this was essentially obsolete in the stage version, the film creates through these changes, a sense of a plot driving the action which, again, triggers a clearer separation between lyric and book times. There is however, a special type of the use of leit motif in the underscoring in this film musical that almost has the potential to reverse the more usual function of the orchestra. When the melodies utilised in the orchestral underscoring are directly related to the rhythms and intonations of the original utterance (one that we have already heard), and especially in a way that it escapes a clearly discernible or easily surveyable melodic structure, the orchestral underscoring itself seems to be 'haunted' by the original words uttered; the paralinguistic 'how' of the utterance becomes a ghost that hovers inside the orchestral music. This type of ghosting is almost constantly in competition with the sequential dramatic linearity produced as the orchestra is confined to more conventional devices of dramatic underscoring (such as the suspense-full cadence mentioned above).

Expanding further: 'refrain' and performative reality vs the ominously unreal.

The intimate reportage-like setting of the residents' interviews in their homes is clearly demarcated against the more expansive space (mall/market, bus, courthouse, etc.) of the ensemble numbers which are choreographed and filmed in a dream-like manner (even as both movement and set are using some form of the 'pedestrian' or 'real'). The residents come together for the first time in the choral repetition of (Coleman's) 'everyone is very, very nervous and very unsure of everything' set at the Christmas market. The nervousness of the dramatic situation is coupled up with the peculiarly eerie Christmas spirit (through the use of the juxtaposed, ironic 'It's the most wonderful time of the year' and the monstrously oversized²⁰ and nauseatingly gyrating Santa statue among other Christmas paraphernalia that take on a grim air of a [capitalist] dystopia). This 'nervousness' overflows the narrative situation and enters the un-real (via the 'supernatural' or 'unearthly') by clearly self-reflexively signalling the first synchronised ensemble movement choreographed sequence almost as a 'miracle'. This 'un-real' coming

²⁰ Achieved through the use of close-ups on facial features and low angle camera shots.

together into an ensemble as well as a 'breaking into [choral] song' moment marks the first coming together of the people as they start to form a community [in fear]. But the separation between the 'real' (as that which is consistent with everyday life experience) of the 'book' time order and the 'lyric time' of the number is not only clearly demarcated, but unmistakably underlined.

This demarcation has a pervasive effect in the way that repetition is perceived in the film version as part of the unreal 'lyric time'. The film is using substantial 'realistic' continuity editing in an effort to achieve the unity with diegetic time, but also engages with a more 'oneiric logic of time' (Dyer, 2012: 24) in the more extensively choreographed numbers through a variety of cuts and shots ranging from space-expansive overheads to extreme close-ups. However, these possibilities of editing mar the performative function of repetition as it had surfaced both in the 'musicalisation' of the 'real talk' utterance and its exploration on stage. Every repetition of the song choruses in the film is accompanied by a completely different sequence of camera shots, either in the interests of driving the plot, or more usually enveloped within the 'lyric time' of the ensuing numbers.

In the stage version the possibilities are far fewer within the reality of the theatrical time frame, but every time the performers repeat the 'refrain', there is an explicit and intelligible indication that *they are repeating it*. While this is partly subsumed within the characteristics of lyric time in other cases, in the absence of a clear distinction between lyric and book times in the stage performance (coupled with the special peculiarity of the musicalised verbatim material as discussed earlier), the repetition takes on another role. Because time and space are shared between auditorium and stage, even when, through song, time is expected to be elongated or suspended, every re-iteration of the 'refrain' makes testament to the fact that exact repetition is impossible. There is always a degree of slippage, or what Foucault calls the sudden illumination of multiplicity' within the similarity that exists in repetition (Foucault, 1970: 232) and Deleuze ascribes to a secondary type of repetition; not a 'naked' or 'bare' repetition, which simply reproduces its original, but a dynamic repetition, evolving through time (Deleuze, 2004: 27).

In the stage version of the 'Shaving scratch' song²¹ there is a rather unconventional chorus/'refrain':

MARK. *I uhm. I I I've studied serial killers since in my mid-teens.
It doesn't mean I am one but err...*
GRAHAME...*Ooh I don't know. Ha, ha, ha*
MARK. *I just er, find it interesting. But as I say just to emphasise that doesn't make
me a serial killer so...*
GRAHAME. *Oh that'll get you off the hook/ after all that you've just said!*
MARK. *That's alright then*

The performers make an effort (the actual labour of which we are witnesses of) to repeat the words/lyrics in the exact same way (if they are to be 'true' to the document²²), while the rest of the elements of the mise-en-scène change with every

²¹ This is the song that gets transplanted into the 'taxi' sequence in the film.

²² After all, as Blythe explains 'with both the songs and the spoken text the audio has remained intrinsic to the process, so that the original delivery as well as the words are learned.' (Blythe and Cork, VI).

repetition.²³ This exposes 'repetition' as a stylised simulation at the same time as it thematises the notion of 'slippage' in every re-iteration in real time. The effort to repeat the original as closely as possible is what makes the slippage even more evident in the staged version. Not only do we become aware of our own reception process as this effort to repeat is always (by definition) failing, but we become witnesses to the event of slippage. The repetition of the musical 'refrain' in performance evades the unreal/utopian space of 'lyric time' that it is usually ascribed to.

The film tries to capture the 'reality of the moment' and its transient quality by recording the voices live on the set and not resorting to the more traditional dubbing of the singing (avoiding what Dyer calls 'severing the body from the voice' by cinematic technology in the presentation of songs (Dyer, 2012: 16)). At the same time, the ensemble numbers sung by the chorus are occasionally treated through rather intimate sound localisations (effectively, extreme sound 'close-ups' coupled with their visual counterparts) as we focus down to a particular performer's voice within the ensemble sound. This last technique produces an illusion of a (hyper)'realistic' approach and also acts as a faint reminder of performing these pieces live²⁴. However, it is indeed marked by the artifice of the medium which at once allows a microscopic look into as well as produces a mediated distance from its source, marking its reception as a result of a careful post-production mix. Perhaps more importantly, this localisation also interrupts our ability to experience the 'slippage' in the repetition of the [choral] refrain, which was so intrinsic to the process of reception in the stage performance. To experience the specifically transitory nature of the event of its utterance (through a difference in repetition in time), is essential to the connection between the performative nature of the theatrical and the everyday. The film audience becomes less able to viscerally and experientially appreciate the connection between the original and the aesthetic reconstitution (or the 'real' and the 'performed') that Lehmann so profoundly connects to the 'irruption of the real' in performance.

The promise of utopia; Happy endings?

The spatial expansion in the film finds its apogee in the climactic final sequence which includes the imposing structure of a water tower; space, 'distance' (and separation) become thematised in this enlarged frame/space. The film ends on an incredibly colourful²⁵ 'London Road in Bloom' party which essentially mixes and overlays a multiplicity of realities including the representation of real events, a real space (but not the real London Road), performers and creative team members appearing alongside some of the original residents as well as local ones in a celebration. This mixing of 'realities' relates to the in-between achieved on stage, but, here, it is obviously of a different order.

²³ On a first level, this shows something essentially reflexive (and honest) about the stage performance: while the words are repeated in verbatim, the *re-framing* can change the meaning substantially; e.g. from 'real concern/nervousness' to 'ironic comment', etc.

²⁴ Arguably this also exemplifies the notion of the 'chorus in descent' mentioned earlier; a community comprised of individual voices (metaphorically and literally through the help of technology)

²⁵ The film also uses gradual colour saturation and intensity in a metaphoric reflection of the community's journey.

In the stage version the 'sex-workers' claimed a very 'real' space in a very real time (as discussed earlier); one that makes clear the porosity of the real/performed binary and introduces the irruption of the real. They do, in fact, appear in the film a lot more frequently than the stage version. However, throughout the film the 'claiming of space' happens in an abundantly voiceless/silent, ghost-like manner²⁶ supported in the end by their placement higher up – at a distance from the street (which almost creates a conflation between the living and the murdered).

Kate Fleetwood, representing one of the sex-workers in the film, walks through the street party and is offered a balloon by one of the girls before she climbs the steps up the tank tower to watch the party from a distance. Another girl waves at her and they both release their balloons to the sky. This inclusive time-space allows the co-existence of reality and performance, but at the same time proposes an oneiric (complete with slow-motion sequences), unattainable, utopian vision of a new generation which reaches out to the ghostly presences of the sex-workers (nobody else seems to acknowledge them) into their world. This utopic world does fall within the aesthetic that was opened up by the filmic re-imagination which separated the 'real', book time and the lyric time of the 'spectacular' numbers. The spectral claiming of space within the utopia is the filmic equivalent to the sex-workers' staged-but-real, uncomfortable, silent, long stare into the audience. The disparity between the two experiences, I believe, exemplifies the rift between the stage and the film; the 'irruption of the real' vs the proposed utopia as a form of political engagement with the source material.

The stage performance ends with a reprise of the 'London Road in Bloom' song. The peculiarly nostalgic quasi-waltz-like music at the end creates a very hybrid form of song; one which at first glance seems to partake both in lyric time and utopian escapism. We are almost invited to participate in the utopian sensibility inscribed in the nostalgia of the music as well as the endless list of flowers (coupled with the actual smell of flowers on stage)²⁷. Yet the song also provides us with a feeling of uncertainty; both in terms of the constantly changing metre irregularly alternating between $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{2}{4}$ around the more regular refrain and the uncertainty of the residents' sketchy gardening/floricultural knowledge. This apprehensive quality dislocates the end away from the usual utopian 'happy ending' as it points to another convention of musical theatre song-writing. This 'list-song' inescapably mirrors another list we were presented with in the performance; in 'The five counts of Murder': Tania Nichol, Gemma Adams, Anneli Alderton, Paula Clennell, Annette Nichols. The stage version does not allow for a complete entrance into an unproblematised utopian space. Ending the stage version with the song creates a very distinct feeling of unease, which in the film is replaced with a hopeful vision of utopia in the bittersweet yet hopeful 'happy ending'.²⁸

Even as the film tries to imbue the ensemble numbers with the 'multiple' and the 'real/pedestrian', by entering into a clearer separation between book and number, it veers towards the utopic and the unreal and -as the community comes together in synchronised movement sequences- perhaps closer to the limit of the conformity

²⁶ In the taxi sequence 'It doesn't make me a serial killer', which is now overlaid with 'silent night', they appear in 'blurry' slow motion shots (almost David Lynch-like surreal images) as we see them from inside the moving taxi.

²⁷ I am indebted to Sarah Whitfield for this note.

²⁸ 'London Road in Bloom' will not be reprised until after the end of the film, well into the titles sequence.

associated with such understandings of utopia (even if more usually than not those moments are presented as dystopic). So while it does not entirely abdicate the connection to the 'real' in favour of the 'utopian', the film tends towards the later limit through its clearer separation between book and number; narrative and spectacle. The stage version, on the other hand, flirts with the utopian sensibilities of lyric time but rests closer to the former limit; it capitalises upon the special peculiarity of the verbatim musicalized utterance and employs the transient nature of the theatrical event to expose the forming of community as a performative aspect of our culturally shaped realities. In so doing it opens up a space for critical reflection through the 'encounter' which compels us to deal with questions, but tries to avoid proposing utopian solutions.

The ontology of the verbatim musical allows for a significant new reconceptualization of the possibilities engendered in the form, not only in terms of a shift in aesthetics, but also the resulting political engagement. It has the potential to utilise its connection to the 'document' to captivate the audience beyond the aesthetic, political and ideological implications of the 'utopian', by drawing on its relationship with the multiplicity inscribed within the 'real'. *London Road* demonstrates how we inextricably perform our identity as part of the communities we build not by tapping into the escapist politics of entertainment (and the utopian sensibility inscribed in the non-representational aspects of the musical idiom), but the 'politics of perception' that surface from the exploration of the continuum between music and language; the 'real' and the 'performed'.

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