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S. A. McHugh

University of Wollongong, smchugh@uow.edu.au

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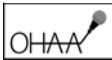
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Minefields and Miniskirts: the perils and pleasures of adapting oral history for the stage

Siobhán McHugh



The author is well known in the Australian oral history community for her work with Australian women and the experience of the Vietnam War. An extensive interviewing project led to a book and a radio program that received critical acclaim. Perhaps inevitably, given the impact of the material, an offer to adapt it for performance was received, and accepted after some initial trepidation. The stage play that resulted has eclipsed audience exposure of the book. This article describes the content of the interview project, the dilemmas and challenges in fashioning single characters out of the stories of several informants, and the responses to the work from the original contributors, actors, audiences and critics, and Vietnam War veterans and their families.

In 1991, I started researching Australian women who had been involved in the Vietnam war. After speaking to two hundred or so, I recorded oral histories with fifty. About half had been in Vietnam during the war, as nurses, journalists, entertainers, humanitarian workers or consular and secretarial staff. A quarter married Vietnam veterans, and thus became embroiled in the psychological and physical after-effects of the war. Others had been part of the anti-war movement.

It took over two years to assemble from the fifty oral histories a book and radio series, both called *Minefields and Miniskirts*. The book sold over 10,000 copies and was mostly well-reviewed. 'Living breathing history', wrote Candida Baker in *The Age*, 'history at its best'. 'The eloquence and frankness of the women is unusual', wrote Helen Elliott in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and: ... McHugh tells their stories without judgement and with such compassion that nothing is withheld. The result is as shocking as it is informing.¹

Alongside humorous and uplifting moments, several of the interviews canvassed traumatic experiences. Civilian nurses described treating children burnt in napalm, or watching them die on the operating table. Military nurses spoke of seeing young men virtually castrated by landmines and of having to ring their girlfriends or family on their behalf. Aid workers recalled the horror of babies lying zombie-like in orphanages, limbless children and captive girls in brothels.

The most affecting story of this dismal litany was told by a journalist, Jan Graham. She happened to be in a jeep taking an American sergeant to the airport for his flight home after a year 'in-country'. Here is how Jan recounts the story in my book:

He was going home, he'd had his three days off and he'd been getting plastered with everybody else in the camp. He saw something going on in a field and he jumped out—he should have stayed in the fucking jeep, he had no right to do this—he ran in, and there was a big explosion ... and I did the most stupid thing of my life, I ran in after him. And his legs were blown off, his penis and testicles were gone, and he was just bleeding—there was not a thing I could do. So I just cradled what was left of his body, torso and head, and cuddled him. And he thought I was his wife, who he was going home to see, to be with for the rest of his life. And he spoke to me of how happy he was to be home, how wonderful it was to be in her arms again—MY arms. 'Darling, it's so wonderful to feel your arms around me again. I've missed this for twelve months. I haven't looked at another woman, and I love you so much.' And I told him how much I loved him and it was so wonderful he was home and what we and the kids were going to do on Sunday ...

Jan breaks down, distraught once more, as she had been when forcing herself to recall the death of her fiancé. Then the pseudo-tough journalistic cool reasserts itself, betrayed only by her anger.

It took him fifteen minutes to die, I was told. It seemed like five or six hours.

Jan felt deeply traumatised by the incident—not just by the horror of the man's death, and the realisation that she herself could have (or should have) been killed too, but by the fraudulent role she felt she'd played. She went to see the man's wife in America, and told her what he had said in those last moments.

She cried, she said, 'This is the first tears of joy I have had since then.' She said, 'At least he died with somebody who loved him.' I said 'No', and she said, 'Yes, because you were me.' She told me she was so proud, so proud to know me—but she should have *hated* me.



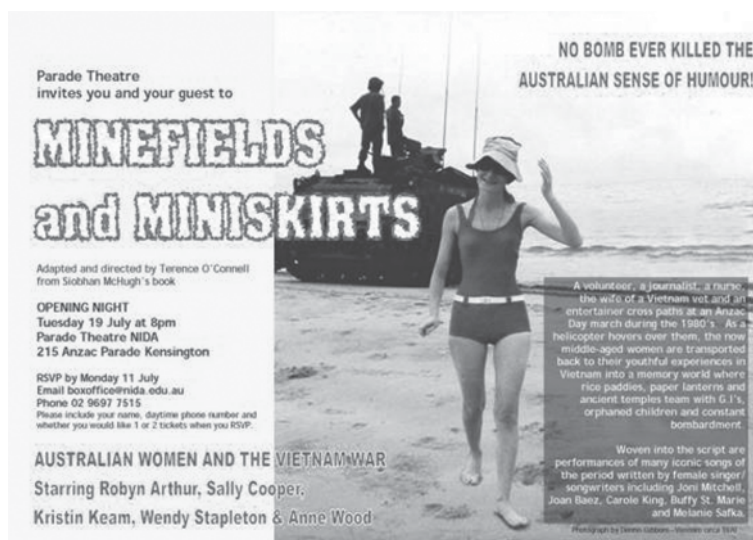
Photo: Denis Gibbons

Military nurse Patricia Ferguson off-duty at Vung Tau, Vietnam, c.1970.



Photo: Siobhán McHugh collection

Army nurse Trish Ferguson (R) with Siobhán McHugh, opening night of the play, Sydney, May 2005, holding the blue swimmers she wore 25 years before, featured on the cover of *Minefields and Miniskirts*.



Siobhán McHugh collection

Flyer for the play at the Parade Theatre, Sydney.



Photo: Siobhán McHugh collection

Actor Tracy Mann and Jan Cullen, the veteran's wife on whom her character is based.

I included Jan's story, largely as above, in the radio series. The difference in the impact was extraordinary—the spoken version was immensely more powerful. People told me, sometimes years later, how her account moved them to tears, in some cases forcing them to pull over and stop driving. I played the excerpt at conferences and in oral history classes and not once did I fail to see how touched and shaken people were, by Jan's raw emotion and pain.

Her anguish on tape is almost unbearable. In twenty years of gathering oral histories, the only thing that I can compare it to is a Cambodian woman describing her son dying quietly before her eyes, from starvation.

As an oral historian, I consider myself a conduit for the interviewee, a go-between through whom their story passes, faithfully, to the broader world. It troubled me that Jan's story became so etiolated on the page. I had tried to inject the body language, the nuances, that might swell the feeling behind the words, but in retrospect, it seemed to taint her testimony, bowdlerise it.

In 2005, to my delight, I got a second crack at the whip, when a new publisher re-issued the updated book. I informed the interviewees of this chance to correct any errors or make any changes. There were gratifyingly few requests: a nurse felt she had not adequately explained the *triage* process, an entertainer regretted not mentioning 'the boys' in the band, one person disliked a word used about her, others wanted a credit for a photo.

In the intervening years, I had read an article by Rosie Block² where she had grappled with a similar issue concerning an emotional account by a young woman whose parents and brother died when the Manly ferry struck their launch. The original transcript read as largely unpunctuated stream-of-consciousness, which gave some sense of the urgency.³ Rosie listened to the audio and reconfigured it using the spacing one would find in poetry, creating mental pauses for effect. I did the same with Jan's testimony for the new edition of *Minefields and Miniskirts*, and was much happier with the result.

He saw something going on in a field and he jumped out
He should have stayed in the fucking jeep he had no right
to do this

He ran in

And there was a big explosion

And I did the most stupid thing of my life

I ran in after him.

And his legs were blown off

His penis and testicles were gone

And he was just bleeding

There was not a thing I could do

So I just cradled

what was left of his body

torso and head

and cuddled him.

And he thought I was his wife

who he was going home to see

to be with

for the rest of his life.

And he spoke to me of how happy he was

to be home

how wonderful it was to be in her arms again...

My arms.

Darling, it's so wonderful to feel your arms around me
again!

I've missed this for twelve months

I haven't looked at another woman

And I love you so much.

And I told him how much I loved him

and it was so wonderful he was home

and what we and the kids were going to do on Sunday

It took him fifteen minutes to die

I was told

It seemed like five or six hours.

Jan is still deeply traumatised by the man's awful death
and the terrible intimacy of usurping his last moments
with his wife. She went to America and told his widow
what he had said as the life drained out of him.

She cried.

She said *at least he died with somebody who loved him.*

I said No!

She said *yes, because you were me*

She said *this is the first tears of joy I have had since then*

She told me she was so proud

so proud to know me

She should have *hated* me.

Stage Adaptation

In 2003 a theatre producer contacted me, seeking the rights to a stage adaptation. I was cautiously elated—pleased that the women's stories would reach a new audience, but apprehensive about how they would be presented. A first meeting with Ken Moffat reassured me that he and his partner, Terence O'Connell, showed a deep respect for the women portrayed and intended to keep faith with the spirit of what they said. But inevitably, a new medium meant a new interpretation of the material.

I wrote to the women and asked those who had not already granted me copyright in their interview to do so, to make the material freely available for the adaptation. Remarkably, all but one wrote back wholeheartedly endorsing the play and signing over copyright. (The one who did not want to be involved had plans to write her own book and felt it might undermine her story's chances.) I was humbled at their trust and support. I was also even more apprehensive. What if they felt misrepresented, let down, by the end result?

Terence O'Connell created five composite characters for the play: a nurse, a journalist, an entertainer, a church volunteer and a veteran's wife. About ninety per cent of the dialogue came from the 'real' women's oral histories, the rest being written by Terence to flesh out the 'back story' and provide colour. But though most of what 'Kathy', the nurse, said was true, in real life the words belonged to about eight women. Not only were several individuals' experiences conflated into one, but military and civilian roles had also been blended. The Entertainer spoke lines belonging to four singers and a go-go dancer. The Veteran's Wife was largely derived from one woman, as was the Journalist, while the Volunteer was a blend of two.

I did not have an inkling of how the play was shaping until opening night at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne in July 2004. It was a surreal experience, to sit there in a crowded theatre, and hear Kathy utter Yvonne's story about the injured child, followed by Colleen's wistful desire to help 'our boys' and Kay's spirited defence of treating a wounded Viet Cong man:

No-one had 'I'm a friend' or 'I'm a foe' tattooed on their forehead.

For the audience, it clearly gelled and because of the unmistakable ring of truth in the verbatim stories, 'Kathy' represented an entirely believable Aussie nurse in Vietnam.

More confronting was to hear stories grafted from one role to another. Jan Graham, the real-life basis for the journalist character Ruth, had such a fund of powerful stories from her ten years in Vietnam, that her character threatened to dominate what was supposed to be an ensemble piece. Terence adroitly carved up the cache. In one powerful scene, three women move to front of stage and tell interspersed tales. Sandy, the entertainer, recalls an old Vietnamese woman desperate to find the body of her son, killed in a massacre. Eve, the volunteer, describes how she watched the interrogation of an old man and is filled with despair.

I said to the GI, 'Why are you doing this?' He replied, 'He's a suspected Viet Cong informer.' 'Well so could I be!' I said. He looked at me. 'Hardly likely Ma'am—you're not a Gook'.

Kathy, the nurse, is overcome with joy as she witnesses a peasant woman give birth in a rice-field. In real life, all three stories belonged to Jan Graham, or 'Ruth'.

What was most unsettling was to hear Jan's harrowing story of the blown-up American soldier, framed for a



Photo: Siobhán McHugh collection

Actor Wendy Stapleton and Maureen Elkner, the entertainer on whom Wendy's character is part-based.

different narrator. 'Eve' is a God-fearing type who would not swear, as Jan does, or use earthy language. Thus Jan's bitter 'He should have stayed in the fuckin' jeep' is transmuted to 'the bloody jeep'. The rawness of 'his penis and testicles were gone' is cut and the story of going to see the man's wife is shortened. The strange and ambiguous last line, 'she should have HATED me', is lost. This sanitised version loses much of the power of the original.

'Eve' is a blend of two very different women in real life: Barbara Ferguson, a volunteer who worked with World Vision and other aid agencies in Vietnam for nine years, and Susan Timmins, a diplomat's wife, who did charity work at orphanages in the afternoon before the round of cocktail parties and social niceties that occupied her evenings. Both women were profoundly altered by their time in Vietnam. Barbara spent so much time in remote villages with the Vietnamese that she forgot what Europeans looked like, commenting once, to a friend's great amusement, on the 'ugly pasty-faced children' of a white missionary. She gradually renounced her evangelical Christian orthodoxy for a more compassionate, Buddhist-like perspective on life: 'No-one holds all the right



Photo: Siobhán McHugh collection

Anne Wood, who plays a character based on journalist Jan Graham, with director Terence O'Connell.



Photos: Siobhán McHugh collection



Kay Collett, radiographer, in 1966 as she set off for Vietnam, aged 23.



Photo: Siobhán McHugh collection

Kay Collett (L) with Siobhán McHugh at the opening night. Kay is now Head of Radiography at the Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney, and is also involved with a charity in Vietnam.

and all the truth', she told me. Susan, who arrived in Vietnam as a starry-eyed newly-wed who assumed that anything the government did must be right, discovered what she called the personal meaning of right and wrong in Vietnam. She was horrified by the casual violence, the dead and disabled children, the incongruity of the diplomatic high life amidst the carnage:

You sat sipping champagne and the whole time there was boom-boom-boom and if you stopped to think, one of those booms might have been killing someone.

The restless consular sophisticate and the highly-Vietnamised volunteer had to be woven together into one woman, Eve. Inevitably, some of the complexity was lost.

But if I felt nonplussed at seeing the 'real' women flitting in and out of character on stage, how did the interviewees themselves feel? Jan Cullen, basis for much of the veteran's wife story, attended the Sydney opening at Glen St Theatre in May 2005. She was seventeen when she met 'Len', who was about to join the army. 'That was no big deal', she told me. 'Half of us had never heard of Vietnam in 1967.' Len saw horrific things in Vietnam. He was wounded and pinned by a log during a protracted firefight, expecting to die at any moment. Len came back a broken, angry shell of the man Jan first met—but she married him anyway. 'What could I do?' she asks.

The marriage followed a dismal pattern familiar to anyone dealing with veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. Len had nightmares in which he imagined himself back in combat, Jan the mate at his side. He drank heavily and was prone to sudden violent rages and paranoia. Three children and many brutal

years later, the marriage ended, after Len abducted and raped Jan at gunpoint, and threatened to kill them both.

The 1987 Welcome Home March, in which Vietnam veterans were publicly acknowledged after years of vilification, began the slow process of catharsis. Jan helped found a support group for wives and children of veterans and gradually put her life back together. In 1989, Len rang out of the blue. He'd had two years without alcohol and for the first time, he talked about his experiences in Vietnam. 'Twenty years later he tells me, and he cried. And I cried with him.' At the Vietnam Veterans march on August 18th, Jan pinned Len's medals on him. 'He actually put his arm around me', she recalls.

Terence O'Connell opens the play *Minefields and Miniskirts* with the veteran's wife, Margaret, watching an Anzac Day march. 'I'd been married to a Vet', Margaret says, 'so I felt like I'd had my own Vietnam.' Those are Terence's words, not Jan's. But they resonated with her. The actor Tracy Mann, who played Margaret, had never met Jan before opening night, but her affinity with her was extraordinary.

Like many in the audience, Jan cried as she watched 'Margaret' unfold on stage. The naïve girl who falls in love with the handsome soldier gets subsumed by menace, confusion and pain, before the tentative first steps towards rebuilding identity and self-esteem. The mature Margaret emerges, a feisty advocate for the rights of veterans and their families.

Jan had never been able to read her story in the book, she told me later—not till she saw it on stage. She returned to the show three times, once with her adult daughter, who seemed less comfortable with the per-



Photo: Siobhán McHugh collection

Six women from the book *Minefields and Miniskirts* with Siobhán McHugh at the opening of the play in Sydney, 11 May 2005.

formance. Although the ultimate ‘message’ is one of great compassion for veterans, it must be confronting to see something strongly resembling the violence between your parents played out on stage.

Besides Jan Cullen, seven other women who featured in my book attended that first night in Sydney. Each found it highly emotional, to be transported back to the place that had shaped them so profoundly, and to hear their own experiences told in their own words, in a public place.

Terence made the actors middle-aged, looking back to their youth, just as the real women were when I interviewed them. The cast relished such powerful flesh-and-blood roles (rare for older women) and at times the similarity of tone or presence to the real women I knew was uncanny. Wendy Stapleton, who played the entertainer, Sandy, even looked the spitting image of Maureen Elkner, a singer who had run off to Vietnam at the tender age of sixteen.

A virgin, Maureen’s first sexual experience came when an Australian soldier lured her back to his hotel and raped her, giving her syphilis in the process. When she related this to me on tape, she was measured and calm. She understood that she had been a naïve child, whose pursuit of adventure saw her thrust into the brutality of war. She was even fired upon on stage while—surreally—singing *My Boomerang Won’t Come Back*. This last detail was too good for any writer to forego

and it made its way into the play. But much of the complexity of Maureen’s journey had to go, as other entertainers’ stories fought to be included—equally potent, and as drama, perhaps more complementary to the other protagonists. It was confusing to see Sandy, looking so much like Maureen, but now speaking Elizabeth Burton’s line, about how the go-go dancers stopped the war the day the Viet Cong watched from the trees.

The night Elizabeth Burton attended the show, Barbara Ferguson was also there. For me, the evening assumed new levels of delight as I saw how well these two women from vastly different worlds connected. Elizabeth, the apprentice hairdresser who’d gone to Vietnam at twenty to see the world, and Barbara, the upstanding Christian who now laughed at her early self-righteousness.

Yet they were not that different really, for instance where it came to principles. Like many who entertained the U.S. army, Elizabeth was asked to sign a document agreeing to ‘associate with none other than Caucasians.’ The miner’s daughter from Wollongong rebelled. ‘My Dad taught me to treat everyone as a human being.’ For fraternising with black and white soldiers, she was deported, as ‘a race-riot risk’. Sadly, not before she had been gang-raped, by six GIs—black and white. The gang-rape makes it into the play. The racial segregation does not.



Photo: Siobhán McHugh collection

Siobhán McHugh and Terence O'Connell,
director of the play.

Del Heuke, a former RAAF nurse in Vietnam, sent me this email response:

On Tuesday night *Minefields and Miniskirts* played in Taree to a full house and a standing ovation. It was confronting, challenging and bitter sweet to sit in the audience and hear private thoughts and moments spoken by someone else on stage. I loved the concept that it was a conversation between women and we the audience were eavesdroppers.

It was beautifully portrayed, especially the way the Vet's wife's experience was woven into the story. Wives did not volunteer for the great adventure and yet they carried a disproportionate part of the load. I heard gasps when the comment [came] from the RSL. 'Come back when you have fought in a real war.' I pray that attitude has disappeared for the current Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

One of the unexpected outcomes of the play was the cult following it developed among Vietnam veterans. Night after night, men with raddled faces clustered in the foyer after the show, their wives, or sometimes children, by their sides. When the actors emerged to share a drink, they were met with an outpouring of stories, unleashed by the emotions aroused by the play. During the Malthouse run, the theatre set up a website for comments. Here are a couple:

Name: Danielle, Aged 17

Show: Minefeilds [sic] and miniskirts

Message:

I went to see minefeilds and miniskirts about a week ago now and I absolutely loved it. It really pulled at my heart strings and made me a bit teary because I know the way the veteran's wife feels. My father was also in the Vietnam War and my [mother] and I have had to put up with the violence and abuse that she put up with... Anyway I was so pleased at how accurate it was to the real life experiences that I face on a daily basis.. My dad tells me lots of things about the war, but has to stop after a while or he will go psycho... I am really happy now that more people know what the females involved in the war had to go through and how it affected their lives and not only the men involved.

Thank you for sharing this fabulous play with all of us and helping me get over what I have been trying to get over for years.

Name: Vietnam Veteran

Show: Minefields and Miniskirts

Message: What an experience. My partner [is] younger than myself who previously hadn't any great exposure to the 'American War'... This show singlehandedly covers every aspect of my experience in that war. My partner was moved to tears as I was with the sympathetic nature that such a topic has been treated. If I could recommend every Vet to see this show; it honestly did more good for me than all the Psych visits I've had, and all the compassion I've been shown and all the medication I've been on... With my sincere and heartfelt thanks... Fido

While male veterans had warmly endorsed the first edition of my book, the play reached the veteran community in a new, more visceral, way. The cast became so embroiled in the fall-out that during the Perth season, they were invited to the Vietnam Veterans' Remembrance Day, to lay poppies at the Roll of Honour there. Robyn Arthur, who with Wendy Stapleton played every single performance of the five month Australian tour (the rest of the cast changed along the way), was honoured to be so chosen. And yet, as she wrote in *Alliance* magazine, thirty-five years before, she had marched in the Moratorium anti-war protests!

Vietnam was a part of my life from the time I was 11 to 21. Cousins were conscripted and some friends were conscientious objectors... The gift that has gone with performing the show has been meeting the people who were part of that extraordinary time in our history... Another time as now when we followed the USA into a war where we don't belong. This comes up constantly during the open forums that we have had with high school audiences everywhere (the play is on the Year 12 syllabus in Victoria).

The telling of these remarkable stories is opening up a dialogue between Vets and their families for the first time in many instances... Its been an incredibly rewarding and enriching journey for us all and in every way it comes back to the people, the living history of the women we represent and the extraordinary legacy that connects Australia to 'that time and that place'.

Close to 50,000 people saw the show before it ended in October 2005—a lot more than have read my book. Is it enough that the stories are being disseminated, even with dramatic licence? Or is the blurring of the individual experience, so central to oral history, too high a price to pay?

In writing the play, Terence O'Connell wanted to convey 'the bravery, fortitude and sheer guts of these amazing women and their adventures in Vietnam'. I think he succeeded. The response of fifteen women from the book who have seen the play has been overwhelmingly positive. The actors too have always been conscious of the 'living history' they represent.



Photo: Peter Ramsay

Members of the cast of *Minefields* and *Miniskirts* with veterans, attending a Remembrance Day function in Perth, August 2005, organised by the Vietnam Veterans Association of Western Australia. (L–R): Sally Cooper, Kevin Cass Ryall, Wendy Stapleton, Anne Wood, Pete Ramsay BEM (State President, Vietnam Veterans Association of WA), Brian Donnelly, Gabby Walters and Robyn Arthur.

As drama, it elicited very favourable newspaper reviews. *The Age*, in Melbourne, wrote:

This is the performance to catch for 2004. Laugh, cry, reflect—or all of the above. But don't miss this magnificent socially focused musical theatre piece.

The Australian said:

The true war stories—delivered in a simple, unvarnished style—are intensely moving, provoking many in the audience to wipe away a tear or two.

Diana Simmonds in the *Sunday Telegraph* wrote:

Entertainment with heart, soul and reason—don't miss it!

Only Stephen Dunne, of the *Sydney Morning Herald* mused on the process, of adapting oral history for the stage:

O'Connell's direction stresses the documentary aspect, but there's a little too much glibness... making each character a slightly too-neat compendium, the instant, off-the-shelf Vietnam experience. But the casting is strong and it works well as selective oral history.

But what about the central question for the oral historian—does dramatisation distort the truth? Even though much has been omitted, and the stories that do get in have been reconfigured and amalgamated, I believe the essence of the play captures the essence of the experiences of the women whose stories I recorded some fifteen years ago.

In some cases, as with the veteran's wife character, the play transcends the book. In others, like Ruth, the journalist, the reality is more powerful. But even a diluted version of truth is still truth, and that is the real power of this play—the audience and the actors know that this stuff is not made up.

My twelve-year-old son came with me to one performance. Despite my parental watchfulness, he regularly plays computer games in which he negotiates death and destruction with frightening cool, seemingly inured to violence. As Ruth spoke on stage about witnessing a Vietnamese girl being tortured, he leaned across to me with a look of concern. 'Mum, is that TRUE?' 'Yes', I said. 'That happened.' His eyes widened. No special effects, no multicoloured explosions on a screen—just words. But they had hit home—because they were true. Surely that response is a vindication of oral history.

NOTES

¹ *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* are daily broadsheet newspapers in Melbourne and Sydney respectively.

² Block, Rosie, 'Voiceprint: From Tape to Page: Keeping Faith with the Voice', in *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No. 17, 1995, pp 67-68.

³ Block, Rosie, *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No. 23, 2001, p. 74.
