

Embers

By Campion Decent



What is Verbatim Theatre?

Verbatim plays are written using only the precise words spoken by people interviewed about a particular event or topic. The plays are constructed by the playwright from the testimony of witnesses or those close to an event in order to lend the play an authority that shifts the theatre from mere entertainment to a form of reportage, politicising the audience.

This form of theatre has four major functions:

1. To *reassess* national/ or local histories;
2. To *celebrate* or *give a voice* to local communities, or marginalised groups;
3. To *investigate* important events or issues;
4. To be *didactic*, (in other words to educate or “teach” towards increased and specific knowledge or understanding.)

In an age where even News and Current Affair programs are being turned into “infotainment”, there is a distinct lack of diverse voices and local stories in our community, which could be one of the many contributing factors behind the resurgence of Verbatim Theatre.

Traditionally, Verbatim Theatre has explored a range of perspectives, a variety of truths; Verbatim plays express the complex layering of characters' realities through story and language. Conscious that it is witnessing a shared reality, whether local or global, an audience is given the opportunity simultaneously to reflect on a play's content intellectually and to experience the characters' stories emotionally.

A toweringly important new Australian play that speaks to our hearts from the hearts of our countrymen.

The Daily Telegraph

Overnight on 7 and 8 January 2003, a dry storm ignited over 80 fires in Victoria's North East and Gippsland. From exhaustive interviews with residents of the region, Campion Decent has fashioned an extraordinary account of the fires; the heart-stopping tales of survival, the awe-inspiring courage and endurance of communities put to the test, the spine-chilling evocations of the wave of heats roars through pristine valleys - and the mountains of sandwiches volunteers anxiously prepared. Gripping, lyrical, comically overwrought when it seems tragic, and deeply moving when all appears lost, *Embers* is the story of a fire - and the people who conquered it.



2003 Eastern Victorian (Alpine) Fires

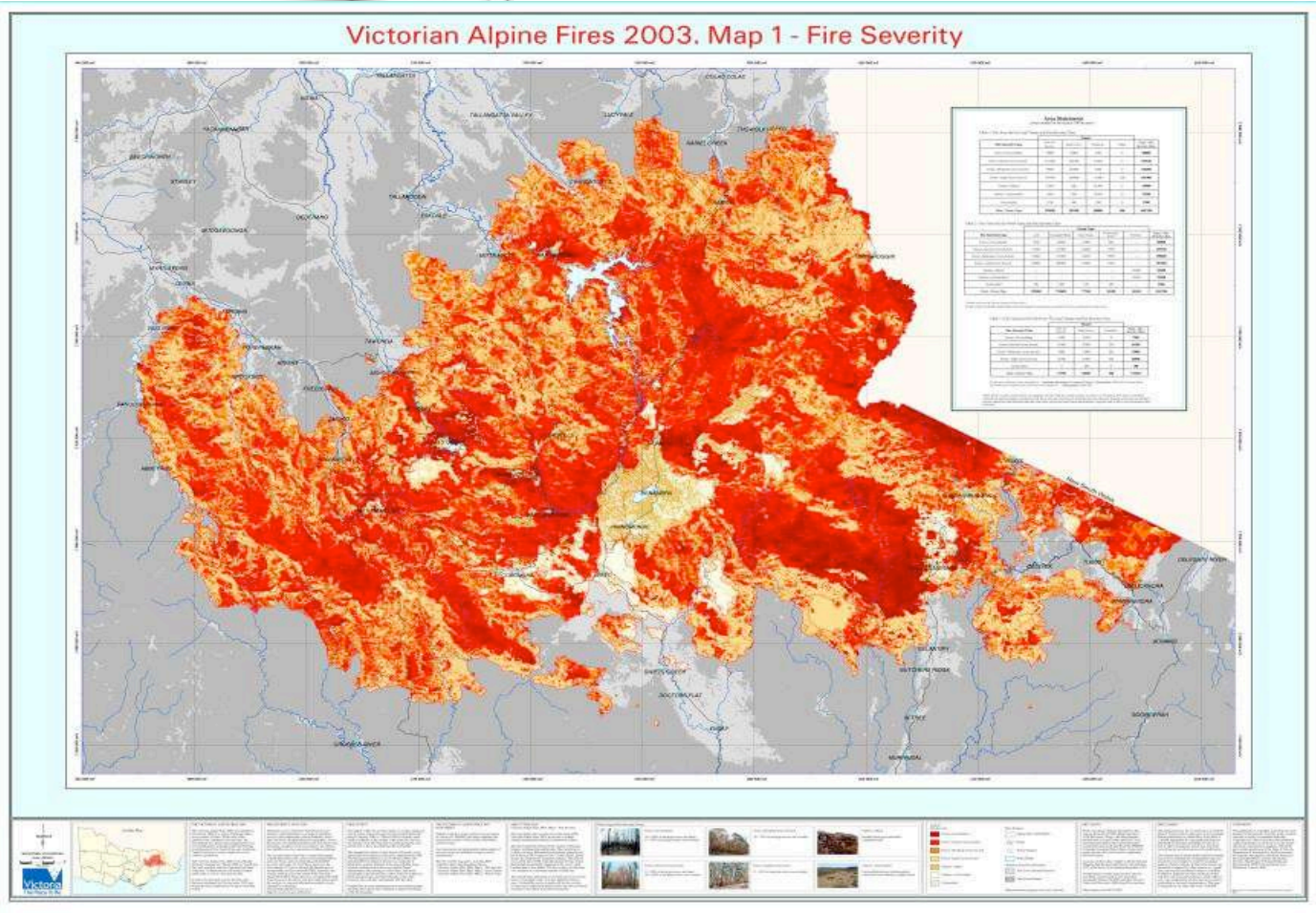
The events behind the play

Eighty seven fires were started by lightning in the north east of Victoria on 8 January 2003. Eight of these fires were unable to be contained - they joined together to form the largest fire in Victoria since the 1939 "Black Friday" bushfires. Burning for 59 days before being contained, the Alpine Fires burnt over 1.3 million hectares, 41 homes and over 9,000 livestock, with thousands of kilometres of fencing also being destroyed.

Areas affected include Mt Buffalo, Bright, Dinner Plain, Benambra and Omeo.



Victorian Alpine Fires 2003. Map 1 - Fire Severity



A rich source of material can be sourced from the following website:

<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/nrenfoe.nsf/LinkView/E20ACF3A4A127CB04A25679300155B04358FFCDA5CA1F43FCA256DA6000942C9>



The Writer's Notes

It's a slightly surreal experience to be touring *Embers* now given the devastating bushfire events of earlier this year; and while the play in no way attempts to provide an account of this most recent experience, there are echoes from the 2003 fires that will make the play resonate in a different way following Black Saturday.

This is the nature of theatre. It is alive to what we bring to it as audience, both individually and collectively. And certainly the collective consciousness around bushfire and its implications has shifted since February 7. At its heart though the play remains a story about a community of ordinary people facing an extraordinary event.

When I first heard the stories that are *Embers*, I was moved by their simple elegance and offer of community strength in the face of adversity. In a world increasingly marked by events beyond individual control my hope remains that *Embers* resonates beyond the specific experience it recounts, to illuminate the universal within it.

It is what lies beneath the surface of this story that I believe we need to hear.

Campion Decent

What the reviews said...

THE AUSTRALIAN THURSDAY AUGUST 3 2006

Horrors burning to be told

THEATRE

Embers

By Campion Decent. HotHouse Theatre and Sydney Theatre Company. Wharf 1, Sydney, August 1. Tickets: \$69. Bookings: (02) 9250 1777. Until September 2. Tours regional Victoria, September 5-23.

THIS production is a stirring celebration of community, in both its making and its subject. It has roots in a rural tradition of pragmatic, almost casual heroism. A disparate bunch of men and women come together to deal with a crisis, then laugh and yarn about it afterwards around the campfire, or in this case the barbie.

The crisis here is the terrible fires that swept through Victoria in 2003, destroying more than 1.1 million hectares of bush and farmland and causing untold damage to lives and livelihoods. Writer Campion Decent, accompanied by regional rural recovery worker Les Hume, travelled throughout the damaged region and talked with farmers, firefighters, relief workers and many others about what the experience meant to them.

Using the techniques of verbatim theatre, Decent has fashioned this research into a script that dramatises it all without losing the voices of those whose stories he has listened to and movingly tells here.

The 70-odd people who had a part in the making of this production are played by seven great actors: Annie Byron, Tracy Mann, Mark Pegler, Tim Richards, Amber Todd, John Walker and Matthew Zeremes. They are directed by Maeliosa Stafford, who has found, as has Decent, just the right balance between documentary and drama.

There are many dramatised group scenes, including a comic celebration of the volunteers who fed the firefighters, and an impassioned debate about the role of controlled burning and the collaboration — or lack of it — between the various state authorities.

The most powerful moments are when individuals step forward and tell their versions of the disaster directly to the audience: the forest worker who hid her native animals down a mineshaft to save them from the fire, the fire brigade captain trying to support his men, the farmer's wife who watched cattle being burned, then had to deal over the phone with insensitive insurance company clerks. In a classic Australian bush irony, the only death in the whole disaster was one by drowning.

There is a great set and lighting design by Gordon Burns and Martin Kinnane, with a projected backdrop of pale, bare trees, eerie bush and fire effects and a stage floor that flickers with glowing embers as though on burned ground.

But the best things in this show, a great and emotionally powerful piece of investigative documentary theatre, are the traces it has of the people who were there.

John McCallum

Student Notes

Things to take into consideration

Embers does not rely on plot or character development to get its point across.



The testimonies of over 70 people were used in *Embers*.



The Actors changed costumes on stage as well as off stage.

There was extensive use of projections to subtitle the major stories as well as the use of haunting music to underline the impact of the stories told.

In terms of staging & acting, *Embers* tends to lean more towards the world of **Epic Theatre** to convey its point across to an audience.



It relies heavily on language, in this case, the stories within the piece and the differing linguistic and physical idiosyncrasies the characters possess in telling their stories.



There were only 7 actors playing all the roles.



Epic Theatre

This will help you answer the exam questions when talking about acting and staging a Verbatim Play.

Epic theatre is a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid 20th century from the theories and practice of a number of theatre practitioners, including Erwin Piscator, and, most famously, Bertolt Brecht.

Although many of the concepts and practices involved in Brechtian epic theatre had been around for years, even centuries, Brecht unified them, developed the style, and popularized it. Epic theatre incorporates a mode of acting that utilises what he calls *gestus*.

The epic form describes both a type of written drama and a methodological approach to the production of plays: "Its qualities of clear description and reporting and its use of choruses and projections as a means of commentary earned it the name 'epic'."

Remembering that one of the main objectives of Epic Theatre and Embers is that the audience should always be aware that they are watching a play and listening to actual accounts of the people involved. Hence the uses of projections, on and off stage costume changes and the use of voice and gesture are prevalent in the production.

When looking at the acting in Embers you could use some of Brecht's theory to portray the various characters.

Gestus is an acting technique developed by Brecht. It carries the sense of a combination of physical gesture and "gist" or attitude. It is a means by which "an attitude or single aspect of an attitude" is revealed, insofar as it is "expressible in words or actions."

Gestus, as the embodiment of an attitude, carries at least two distinct meanings in Brecht's theatre: firstly, the uncovering or revealing of the motivations and transactions that underpin a dramatic exchange between the characters; secondly, the "epic" narration of that character by the actor (in the case of Embers it is their experience of the fires that's important to the piece)



DRAMATIC THEATRE	EPIC THEATRE
PLOT	NARRATIVE
implicates the spectator in a stage situation	turns the spectator into an observer, but
wears down his capacity for action	arouses his capacity for action
provides him with sensations	forces him to take decisions
experience	picture of the world
the spectator is involved in something	he is made to face something
suggestion	argument
instinctive feelings are preserved	brought to a point of recognition
the spectator is in the thick of it,	the spectator stands outside
shares the experience	studies
the human being is taken for granted	the human being is the object of the inquiry
he is unalterable	he is alterable and able to alter
eyes on the finish	eyes on the course
one scene makes another	each scene for itself
growth	montage
linear development	in curves
evolutionary determinism	jumps
man is a fixed point	man as a process
thought determines being	social being determines thought
feeling	reason

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A HOTHOUSE THEATRE & SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRODUCTION

EMBERS

BY CAMPION DECENT

Director Maeliosa Stafford



PERSONAL EXPERIENCES FROM THE 2003 VICTORIAN FIRES ARE NOW AN EXTRAORDINARY TALE OF COURAGE, ENDURANCE AND SURVIVAL

'A TOWERINGLY IMPORTANT NEW AUSTRALIAN PLAY THAT SPEAKS TO OUR HEARTS FROM THE HEARTS OF OUR COUNTRYMEN.'

The Daily Telegraph



2007 Queensland Premier's Literary Award for Drama Script (Stage)
2007 AWGIE for Community Theatre

Cast: Julia Blaylock, Mergle Blinn, Julian Currie,
Alan Lewis, Paul Hedderley, Tracy Mann, Mark Peggler
Set Designer: Gordon Rivers
Costume Designer: Maddy Brennan
Lighting Designer: Martin Kilmone
Composer/Sound Designer: Steve Francis



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