



THE OKLAHOMA CITY BOMBING PROJECT / IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WEST





Type of output:
Performances
(Published Play-text
and Performance)

by
Steve Gilroy

Front cover image and left:
In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016

CONTENTS



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

SUMMARY	4-5
INTRODUCTION	6-8
TIMELINE	9-11
RESEARCH CHALLENGE	12-14
CONTEXT	15-16
METHODS AND PROCESSES	17-20
DISSEMINATION	21-25
REFERENCES	26

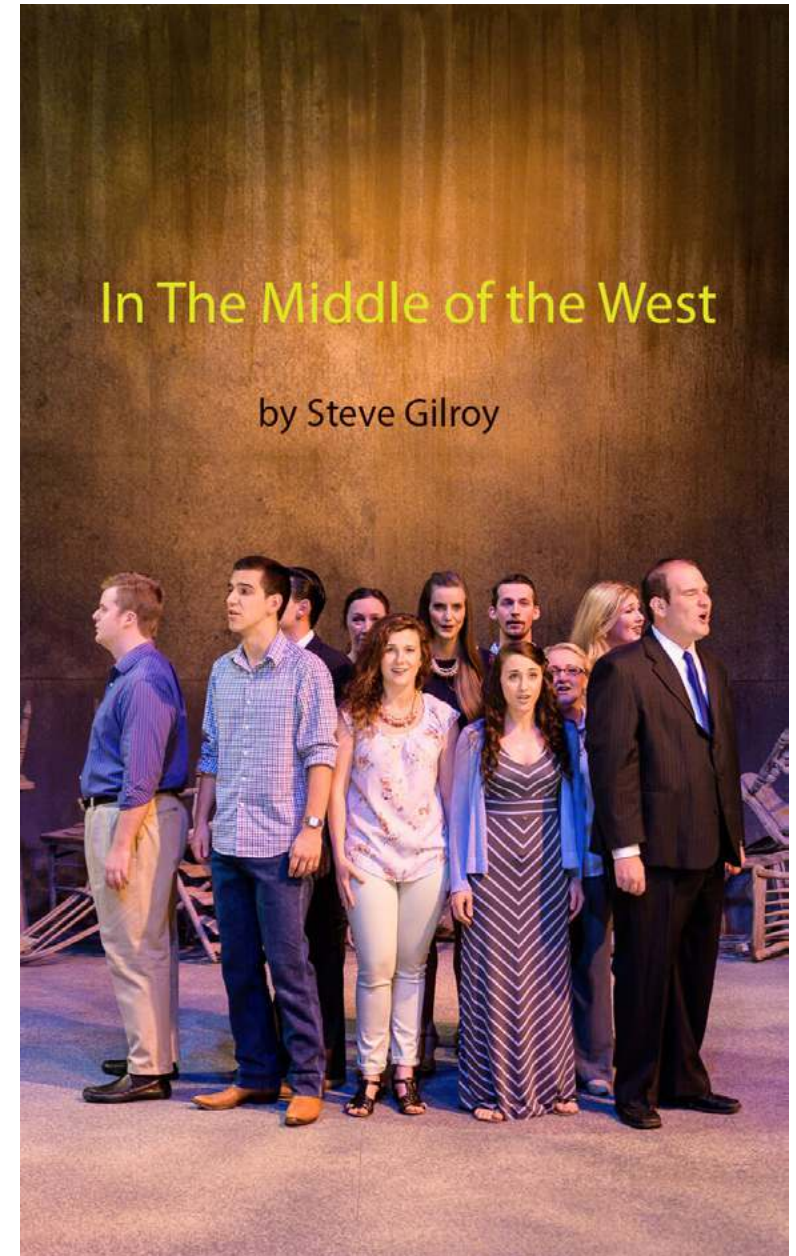
SUMMARY

The Oklahoma City Bombing Project / In the Middle of the West was a verbatim theatre inquiry into the legacy of the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City (OKC) in 1995 carried out by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. It comprised three stage productions and a published play-text (2015-2018).

The research interrogated normative memorial discourse defining the remembering of the bombing and its legacy. Specifically, through testimonial revelations, the project explored political aspects of the official narratives of remembrance and, more broadly, narratives of survival.

By framing the verbatim text through the mythology of the West, the play and performance explored the point of intersection between myth and the lived experience as conveyed through verbatim testimony.

Right: *In the Middle of the West*,
Play text: [Link](#)



The current work is stylistically situated between verbatim texts exploring narratives of trauma and survival, such as Philip Ralph's *Deep Cut*, 2008 and post-dramatic works admitting the manufactured nature of text and character (Crouch, T. *The Author*. 2009).

Workshops in OKC on Gilroy's verbatim making processes were followed by interviews with key protagonists, including bombing victims, survivors, city and federal officials, first responders and the media. Crucially, as testimony was edited, distilled and framed by other elements of production the signifying function of the testimony was discussed and negotiated with participants.

The project culminated in professional and student productions in the US and UK, including the Lyric Theatre, OKC. A play text/education pack was made available to all Oklahoma High schools and endorsed by OKC State Department in 2020. Project funded by Oklahoma City University (OKCU) - \$40,000.

Right: Cover of *Focus*,
Oklahoma City University
Alumni Magazine



INTRODUCTION

“ The . . . Oklahoma City Bombing Project, served as a living memorial, and a celebration of the tenacity, recovery, and healing process of Oklahoma City.”
R. Lynch, “New Year’s Review of Arts across the USA in 2015,”

“It has opened my eyes to different perspectives [...] it is far more moving to learn about human history rather than learning straight facts. It helps teach not only the story, but also how an event changes the world and the people around it.”

Gianna Hoffman, 12th Grade, Classen High School, Oklahoma City.

Huffington Post, 2015.

The Oklahoma City Bombing Project / In the Middle of the West was a body of work initiated through a commission by Oklahoma City University (OKCU) performed as part of the official memorial programme marking the 20th anniversary of the bombing.

The research process extended Gilroy's existing documentary methodologies (e.g. *Motherland*, 2008; *The Prize*, 2012) to examine the long term impact of America's most deadly domestic terror attack (168 civilian fatalities) on the citizens of OKC. A production was prepared and rehearsed, using Gilroy's verbatim methodology by students of OKCU. The world premiere of *The Oklahoma City Bombing Project* (TOCBP) was performed at the Berg Theatre, Oklahoma City in April 2015.

The work was further developed in the UK newly entitled, *In the Middle of the West* (ITMOTW). The UK premiere was performed at Northern Stage, Newcastle upon Tyne, June 2016. The publication of the play-text by Bloomsbury in the UK followed in 2018, alongside further amateur and professional productions in the USA.

In 2015 and 2019 working with a network of teachers and the State Education Department, Gilroy facilitated workshops in schools across OKC. Evaluations conducted within schools demonstrated the use of the published play text of ITMOTW and accompanying education pack (now available to all schools in the State of Oklahoma) had influenced students' understanding of the bombing and changed the way teachers approached (mandatory) teaching of the events of 1995.

Left:
The Oklahoma City
Bombing Memorial



Right:
The Oklahoma City Bombing Project,
Berg Theatre, 2015



TIMELINE

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019- 2020
<p>Theatre production commissioned by Oklahoma City University to investigate long term impact of the Oklahoma City bombing.</p> <p>Interviews commence.</p> <p>Paper: <i>Documentary Theatre and Oral History: The Oklahoma City Bombing Project</i>, Northumbria University, 'Performance and Identity' Research Seminar Series, 17th November 2014.</p>	<p>World Premiere of <i>The Oklahoma City Bombing Project</i> at the Berg Theatre, Oklahoma City, 16th April 2015.</p> <p>Paper: <i>New writing and Verbatim Documentary Methodologies</i>, Oklahoma City University, 1st October, 2015.</p>	<p>Performance: Gilroy, S. <i>In the Middle of the West – In Making</i>, TaPRA (Theatre and Performance Research Association) Conference (Interim), Northumbria University, 11th May 2016.</p> <p>UK Premiere of <i>The Oklahoma City Bombing Project</i> (newly titled – <i>In the Middle of the West</i>) at Northern Stage, Newcastle upon Tyne, 18th May 2016.</p>	<p>Production of Education Pack and series of workshops in OKC schools, 2017.</p>	<p>Publication of play-text: Gilroy, S. 2018. <i>In the Middle of the West</i>, Bloomsbury, ISBN 978-178682-688-6.</p> <p>Production at The Lyric Theatre, Oklahoma City, 31st October, 2018.</p>	<p>Student performances in Millwood School, Classen and Cushing High Schools, Oklahoma City.</p> <p>Play and Education Pack endorsed by State Department and available across the State of Oklahoma, 2020.</p>

Right:
In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016



Below:

In the Middle of the West (video),
Northern Stage, 2016



RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The primary research aim was to interrogate the official, normative memorial discourse which defines the 'remembering' of the bombing of 1995 and its legacy.

The OKC National Memorial and Museum are the recognised custodians of the official legacy of the bombing and promote messages of civic and community pride. This approach to remembrance has resulted in the exclusion of narratives that challenge or problematise an emphasis on community unity and heroism. *ITMOTW* sought out interviews with a diverse range of people whose lives had been directly affected by the Oklahoma bombing, including survivors, bereaved friends and relatives, city officials and politicians, first responders, defence attorneys and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) representatives, to explore stories that contradicted, rendered complex or otherwise exceeded official accounts.

In doing so the project also explored anti-federal government sentiment through the Midwest that stemmed from these events, which became particularly evident during the Obama presidency, and then harnessed by the Trump presidential election campaign of 2016.

Above:
The Oklahoma National Memorial

Below:
The Oklahoma National
Memorial Fence

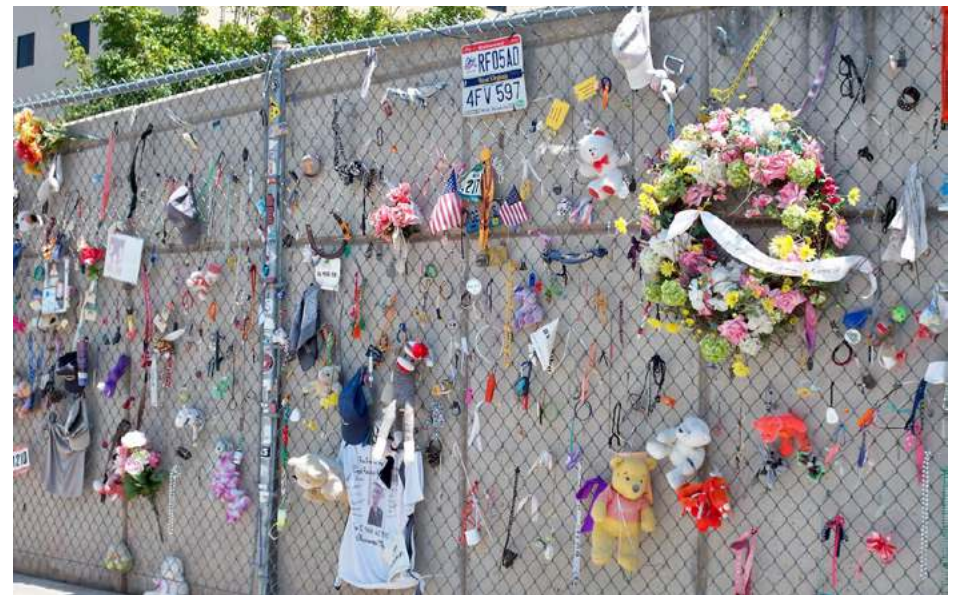




Image:
In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016

Below:

In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016



CONTEXT

A number of Gilroy's documentary theatre projects relate to human conflict and trauma and these include: the impact of the Iraq and Afghan wars on the domestic world of working class families from North East England (*Motherland*, 2009), disenfranchised olive farmers living in the Palestinian West Bank (*Facts on the Ground*, 2010) and for this project, the communities of OKC living with the legacy of the OKC bombing.

Debates within the practice and scholarship of documentary theatre highlight the importance of balancing the commitment to a theatrical/dramatic form with a duty to present the truth of the testimony presented. Gilroy has experimented with the theatrical treatment of this theatre genre, seeking to extend the use of theatrical convention associated with verbatim presentation (Peters, 2018, Taylor, 2013).

Below:

In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016



Within *ITMOTW* the authentic and coherent verbatim performance is fractured and interrupted through the use of diegetic and non-diegetic song, physical theatre, YouTube clips, and live feed. This is a move away from sole reliance on direct address and other conventions associated with verbatim performance. Exploring the mythology surrounding the bombing, the verbatim text is framed, furnished and poeticised through Americana's iconic textures: Country and Bluegrass, diners with Glen Campbell on the juke box, and pioneers with rifles in their wagons. The features of the memorialisation of the bombing are inextricably connected to myths of the frontier.

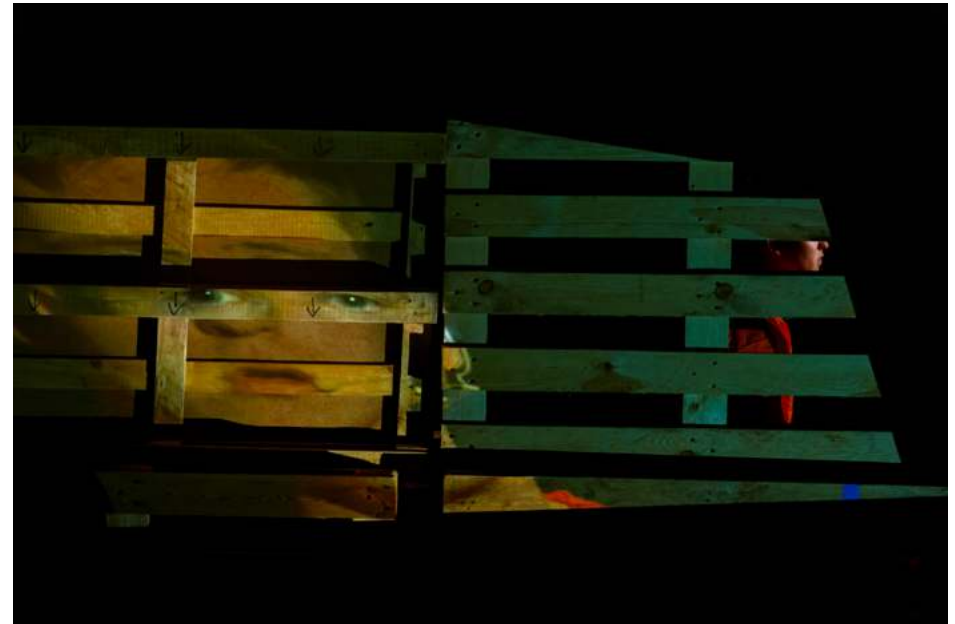
In response to ongoing debates around the ethics of making and performing verbatim text, (Jeffers, 2006; Duggan, 2013), Gilroy has developed a process of consultation and negotiation offering contributors control over the representation of their testimonies; extending the role of participants into co-creators and expanding authorial ownership of the theatrical construction.

The project was highlighted in the 2015 New Year's Review of Arts across the USA in the Huffington Post by Robert Lynch:

"The Oklahoma City Bombing Project, served as a living memorial, and a celebration of the tenacity, recovery, and healing process of Oklahoma City."

Below:

In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016



METHODS AND PROCESSES

An initial twelve month research and writing process included visits to Oklahoma City between 2014- 2015 and again in 2018. During the initial trip, Gilroy conducted workshops with student actors and the wider creative team on his verbatim making processes.

A series of interviews were conducted from September 2014 to June 2016, including 'in person' and via Skype. Interviews conducted with bombing victims, families of victims, key city officials, mayor, fire and police chief, first responders, reporters and TV anchors from BBC and Oklahoma media, FEMA officials, staff from the Memorial and the defence attorney for Timothy McVeigh. Between July 2015 and June 2016 a new draft of the play was created, transposing existing material for the UK context.

Gilroy's processes have evolved through the creation of more than a dozen documentary projects. The interview process involves active listening, and the development of a relationship with participants over extended periods of time.

As part of the research process, Gilroy collaborated with Professor Brook Hessler and Eleanor Lou Carrithers, Chair of Writing and Composition at Oklahoma City University, who has a long-standing relationship with the Oklahoma City National Memorial. Although different, their practices were connected: both are specialists in oral history research as foundation for storytelling and public memory.

The project addressed its research questions through a creative process allowing meanings and connections to emerge across different testimonies, and revealing contradictions with cultural, social and political implications.



Above:
Rehearsal, Berg Theatre,
OKC, 2015

Below:
Rehearsal, Lyric Theatre,
OKC, 2018



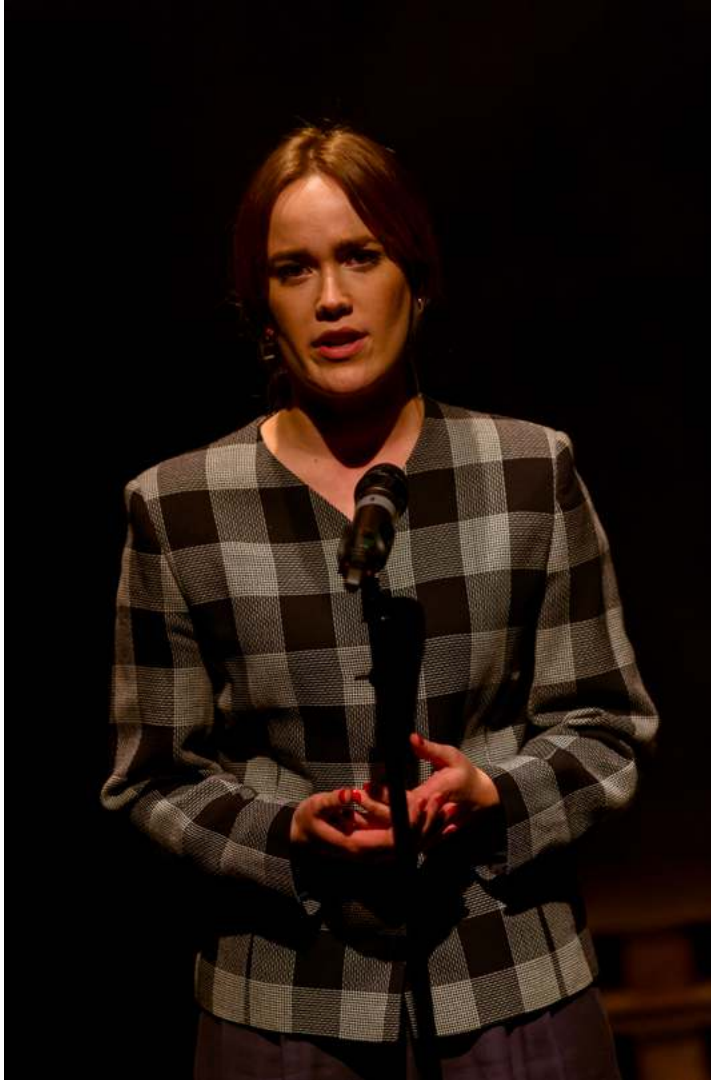
The acting process was 'outside in': exacting imitation of voice followed by interpretation and analysis of the character's psychology. The actors analysed the individual characteristics and internal impulses encoded within the voice, e.g. how the voice indicated the physical demeanour, energy and movement of a subject. This was followed by a vocal / physical distillation and honing of character.

Implicit in the process was acknowledging the text as a construct, drawing attention to its manipulation through meta-theatrical conventions (Bottoms, 2006). For example, at the end of Act 2 Scene 7, the server breaks out of character and the realism of the restaurant and lip-synchs to *I'll be Seeing You* by Billie Holliday. In Act 2 Scene 6, Jennifer Reynolds says "So I can tell you what I really think, but I don't want it to be in your play. I'll put it that way. Okay?" (Gilroy, 2018). This is a reminder of what's not said or included in the play, and what other potential testimonies are possible that cannot be heard.



Right:
Oklahoma City University





Right:
In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016

DISSEMINATION

“Many stories of that go on without a single ear to listen. Those stories root down what happened from a grounded viewpoint and have a sense of reality and truth.”

Philip Laburger, Age 14,
Cushing High School, Cushing, Oklahoma.

Performance (professional production): Gilroy, S.
In the Middle of the West, staged reading at The Lyric Theatre,
Oklahoma City, October 15th 2018.

Published Play-text: Gilroy, S. (2018). *In The Middle of the West*,
Bloomsbury, ISBN 978-1-786826- 886

Performance (student production): Gilroy, S. *Oklahoma City Bombing Project*, 16th - 19th April 2015, OCU Berg Theatre, Kirkpatrick Fine Arts Center, Oklahoma City, USA. Part of the official memorial events for the 20th anniversary of the bombing in 2015.

Performance: Gilroy, S. *In the Middle of the West – In Making*, TaPRA Conference (Interim), Northumbria University, 11th May 2016.

Performance (student production): Gilroy, S. *In the Middle of the West*, 18th – 21st May 2016, Northern Stage, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.
<https://vimeo.com/381918092> (Password: west)

Paper: Gilroy, S. *New writing and Verbatim Documentary Methodologies*, Oklahoma City University, 1st October 2015.

Paper: Gilroy, S. and Hessler, B. *Documentary Theatre and Oral History: The Oklahoma City Bombing Project: 'Performance and Identity'*
Research Seminar Series, Northumbria University, 17th November 2014.

Collaborative Vocal Collage Project with Dr Brooke Hessler, California College of the Arts, April 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=357v8Wvj5Us> “The project fundamentally changed the way I approach oral history, as a teacher and as a researcher [influencing] the work I do today as a community story-worker and as an instructor and integrative learning specialist.” (Dr Brooke Hessler, California College of the Arts).

Production of Education Pack and series of workshops in OKC schools, 2017, Judith Paldino gives a paper at the Oklahoma State Service Learning Conference; *Building Community Capacity*.

Student performances in Millwood School, Classen and Cushing High Schools, Oklahoma, 2018/19.

Play and Education Pack endorsed by Oklahoma Education State Department and available across the State of Oklahoma, 2020.

<http://journalrecord.com/2015/04/16/bombingdrama-brought-to-life-play-presents-bombing-survivors-words-general-news/>

<https://www.okcu.edu/theatre/oklahoma-bombing-project/>

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/outsider-adds-perspective-to-play-marking-oklahoma-bombing/2019633.article>

<http://city-sentinel.com/2015/04/theatreocu-remembers-okc-bombing-through-original-play-by-steve-gilroy/>

“Steve Gilroy is global
pioneer of verbatim
theatre”

Living North

<http://www.livingnorth.com/northeast/arts-whats/word-word>

Left:
Article,
Times Higher Education, 2015

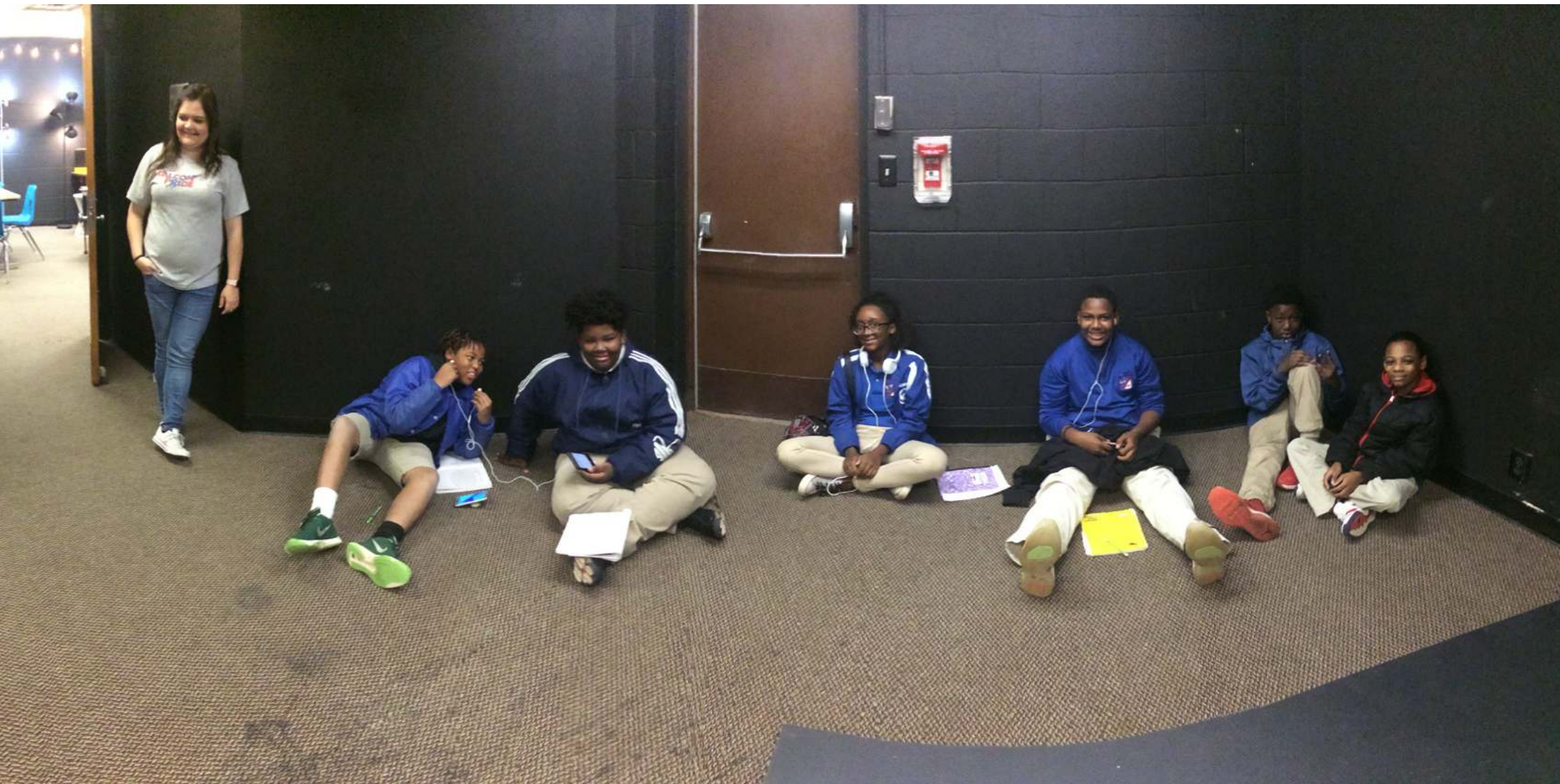


Right:
Book Launch,
Full Circle Books, OKC, 2018



Below:
Workshop, Millwood Public School,
OKC, 2015





REFERENCES

- Bottoms, S. (2006). 'Putting the Document into Documentary: an unwelcome corrective?', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 50 (3), 56-68.
- Crouch, T. (2009). *The Author*. London: Oberon Modern Plays.
- Duggan, P. (2013). 'Others, Spectatorship, and the Ethics of Verbatim Performance.' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 29 (2), 146-158.
- Gilroy, S. (2018). *In The Middle of the West*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Gilroy, S. (2013). *Facts on the Ground*, first produced at Live Theatre, May 2010. <https://vimeo.com/382006784/> (Password: facts)
- Gilroy, S. (2009). *Motherland*, London: Oberon Modern Plays
- Jeffers, A. (2006). *Refugee Perspectives: The Practice and Ethics of Verbatim*. London: Oberon Books.
- LUNG Theatre. (2016). *The 56 & E15*. London: Oberon Modern Plays.
- Lynch, R. (2015). 'New Year's Review of Arts across the USA in 2015', *Huffington Post*, December 30th.
- Ralph, P. (2008). *Deep Cut*. London: Oberon Modern Plays.
- Sarah, P. (2018). 'The function of verbatim theatre conventions in three Australian plays.' *NJ: Drama Australia Journal*, 41 (2), 117-126.
- Taylor, L. (2013). 'Voice, Body and the Transmission of the Real in Documentary Theatre.' *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 23 (3), 368-379.

Left:

In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016



Right:

In the Middle of the West,
Northern Stage, 2016



