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Vardy v Rooney: The Wagatha Christie Trial

How the Wagatha Christie play is changing the narrative of British ‘documentary theatre’

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In May 2022, a two-week libel trial at the high court in London dominated the front pages of the UK’s tabloid press. The case represented the culmination in a long-running saga that had held the public imagination for three years: the Wagatha Christie affair.

Colleen Rooney, whose husband Wayne Rooney is England’s leading goalscorer, was suing Rebekah Vardy, the wife of another prominent England footballer. Vardy sued Rooney for libel in 2020 after Rooney accused Vardy of leaking personal stories from her private Instagram account to The Sun newspaper. Rooney’s accusation had been [made on Twitter](#) in 2019 following the sting operation she conducted to catch Vardy in the act, earning her the title “Wagatha Christie”.

As you’d expect, breathless newspaper accounts of proceedings were accompanied by a whirlwind of public speculation on social media. Now, a theatre dramatisation of the case, [Vardy v Rooney: The Wagatha Christie Trial](#), is attracting sell out audiences to London’s West End.

The Agatha Christie connection doesn’t end there, however. Online punsters have already branded the affair “[The Scousetrap](#)”, a portmanteau of Rooney’s Liverpool roots and Christie’s *The Mousetrap*. The producer of the Wagatha play, Eleanor Lloyd, was also behind the revival of Christie’s [Witness for the Prosecution](#), which has been running at London’s County Hall since 2017.

While both plays thrive on the appeal of the courtroom drama, *Wagatha* is composed entirely from real court transcripts. This positions the play within a long tradition of British verbatim theatre. Verbatim plays, also known as “documentary theatre”, elevate fact-based storytelling by dramatising real spoken word and personal testimony. However, there is something crucially different about this verbatim play to those that came before it.

Spoken truths

Some verbatim practitioners incorporate not only what participants say, but exactly how they say it.

Leading playwright Alecky Blythe’s work, features actors deliberately recreating the hesitation, tone and inconsistencies of interview participants, while delivering the content of their speech. Other writers incorporate verbatim material into their plays but combine this with sections of imagined dialogue, blurring the line between fact and fiction.

Despite these shades of verbatim theatre, practitioners and theorists agree that it pursues an aim that is more than artistic. Specifically, it offers an objective authenticity and truth recovery that fictional plays cannot reach.



Rebecca Vardy (right) sued Coleen Rooney (left) for libel after Rooney accused Vardy of leaking private information to *The Sun*. Andy Rain/Neil Hall/EPA

It is unsurprising then, that some of the UK’s most groundbreaking verbatim productions similarly use court transcripts. The Kiln Theatre (previously known as Tricycle theatre) in north London made headlines with its productions in the 1990s and 2000s. For instance, its production The Colour of Justice (1999) was dubbed “is the most vital piece of theatre on the London stage” at the time. Based on transcripts from the six-month inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, it sought to confront institutionalised racism. Another production, Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry (2005) examined the deaths of 13 unarmed civilians in Derry, Northern Ireland in 1972. Both plays queried the notion of justice and the authenticity of the official record.

By contrast, in foregrounding a story of celebrity culture and social media obsession, *Wagatha Christie* dramatises the Vardy v Rooney trial as an end in itself. The drama is all there: larger-than-life characters, contradictory witness statements and “lost” evidence. Wide-scale privacy and libel issues are not there. As such, the trial’s July 2022 outcome – that Rooney’s claims were “substantially true” – barely matters.

That's entertainment

For the play's writer, Liv Hennessy, it's all about escapism and commercial appetite. Referring to the trial as a national "watercooler moment", Hennessy believes that Wagatha will attract first-time theatregoers, which could aid theatre's post-pandemic recovery.

This queries the aim of verbatim theatre as a form of exploration of social and a means by which to shed a light on underrepresented voices and tragedies.

Recent productions have focused on the Grenfell Tower disaster, the challenges facing Generation Z and antisemitism. For all their lofty ideals, verbatim plays regularly struggle with the ethics of adapting real speech. Interviewees may take issue with the way in which they are represented or have concerns that their identity will be exposed. Adapting inquiry transcripts incurs a responsibility to the families of those involved which may not always be discharged.

While Wagatha marks a submission to mass culture, it does so by recognising that theatre is ultimately about entertainment. This is wholly different from the moral quandary that tends to accompany watching verbatim theatre. Audiences may worry that by watching injustice, they become complicit in it. Or that "enjoying" a harrowing verbatim play leads to the commodification of trauma. They won't experience this when watching Wagatha.

The “Wagatha Christie” play may therefore alter the definition of verbatim theatre. Given clear audience demand – the show sold out within minutes of ticket release and six more dates have been added – there may come a point where celebrity-led stories happily coexist alongside the underrepresented voices synonymous with the form. Hennessy clearly hopes that Wagatha will be a sort of gateway production inspiring a love of theatre that crosses genre, form and subject. For verbatim practitioners, it reinforces that aims aside, to get audiences in, little should get in the way of a good night out.