

Original citation:

Wallace, Richard. (2017) "We might go into double act mode": 'professional recollectors', rehearsed memory and its uses. *Oral History*, 45 (1).

Permanent WRAP URL:

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“We might go into double act mode”: ‘professional recollectors’, rehearsed memory and its uses

- **Richard Wallace (University of Warwick)**

Abstract:

This article examines the issues that arise when interviewing subjects experienced in recounting their own histories. Brian Harrison has called such interviewees ‘professional recollectors’, and the article focuses on a single interview conducted with Glaswegian twin brothers John and Peter Douglas, both of whom had careers as cinema projectionists. The interview demonstrates some of the ways in which memory is structured into a ‘performance’, and the implications that this has for oral historians. Although the anecdotal aspects of the interview (and others like it) offer a highly constructed and rehearsed set of narratives, the article concludes that they are nevertheless useful historical sources because the anecdotal ‘set-ups’ frequently involve detailed accounts of the working life of the projectionists.

Keywords:

Anecdotes; performance; professional recollectors; projectionists; group interviews

This article addresses the methodological and theoretical issues and concerns that arise when we conduct oral history interviews with participants who have a great deal of experience in recounting their own life histories. Brian Harrison has called such participants ‘professional recollector[s]’, noting that in their role as raconteurs they ‘[create] myth and [forget] what really happened’.¹ Although I would challenge the notion that all such interviewees could be thought of as being ‘professional’, the respondent who has a well-rehearsed repertoire of stories, anecdotes, recollections and opinions will be familiar to any oral historian. How we treat such

material remains a pertinent question when it comes to the practicalities of the interview situation, and the secondary analysis of the material collected.

Well-rehearsed and frequently recounted anecdotes present a paradoxical situation to the oral historian. On the one hand, they offer a complete, colourful and entertaining account of a particular moment of interest, exhibiting a high level of clarity and coherence. However, these are characteristics that more spontaneous, fragmented remembrances often lack. As Della Pollock argues, ‘oral history performances challenge the textual drive toward narrative resolution’, so the presence of coherent, closed narratives within such performances mark such accounts out as being consciously reconstructed and re-shaped versions of the events described.² This is especially true if the narrator is used to presenting their life story in a public forum or for an audience. In such instances entertainment value may become the dominant consideration, and so memories are deliberately structured into anecdotal forms prior to the performance with such concerns in mind.

The focus of this article is a single interview conducted as part of ‘The Projection Project’, an AHRC-funded research project running in the Department of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick between 2014 and 2018.³⁴ The aim of ‘The Projection Project’ is to examine the work and history of the cinema projectionist in the UK, a figure on the verge of extinction. During the last decade the film projectors which have been the workhorses of cinemas since the late nineteenth century have been replaced on a vast scale by digital projectors. Whereas the mechanical projectors once required a team of up to five projectionists to run a single show safely and competently, today’s digital projectors use automated playlists which can be programmed weeks in advance and occupy only a small part of one employee’s weekly work. Being computerised, digital projectors no longer require specialised technical or mechanical skills

to run, and the heavy tins of delicate 35mm film have been replaced by miniscule hard drives. In today's multiplexes there are no projectionists. [wallace-figure1.jpg to go near here]

The interviews conducted for the project aim to capture a history of skilled work that is at risk of being lost. I have interviewed projectionists who worked in cinemas from the 1940s up to the present day. Many have retired or been made redundant. Some are still working as projectionists, though with a radically different job description and nomenclature (most of those responsible for cinema projection in the UK today are now known by the more generic title of 'technician'). The interviews address many aspects of the job including: the details of working practices; daily and weekly routines; the structures of work in cinema; changing technology and its impact; trade union membership and activity; and the sensory aspects of the job. These labour enquiries run parallel to the personal narratives of individual projectionists. Questions related to how a projectionist started in the profession, and their thoughts and feelings about the work are bound up with this exploration of labour practices and provide a vital human element that makes each recording unique.

Although I hope that this article goes some way towards functioning as an inquiry into the working lives of projectionists, my primary aims are to utilise a single account of two projectionists' work to elucidate questions that are pertinent to oral history approaches more generally concerning the rehearsed performance of anecdotal testimony. In focusing on a single interview, I do not claim to offer an exhaustive overview of every conceivable issue that we might face in such a situation. Rather, I wish to offer an account of some of the key issues raised within this one particular interview which I believe has wider implications for how we conduct and use oral history research with well-rehearsed participants.

The interview in question was conducted with identical Glaswegian twin brothers John and Peter Douglas, both of whom worked as projectionists in various cinemas around the city between 1953 and 1997. They have since become ‘professional recollectors’, giving joint public talks, and newspaper and video interviews about their working lives. They first came to my attention when I was conducting searches for Glasgow-based projectionists. A number of local newspaper articles feature their memories, and they had also recently contributed an interview to an event which formed part of the 2015 Glasgow Film Festival called ‘Jeely Jars and Seeing Stars: Glasgow’s Love Affair with the Movies’. Thus, by the time I came to interview them, they were well versed in the process of public remembrance. At the heart of this discussion, then, is an enquiry into what occurs when interview participants who are used to recounting their life stories in a self-consciously structured way for a public audience, bring that pre-conceived performance into the interview situation.

The question of performativity is a key aspect of oral history writing. Linda Shopes and Bruce M. Stave argue that ‘as many oral historians know intuitively, the telling of stories is inherently performative: an interviewee puts on a show, creates an identity, within the context of talking to the interviewer’.⁵ Pollock argues that performance in the context of oral history ‘is not so much an interesting or entertaining option as an obligation’, because it takes place ‘in the relatively artificial context of an interview’.⁶ Alessandro Portelli notes that ‘the final result of the interview is the produce of both the narrator and the researcher’.⁷ With this in mind, Heike Roms and Rebeca Edwards view performativity ‘as a form of structured behaviour that involves both interviewee and interviewer as co-performers in an embodied, spatio-temporal encounter’.⁸ This is a position mirrored by Portelli, who sees the interviewer as the ‘stage director’ of the interview and ‘organizer or the testimony’.⁹

Within the interview anecdotes can be seen to ‘constitute a formative structural component of oral testimonies’,¹⁰ and as writers such as Richard Bauman, Daniel James, and John [Kirk](#) have argued, anecdotal forms (and their well-rehearsed performance) are rich in historical material.¹¹ Indeed, to a great extent the contradiction that I outlined at the start of this article is overturned by Roms and Edwards, who suggest that the performative nature of the interview encounter ‘may have traditionally been thought of as getting in the way of a “truthful” account, it now emerges as that which constitutes the very nature of an oral form of historical evidence’.¹² However, the focus here is not simply on the anecdote as an oral form, but on how the co-creative interview situation is altered when an interview is conducted with a narrator who is well-practiced in performing their life stories publicly for an audience. Their anecdotes tend to be delivered as rehearsed, practiced, perhaps even scripted performances. The well-rehearsed respondent complicates (or perhaps simplifies?) the collaborative relationship between interviewer and respondent, because a pre-composed ‘act’ replaces conversation. The interview becomes one-sided.

What I am suggesting is that in reformulating the interviewer/respondent relationship into one that is more one-sided, the well-rehearsed anecdote becomes an aspect of the performance that is under the complete control of the raconteur. Ironically, then, in being liberated from the co-creative interview process, the well-rehearsed anecdotal performance offers up a version of a participant’s life history that is entirely their creation, and the authorship entirely theirs. Rather than viewing the well-rehearsed anecdote as a highly structured and narrativised account that does not offer spontaneity or the rawness which we might be tempted to associate with authenticity, it is useful to reverse this viewpoint, recognising that such accounts are authentic precisely because there is no intervention from a mediator. As Portelli notes, ‘the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian [...] is the speaker’s subjectivity’.¹³ This is, perhaps, no more evident than in the well-rehearsed anecdote, where both the original

memories and the ways in which they are shaped into stories for public consumption are subjectively controlled by the respondent. In such circumstances, there is still a mediator, however they are a figure imagined by the narrator: stories are always shaped by what the teller thinks the audience – real or imagined – wants to hear. These are aspects that will be explored in greater detail through the analysis of the interview with John and Peter Douglas.

The interview differs in another way from what might be regarded as the typical one-to-one oral history interview as the brothers had requested to be interviewed together. They had both started working as projectionists on the same day in 1953 and retired at the same time and from the same cinema as each other in 1997. At one point in the interview the twins directly addressed the impact that their status as twin brothers has had on their lives:

John Douglas: In the 1950s [Glasgow University] did a survey of identical twins and they found that when identical twins are born, immediately they're born, their paths either go in parallel for their lives or immediately –

Peter Douglas: Their personalities will change, yes.

John Douglas: Will change. Now, they decided that the twins... Seeing that twins themselves had no way –

Peter Douglas: Of changing that –

John Douglas: – of being able to change that. It was built what we'd call 'in the genes', it was in the genes. We obviously have been parallel twins, we always had the same interests. Never married because we always liked the same girl [both laugh]. Identical twins is what we'd have to have [John Douglas laughs].

Peter Douglas: Yes, didn't want to upset each other if I said, "I don't care about you, I'm going after her," you know.

This brief, but telling, description of their lives as ‘parallel twins’, means that the individual stories of their working lives is seen (by them at least) to be intertwined to such an extent that it is effectively one story. To adopt such a position ourselves, however, would be problematic, because even though their lives may have run in parallel, they are, after all, different people. The complexities of this relationship, and the impact that this has on the telling of their life history will be explored in more detail later in this article.

Expectations and control

Initially, then, the notion that John and Peter’s story was a joint one provided the rationale for conducting a joint interview. However, once the interview had begun, it very quickly became apparent that there was a second, more significant, reason why such an arrangement appealed to them. At the very start of the interview the following exchange occurred:

John Douglas: You might find that we’ll go into double-act mode, which will be, sort of off-the-cuff, which will cover [spreading hands to indicate ‘wideness’] –

Interviewer: That’s –

John Douglas: Because we go round doing talks –

Interviewer: Yes.

John Douglas: – about this and that, you know as a sort of double-act. And we’ll see –

Peter Douglas: We’ll see how it goes.

John Douglas: If you feel it’s not working out, stop us.

Interviewer: No, that sounds absolutely fine.

The double-act nature of the interview should already be apparent from the two brief extracts included so far. When discussing their lives as twins, the brothers move easily back and forward between one another. Although in both of these examples, John takes the lead, Peter plays an

important role, interjecting ('In the 1950s', 'Their personalities will change', 'We'll see how it goes') in order to add information, impart clarity or to help move the discussion on. This backwards-and-forwards, bantering nature characterises the whole performance. John's dual assertions that they might 'go into double-act mode' and that 'we go around doing talks', acts as a sort of warning that the brothers have a pre-prepared 'act' which they perform for audiences interested in Glasgow's cinema history.

Although not articulated as such, this introduction can be seen as the brothers' way of informing me of their expectations for the interview that is to follow. Bauman, David K. Dunaway and Rosalie H. Wax have written about the issue of 'expectation' in the interview situation. Dunaway and Wax note that both the interviewer and the interviewee have expectations of how an interview will be conducted and how it will unfold and that these expectations may not be the same.¹⁴ In the previous extract, John is not so much outlining his and this brother's expectations for the interview itself, but informing me that they are used to telling their story in the form of a stand-alone, rehearsed, double-act, performed by the brothers, rather than in response to questions from an audience. It could be understood, then, that at this point in the interview, John is informing me that unless I have other ideas, the twins will proceed in a way that is familiar to them, performing their double-act with me as their audience. Although I was expecting the interview to take a more traditional format, in accepting John's suggestion – 'No, that sounds absolutely fine' – I unwittingly gave the brothers license to continue as they saw fit.

Having asked my first questions to ascertain factual biographical details – dates of birth, a list of cinemas that the brother had worked in and the years that they worked there – we began what I had expected to be the more free-flowing section of the interview, where I would guide the brothers through their collective and individual stories with a series of questions. However, having finished their individual career overviews the following exchange took place:

Interviewer: *Okay. Well thank you, that's really, a really comprehensive overview, and actually I think between you you've worked in really quite a lot of cinemas around Glasgow –*

Peter Douglas: Yes, although, although Glasgow had so many cinemas. There was just about a cinema almost on every street corner, nearly as many cinemas as pubs, you know [laughs].

John Douglas: Do we want to now maybe just go into, between us, the, the story of our lives within the cinema –

Interviewee: *That, that... yes, please, please do.*

John Douglas: – from the start?

Interviewee: *Please do. I... One of the questions I was going to ask you was how you became interested in the cinema, so please tell me that.*

John Douglas: Well children used to go out and play...

Following this exchange the brothers begin their story, performing a detailed, personal, and roughly chronological, routine which addresses their childhood memories of cinema-going (including the singing of a song within the interview), their decision to work in the industry and outlines the minutiae of their working lives as projectionists.

The cohesive nature of the performance meant that without interrupting their flow, finding suitable gaps in their narrative for follow-up questions was difficult. My first opportunity arose seven-and-a-half minutes into their oration, and only two further interjections were made during the first 53 minutes of the interview. On each occasion these interjections were to clarify a point already raised, and only ever in a manner deliberately designed to cause as little disturbance to the flow of the brothers' performance as possible.

John's question – 'Do we want to now maybe just go into, between us, the, the story of our lives within the cinema?' – can be seen as a moment of transition in the interview on three fronts.

Firstly, it marks the point where the traditional interview conditions that had been set-up during the first six minutes of the interview were transformed into a space for the twins to perform their 'double-act'. Secondly, it marks the moment where my expectations of the interview process encountered John and Peter's contrasting expectations, and I willingly, yet unknowingly, enabled them to begin their performance. Finally, it marks a point where control of the interview is passed from the interviewer to the interviewee. John's question cuts short a developing discussion about local cinema culture in order to retain the structure of their performance as conceived. My initial impression that John was simply asking my first question for me, can in hindsight be seen to be his way of moving the scenario into more familiar territory, over which the twins have control.

Such a scenario has the tendency to prompt a feeling somewhat akin to panic in the mind of the interviewer, as they risk being excluded from their own interview. At the forefront of this experience is the question of whether or not to let the performance continue in its entirety, relinquish control (for now) and accept the role of audience member as opposed to that of participant. It became clear to me that part of the process of this interview would be to watch the performance unfold, make notes of any aspects not covered, or which I wished to explore in greater detail, and then proceed with a more traditional interview once the twins had come to an end. In this respect I conceived of the performance as a whole as being akin to a respondent in a more traditional interview scenario answering a question in a lengthy and meandering way, which the interviewer might choose to let play out before following up on individual aspects in more detail. This I was able to do and after the twins' initial performance, we spoke in a more conventional fashion for around 45 minutes and I was able to ask the questions which had not already been addressed to my satisfaction (I will return to this section of the interview later).

Constructing the performance

John and Peter's double-act intertwines two stories into one coherent performance. Rather than detailing the lives of each brother in turn, a roughly chronological, thematic, approach is taken, with the sometimes different, sometimes shared experiences of each brother being brought together. Thus we have detailed descriptions of the brothers' first visit to the cinema as children, their decision to enter the cinema industry, their development as projectionists, the different types of machines they worked with and the things that could go wrong with them. These, however have been carefully structured around a series of anecdotal accounts in such a way as to provide a coherent and entertaining insight into the work of the cinema projectionists, as well as one which serves a discursive, almost analytical, function.

One specific extract should suffice to illustrate the overall mode and structure of the performance. The extract below focuses on the twins' first day as apprentices, an event that took place on the same day in 1953, but in different cinemas:

John Douglas: Peter was sent to the Capital at Ibrox and I was sent to the cinema training in Hope Street, the New Savoy.

Peter Douglas: And we were quite surprised because there were a lot of men, yes, and –

John Douglas: Yes, a lot of projectionists.

Peter Douglas: That's right. I mean, when I went in –

John Douglas: The first day.

Peter Douglas: – there were about four others, four other men, and I went in as the lowly apprentice, and there was another apprentice who obviously was further on in his time than I was, and, er, three other projectionists, but I found out after that in fact there were more than three, there were about five altogether. So there was the five projectionists and the two apprentices and –

John Douglas: Yes, yes, and of course there was the Chief.

Peter Douglas: That's right, the Chief.

John Douglas: The Chief operator.

Peter Douglas: He, he was the one who was in charge of the operators.

John Douglas: That's right, that's right.

Peter Douglas: And you always looked up to him. But in my case he was quite a young chap as well and I thought, "You know, I'm going to like this okay."

John Douglas: Yes, and when I went on my first day at the cinema, the New Savoy, the Chief wasn't there, umm, it was only the other men that were there, and the Chief Projectionist, he came in at ten o'clock with a smart coat, soft hat, briefcase, rolled up umbrella, a newspaper under the arm, and came in and he looked me up and down, "Son, I don't know why you've come into this business, it's finished."

Peter Douglas: That was in –

John Douglas: 1953.

Peter Douglas: On your first day to hear that wasn't very encouraging [laughs].

John Douglas: No it wasn't very encouraging.

Two separate narratives have been carefully combined into one shared account. Peter's description of the team of projectionists is both a specific personal view of The Capitol cinema in Ibrox on that day in 1953, but also stands in for John's experience at the New Savoy. The stories only begin to separate when the brothers begin a deliberate articulation of the differences.

What is also notable is the way the sequence of statements moves between speakers. Although at the outset of the interview John notes that the twins' 'double-act' will involve them providing 'off-the-cuff' remembrances, it might be more accurate to suggest that the performance is

designed to give the appearance of being off-the-cuff. The anecdotes are, in fact, highly structured. Although there are moments of seemingly ad-libbed interruption, where either John or Peter interjects to add detail, in general the lead speaker alternates in order to present their own particular story. This interplay characterises the whole interview. In general John describes experiences and events that happened to him, and Peter takes ownership of the narratives pertaining to his experience. Shared experiences are split between the two. Factual details and description of work processes common to both brothers' experiences seem to be 'up for grabs', as evidenced by John's 'the first day' interjection towards the start of the previous extract.

Although clearly an effective dramatic device, there are signs elsewhere in the interview that this alignment of voice and experience is more than just for the sake of coherence. During the more conventional 45 minute interview that followed the twins' performance, the rigorous backwards and forwards between the twins remained an important characteristic, but it was notably less fluid. At one point the conversation stalls as John loses his train of thought. Peter quickly interjects in order to keep the discussion flowing, but recalls an incident that 'belongs' to his brother:

John Douglas: You couldn't get as good seating as they wanted and things like that. But anyway, umm, I think really... I forget what I was going to talk about now.

Peter Douglas: That's alright. What you can tell... er, one of the funny incidents that happened... What about that day, er, when the money was dropped?

John Douglas: Oh yes, yes.

Peter Douglas: This was in the Odeon, Renfield Street, in the 1960s.

John Douglas: In the Odeon in the 1960s we had on three projectionists that particular evening and, er, I was one of them...

In this brief moment Peter is faced with a dilemma. John has run out of steam. Peter has an anecdote up his sleeve, and he knows it well enough, but embodied in his hesitant delivery is an acknowledgement that it is not his story to tell. The ‘er’ that follows the ‘What about the day’ stands in for a moment of frantic contemplation as Peter attempts to work out how to prompt his brother with the details of the story without spoiling the anecdote for his audience. The broken meter of Peter’s delivery here is not due to an effort of memory, but a verbal manifestation of his efforts to will his brother to take up the story.

It is an important moment because cracks appear in the otherwise coherent performance, and reveal something of the nature of its construction. It is significant that this exchange took place during the section of the interview following the completion of the twins’ initial ‘performance’. At this point the statements were in response to my questions and the breakdown of the flow hints towards the ‘unscripted’ nature of these responses; John loses his train of thought because he is no longer delivering a well-rehearsed anecdote and Peter fills the gap by offering up a different anecdote to get the pair back onto familiar narrative and performative ground, retaining control of the exchange

The proprietary nature with which each brother recounts his own story, as a constituent part of a more intricate performance, suggests that John and Peter’s idea that they have one ‘single story’ is actually far more complex. Rather, there is a single *performance*, made up of a complex intertwining of separate personal narratives, which frequently cross paths at moments where the memories of similar, but separate, events and working practices are shared. Peter’s question, ‘What about that day, er, when the money was dropped?’ reveals an underlying integrity of memory to the separate stories that are the constituent parts of the performance. These are not anecdotes that are divorced from lived experience, distilled into a form where it can be passed on and retold by anybody. Instead, there is a sense that one brother can still claim ownership of one

set of memories, the other brother another set of memories, and that there is a third set of memories that is shared. Importantly, this view is reciprocal, as in the instance above where Peter's hesitation signals that the story about dropped money is not his to tell because it happened to his brother.

In this respect it is difficult to clearly state that John and Peter fulfil the definition of Harrison's 'professional recollector' who 'creates myth and forgets what really happened'. The respect they have for each other's unspoken claims to their own memories, suggests that there is an underlying integrity to their recollections. Nevertheless, the performance itself is not the unstructured product of spontaneous remembering. These memories have been told and retold frequently, and have been placed within the contextual framework of the performance. That is not to say that John and Peter are not genuinely remembering their own past, but that this has been reshaped by each retelling and so may be far removed from lived experience. The performance itself creates a structure for remembering.

The two 'first day' accounts are certainly related to one another, given that they articulate the same type of event and took place at the same time. However, the process of memory shaping would no doubt have begun on that day in 1953, when each experience would have been recounted and discussed for the first time. As such they may have become shared memories almost immediately, making the transition very quickly from 'John's first day' and 'Peter's first day' to 'our first day'. However these two events are in a very definite sense separate occurrences, given that neither event was experienced by both brothers. The deliberate intertwining of the two separate narratives into one has the result of producing a coherent overview of events, whilst also encouraging a comparison to be made between the ethos of the two cinemas and the age, attitude and style of their respective chief projectionists.

There is a very deliberate rhetorical intent involved in structuring the anecdotes in such a way, leading to the pay-off that in 1953 the chief projectionist already considered the industry to be in decline. This device has a double irony: firstly, that in hindsight cinema obviously wasn't 'finished' in 1953 (though the 1950s is widely recognised as a period of crisis); but secondly that the comment becomes significant due to the situation that projectionists find themselves in at the present time, the moment that the story was recounted to me. Now that there are few projectionists, the story gains an additional level of meaning and irony (and perhaps even currency); the story is particularly worth telling now that cinema projection has, indeed, 'finished'. 'Professional recollectors' are themselves a symptom of a past pastness and as Kirk and Wall note, 'composing the self is not merely a way of imagining, or re-imagining, the past, but of making sense of the present and situating oneself within it'.¹⁵ Thus for the brothers, their first day anecdote becomes a comment on both the present moment of transition in film exhibition and their own position and self-presentation as former projectionists.

The more we examine the well-rehearsed anecdote, the more suspect the notion that they represent a less valid form of oral testimony becomes. The intricate structuring of the twins' separate stories and the way in which the telling of them passes backwards and forwards, demonstrates a tightly arranged set of performances, pre-constituted and rehearsed. Yet this tight structuring speaks to the vast amount of remembering that has taken place to pull together two separate lives into one effective performance, whilst retaining the autonomy of each speaker. This is a process of remembering and retelling that has almost certainly been taking place since the evening of that first day in the projection box, with the brothers sharing their separate stories with one another (and probably also with others). The preparation of the performance itself has, therefore, involved a great deal of memory work on the part of the two brothers to produce something that is coherent, entertaining and discursive whilst also representing their own personal experiences of their first days as they remember them now. The brothers have complete

ownership over these accounts and thus when they are re-performed within the interview situation they were not subjected to the same kind of creative intervention from the interviewer as might have been the case in a standard interview. We can, therefore, begin to see how valuable this type of performed oral account can be. The rest of this article outlines how we might use such material.

Generic and specific recollections

A number of critics, including Kirk and Wall, James, and Portelli have explored the meanings that can be usefully found within the performative and anecdotal aspects of oral testimony.¹⁶ Kirk and Wall, and James argue that oral testimony and the anecdotal form are both grounded on the social relationships which shape identity. Kirk and Wall argue that ‘articulating memory, or remembrance, finds structure in and through a range of historical discourses and cultural forms that express both the social and individual: the expression of self is inevitably positioned in the presence of ‘Others’ – in many instances constituting hegemonic or dominant relations’.¹⁷ Adopting a similar position, James argues that ‘anecdotes represent the relationship of the individual to a dominant social model and attitudes. They express in synthesized form, on a local scale, the transgression or acceptance of hegemonic values’.¹⁸ For each of these writers the social interactions that shape the anecdotes and the processes of articulating memory can be read within the testimony itself.

This is certainly true within the brothers’ accounts and aspects such as the interrelationship between the two narrators, their view of their place within the working hierarchies and their judgements about the place of cinema are all the product of such social shaping. As Portelli argues, however, alongside these questions we can also learn important factual details about daily

life and routine even though they might at first appear to be obscured by their depiction in structured, narrativised forms. Portelli argues that ‘the importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge’.¹⁹ This sense that the departure from fact can prove to be the source of significant historical evidence holds true here and is embodied in the twins’ oscillation between personal memories and something more generic in form. Take for example the following anecdote:

John Douglas: There was always two [projectionists] on duty and one manning each projector, and there was a reason for that which I’ll go into in a minute. But, umm, we had these changeovers and it was very important that the reels were shown in the correct order; it would be rather unfortunate if you showed reel 1 and reel 5 and then reel 3 and 2 and then 4.

Peter Douglas: Yes, you wouldn’t, you wouldn’t understand what the film was about.

John Douglas: You wouldn’t understand what was happening. So we had a fool-proof system by which on the beginning of each leader of the film, the beginning of the reel, was marked ‘reel number’ and the reel number. And when the, the projectionist would go to lace up the film, in other words put the film through the projector, before he did that he would go to the other projectionist and they would double-check that they had the correct reel number and they both had to agree it was the correct reel number and then the other projectionist would lace that up, so you would get a really fool-proof system.

Peter Douglas: And do you remember with that system, John, we had little, er, brass, er, disks with the numbers of the reels on them and you would hook that up beside the projector where you had laced up that particular reel, so that was another way of checking. [...] Well I hadn’t long started at the

Capital in Ibrox as a lowly apprentice and we were showing a film called *All That Heaven Allows* which was a real weepy film.

John Douglas: [Laughs] Oh dear. And the audience... you'd go outside at a certain point and you'd hear them [makes sad sniffing sounds] sniffing, you know, the audience were –

Peter Douglas: As the heroine was dying and the hero was by her side. But anyway, er, this was the film we were showing. So we changed shifts, the two shifts we had, we changed shifts at four thirty in the afternoon, and, er, I came on with the other two fully qualified projectionists who were on my shift at four thirty, the other two qualified projectionists were ready to go home and they just said as they were going, "That's the second last reel running ready to change over onto the last reel." So we said, "Off you go, enjoy your night off," and off they went. So I was standing back and the two projectionists were there for the changeover.

John Douglas: From reel 5 to reel 6.

Peter Douglas: That's right. The heroine was dying –

John Douglas: Oh dear [mock weeping], and the audience were crying.

Peter Douglas: – the hero was by her side. Change. And there's Laurel and Hardy standing in the pouring rain. Probably saying, "Now there's another fine mess"

Both: "you've got me into."

John Douglas: But anyway -

Peter Douglas: Fool-proof system [said ironically]. So what had seemingly happened was that on the previous shift, the projectionists on the previous shift had gone in, taken reel 6 out, shown it to the projectionist, "Reel 6?" "Yes,

reel 6,” laced it up, but for some unknown reason he had gone to the
Saturday morning matinee film bins –

John Douglas: Matinee film bins –

Peter Douglas: – and taken reel 6 out of that. So no system is fool-proof, John.

In many ways this works as a fairly generic ‘things going wrong in the projection room’ anecdote. Every projectionist has at least one, and many of those who projected in the era when film reels were split across two projectors have a story about the wrong reel being played at a crucial moment. However, the details of such stories are always particular to the individual projectionist, suggesting that rather than possessing the quality of a recurring ‘myth’, these incidents are instead part of the working experience of projectionists; at some point in their career something will go wrong. Furthermore, given that there is a limited number of possible problems, it is likely that similar problems, and therefore similar anecdotes, will recur across interviews. As such these stories tell us a great deal about the work of a projectionists, and in their differences they reveal something about how projectionists tell their stories. [wallace-figure2-p20.jpg to go near here]

The generic aspects of this anecdote are also the aspects most clearly designed to convey the comedy of the situation. It is entirely possible that the event described did take place during a screening of *All That Heaven Allows* and that the final reel of Douglas Sirk’s classic 1955 melodrama was accidentally replaced by the final reel of an unspecified Laurel and Hardy comedy. Projectionists do have a tendency to remember very clearly the film playing when telling stories where something goes wrong, so the twins’ account is typical in this respect.

However, beyond this cursory identification of the film title, the details of the anecdote seem to be specifically designed to heighten its comic potential, not its historical accuracy. It is noteworthy that the Laurel and Hardy film remains unnamed. In part this is because it was not

that film that was affected by the interruption. More straightforwardly, the juxtaposition between a tense and emotional melodrama and a slapstick comedy makes for an amusing anecdote and excessive factual details hinder the telling of a comic story. We can see this playing out in the account, in that once the brothers begin discussing the films themselves they move away from specifics and begin to describe (and also physically perform) generic conventions which heighten the comedic potential but corrupt the historical details. Most apparent here is the brother's sweeping generalisations of both melodramatic conventions in a cinema setting – the dying heroine, the attendant hero, the weeping audience – and of Laurel and Hardy films: in the twins' account the duo are reduced to their most famous catchphrase.

Such details provide colour, texture and atmosphere to the twins' performance of the anecdote. Yet their description is not recognisable as a sequence in *All That Heaven Allows*, in which the heroine (Jane Wyman) is never in any threat of physical injury, let alone death. The film does feature a sequence in which the heroine nurses the hero (Rock Hudson) back to health after a near fatal fall. However, even if we allow for the possibility of fading memory reversing the roles, the sequence occurs at the very end of the film, so could not have fallen victim to a mixed-up reel change in the manner described.

There are many explanations for this disjuncture: John and Peter might remember that the incident described did happen during a screening of that particular film, but can't remember the specific narrative details; they might think they *can* remember the plot, but are mistaken; they might be referencing *All That Heaven Allows* because it is a well-known Hollywood melodrama so requires less setting-up for the sake of the story than something more obscure; most likely they might be fully aware that their narrative is not an accurate representation of the film, but deploy it for the sake of a good story. For John and Peter, as performers for an audience, what is important is not the accuracy of the details, but the economy of storytelling and that the generic

sense of the contrast between melodrama and comedy be physically felt by both the cinema audience *in* the anecdote and the audience *of* their anecdote. Slipping from specific details (the brass tags, the system of checks, the namechecking of *All That Heaven Allows*) to generic overview (a non-specific melodramatic situation, affected weeping and sniffing, an unspecified Laurel and Hardy comedy, the ‘another fine mess’ catchphrase) makes for an amusing story, one that is anchored in a lived experience, but has been narrativised and dramatized for maximum effect.

It might seem at this point that I have reversed my position and am now arguing that such an anecdote is not very useful in terms of what it tells us about the actual work of projectionists. However, James has argued that ‘one necessary characteristic of Western plots is the presence of tension created when there is a disturbance in the normal flow of narrative events’.²⁰ For an anecdote to perform its desired function, this disorder must be clearly signalled as ‘a violation of the normative narrative pattern’.²¹ The disorder – in this case the mixing-up of film reels – has to be contrasted with the *ordered* events – where *All That Heaven Allows* is allowed to run smoothly. Thus in the anecdotal form we are given both disruption *and* normality.

John and Peter’s description of the process of the change-over, particularly the system of checks employed in their ‘fool-proof’ system, and the use of brass tags to label the film reels provides important background information necessary for the anecdote to have its comic pay-off (in the story the fail-safes don’t work). These details, important but somewhat mundane in narrative terms, provide a clear insight into the twins’ ordinary working practices, given that these checks would be repeated every twenty minutes throughout the day as each reel finished. Thus we are provided, almost incidentally, with a small but significant and oft-repeated aspect of the projectionist’s daily routine. Karen Fields calls these details ‘unintended memory’, given that ‘such features are often not the main subject of the story’.²² Yet, for the researcher they are the

substance of historical enquiry. Ironically, we learn a great deal about the particular strategies employed to ensure that mistakes didn't happen in the projection room through a story centred on their failure.

The formulation of this labour into a pre-constructed narrative, designed to entertain a non-specialist audience also ensures that the process is quite clearly described, such as when John explains the term 'lacing up'. In other interviews conducted for the project, the safety checks are often passed over as being inconsequential, or are not articulated clearly enough to be usefully comprehended, because they are routine aspects of the work and seem mundane to those that enacted them. In such circumstances, additional questioning is needed to produce a clear account. Here, the careful and deliberate narrativising of the process provides an excellent and detailed account of one aspect of the projectionist's work. It is not unique to this interview, but this might be is the clearest account I have collected precisely because it is designed with clarity in mind.

Conclusion

Such careful structuring of memory raises questions as to how we are to view and use such material. The discrepancies between the details of the story and the generic characteristics create an insoluble paradox. On the one hand the details pertaining to the practical aspects of the job to add to our knowledge of how mistakes were (generally) avoided. At the same time, these details have been marshalled by the twins in the service of a comic narrative, the telling of which (deliberately?) distorts known facts and uses generic devices for comic effect. Thus the manipulation evident in the second half of the story has the potential to casts a shadow over the apparently more informative first half.

Elsewhere in the interview an inversion of this process regularly takes place, where a seemingly generic framing device gives way to more specific sets of memories. In Peter's brief discussion of Glasgow cinema-going, set out earlier in this article, he notes that, 'there was just about a cinema on every street corner', replicating a short-hand, almost romanticised version of an age of abundance, sadly now past. It is a formulation common to discussions of historical cinema-going. Annette Kuhn's work on British cinema audiences of the 1930s, for example, notes a similar tendency for people to emphasise the abundance of cinemas and the phrase 'one on every street corner' is not an uncommon one.²³ Equally, John and Peter talk of queues of children for the Saturday matinees, and lines stretching around the block on Saturday nights. Such repeated images almost have the characteristics of folk tales, which Sandy Hobbs describes as 'stories which are told as true, but which on closer examination appear to be variants of certain basic elements or motifs which persist over a period of time'.²⁴ The picture painted is a vivid but impersonal one, with generic qualities that are repeated across interviews. This produces a second paradox, whereby this repetition of accounts ostensibly upholds this image of a vibrant cinema culture, whilst simultaneously undermining it through the repetition of familiar rhetorical tropes. It feels both authentic and personal, *and* romanticised and generic at the same time. Paul Thompson has noted that such a slippage into the quasi-folkloric is difficult to detect, primarily because the informants themselves believe the stories and information provided to be genuine.²⁵ Whether or not they are a true reflection of lived experience is impossible to ascertain.

Nevertheless, from such generic contextual information, individual personal accounts emerge. Returning to the anecdote of the mixed-up reel, we can see that out of a comic scenario with generic characteristics that can be found in many projectionists' accounts, can be gleaned a detailed account of daily working practices. As Paul Thompson notes, 'one should remember, in considering the inaccuracies, that some experiments have found the uncanny patches of detailed accuracy which one can also show'.²⁶ In their account of their first days at work, behind the

contextually layered irony of the chief projectionist's comments about the job being 'finished', is an insight into the professional hierarchy of projectionists, the kind of social interactions evident in a projection box during the 1950s, and the place of the apprentice. The civil servant-like attire of the chief stands in stark contrast to the popular image of the projectionist that we might be familiar with from films such as *Cinema Paradiso*.²⁷ Such observations might provide supporting material to a series of amusing anecdotes, but they *also* offer an insight into the daily life of a cinema projectionist. They do this through a coherently constructed and performed narrative that is entirely of the twins' own construction; it belongs to them and embodies their own attempts to recall, construct and reconstruct their own personal histories. As Portelli highlights 'oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'.²⁸ The well-rehearsed anecdotal form – and its performance – is one place where both historical, factual detail *and* the personality of the narrator(s) emerges. To dismiss such anecdotes – and the carefully structured performances from which they originate – would be to miss out on the underlying details, and the subjectivity, that are the meat of any historical enquiry. The foundations of John and Peter's performance is not a fabrication, but the intricate details of working lives. As historians we would be foolish to overlook their significance.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the AHRC (grant reference AH/L008033/1) and conducted as part of 'The Projection Project' running in the Department of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. Special thanks are owed to John and Peter Douglas, and the reviewers whose valuable comments have helped greatly in the writing of this article.

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Notes:

- ¹ Brian Harrison, 'Oral History and Recent Political History', *Oral History*, vol 1, no 3, 1972, p 46.
- ² Della Pollock, 'Introduction: Remembering', in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p 4.
- ³ For more information on 'The Projection Project', see the project website. The Projection Project [web page]. Accessed online at <<http://projectionproject.warwick.ac.uk>>, 12 September 2016.
- ⁴ Interview with John and Peter Douglas, born in Glasgow, 31 March 1937, cinema projectionists; recorded by Author, 24 July 2015. Permission to use the respondents' real names has been agreed.
- ⁵ Linda Shopes and Bruce M. Stave, 'Preface', in Della Pollock (ed.), *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p xi.
- ⁶ Pollock, 2005, pp 4, 3.
- ⁷ Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp 72.
- ⁸ Heike Roms and Rebecca Edwards, 'Oral History as Site-Specific Practice: Locating the History of Performance Art in Wales', in Shelley Trower (ed.), *Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p 172.
- ⁹ Portelli, 1998, p 70.
- ¹⁰ John Kirk and Christine Wall, *Work and Identity: Historical and Cultural Contexts*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p 208.
- ¹¹ Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*, Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2000. Kirk and Wall, 2010.
- ¹² Roms and Edwards, 2011, p 172.
- ¹³ Portelli, 1998, p 67.
- ¹⁴ Bauman, 1986. Rosalie H. Wax, *Dong Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971. David K. Dunaway, 'Method and Theory in the Oral Biography', *Oral History*, vol 20, no 2, 1992, pp 40-44.
- ¹⁵ Kirk and Wall, 2010, p 206.
- ¹⁶ Kirk and Wall, 2010. James, 2000. Portelli, 1998.
- ¹⁷ Kirk and Wall, 2010, p 205.
- ¹⁸ James, 2000, p 172.
- ¹⁹ Portelli, 1998, p 68.
- ²⁰ James, 2000, p 166.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Karen Fields, 'What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly', *Oral History*, vol 17, no 1, 1989, p 50.
- ²³ Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*, London, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2002, p 20.
- ²⁴ Sandy Hobbs, 'The Folk Tale as News', *Oral History*, vol 6, no 2, 1978, p 74.
- ²⁵ Paul Thompson, 'Problems of Method in Oral History', *Oral History*, vol 1, no 4, 1972, p 11.
- ²⁶ Thompson, 1972, p 10.
- ²⁷ *Cinema Paradiso*, Dir Giuseppe Tornatore, Prod Cristaldifilm, 1988.
- ²⁸ Portelli, 1998, p. 67.