



Tina Satter / Half
Straddle's *Is This*
A Room: REALITY
WINNER VERBATIM
TRANSCRIPTION, the
Kitchen, New York,
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Productions and Events

REBECCA ADELSHEIM

REALITY WINNERS

Is This A Room: REALITY WINNER VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION

Tina Satter

Vineyard Theater, New York

Fall 2019

Stepping into the Vineyard Theater, audiences come face-to-face with a twelve-foot formal military portrait of the actual twenty-five-year-old Reality Winner. She is blond and unsmiling in her crisp blue uniform. As we trek to the basement theater's entrance, each door displays a playful selfie of Reality—one of her in a Pikachu onesie, the other in uniform holding her black cat up to the camera—along with the following text:

In May 2017, top-secret proof of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was leaked to a media outlet.

The next month, a 25-year-old former American Air Force linguist named Reality Winner, suspected of leaking that evidence, was surprised at her home in Augusta, Georgia by the FBI.

IS THIS A ROOM stages this visit word-for-word from the official FBI transcript recorded that day.

The brainchild of director Tina Satter, this searing show was originally produced by Satter's theater and performance ensemble Half Straddle at the Kitchen in January 2019, and its subsequent presentation at New York's Vineyard Theatre has given this searing show an extended life. Using only the four figures indicated in the original FBI transcript of the interview—Reality Winner (Emily Davis), lead investigator Agent Garrick (Pete Simpson), his sidekick Agent Taylor (TL Thompson), and Unknown

Male (Becca Blackwell)—Satter crafts a deeply tense and transforming seventy-five minutes that redefine political and verbatim theater.

Half Straddle—born in 2007 from a graduate school friendship and collaboration between Satter and performer Jess Barbagello—generates rambunctious work exploring girlhood and adolescence and has found critical success on the international festival circuit. *Football / In the Pony Palace* (2011) and *House of Dance* (2013) examine feminist and queer subcultures through exuberant performance and homemade spectacle, a kind of feminist camp. Satter, who has written and directed all of the company's previous work, cites the American experimental playwright-director Richard Maxwell as one of her critical influences. In *Football* and an adaptation of Chekov's *The Seagull* called *SEAGULL (Thinking of You)* (2013), she pushes her performers toward a tonally neutral or "flat" acting style that, combined with striking theatrical gestures, results in unexpected humor and subversive commentary on gender and sexuality. The pieces are political, stemming from Satter's personal impulses to center queerness and complex femininity, so often undervalued as meaningful spaces for drama.¹

Is This A Room departs from Half Straddle's previous projects, diving into the restrained, hierarchical world of intelligence operations. Satter stages the FBI transcript verbatim, consciously shifting what we have come to expect from documentary theater. Peter Weiss, a postwar theorist of documentary drama, defines the form: "The documentary theater shuns all inventions. It makes use of authentic documentary material, which it diffuses from the stage, without altering its contents, but in structuring the form."² In the case of later American creators like Anna Deavere Smith and Tectonic Theater Project (both of whom use collages of verbatim interviews in their work), authorial perspective on the sources comes from structure and juxtaposition—documents arranged in sequences that create meaning but also call attention to the subjectivity baked into the artist's manipulation. Rather than a mosaic dramaturgy, *Is This A Room* employs a single document performed precisely, down to minute linguistic falters and carefully timed coughs, so invention and intervention come not from structure but from Satter's concept and direction. Her project makes a dry transcription—an analytical view of conversation—human again; Satter forgoes the neutral, affectless acting style from her earlier work and instead directs her ensemble to fully embody complex emotionality. Performers reimagine sneezes and stutters, nervous laughter and asides, with intention and naturalism, highlighting the actual humans at the center, with their unknowable truths and contradictory motives.

Parker Lutz's thin, gray-carpeted alley set, slightly raised with two elevated portions on the extreme sides, provides a stark canvas for the unfolding human drama. Entering audience members cast long shadows on the bland, gray structural pillar before them as they make their way to seats either in the main bank or a single row of chairs on the far side of the playing space. Already, the audience is thrust beyond any expectations of passive viewership that accompany traditional dramatic fiction: against



the banal set, they are part of the landscape for a reckoning about action, complicity, patriotism, and moral fortitude. In a 2013 *Theater* forum on documentary theater, Kelly Copper of Nature Theater of Oklahoma suggests that documentary drama itself pushes audiences out of their passive role due to their encounter with the “real.” They are forced to ask, “Who are these people onstage? Is this who these actors are *really*? Should I feel responsible for what’s happening to them?”³ In Satter’s staging, both form and space insist on activated spectatorship, shadows of the public imprinted from the beginning.

The performers’ voices are amplified to varying degrees. As if they are wearing wires that will provide this recording, both agents’ voices are clear, and occasionally their clothes brush against the mics. Winner is less amplified; we have greater access to her unmediated voice, indicating that she is farther from the mic, unwired, and therefore our person of interest. The transcript contains redactions ranging from single phrases to entire sections of conversation, and Satter stages those moments of unknowability. When the performers reach redacted words, lights flash pink and a distant bomb sounds—at first it’s a nearly imperceptible blip, as if they’ve merely skipped a beat. In longer redactions, the lights snap to black, and when they return seconds

Tina Satter / Half Straddle’s *Is This A Room: REALITY WINNER VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION*, the Vineyard, New York, 2019. Photo: Carol Rosegg

later the actors have shifted position slightly and resume immediately. The interrupting lights themselves transform over the course of the play from a deep pink to red and eventually to blue—a subtle flag, a question about patriotism coloring the moments a governmental editor deemed too classified or important to give to the general public. Satter underlines that unknown editorial hand, exhibiting the unseen forces that limit our understanding of the events, leaving us to reckon with our uncertainty.

Clad in denim cutoffs, a white button-down, and yellow Pikachu Converse high-tops, Emily Davis gives a masterful performance as the former intelligence translator Reality Winner. Accommodating and funny, yet firm, Davis moves through successive phases of the interrogation with a deep complexity of character and feeling. It's clear that Davis and Satter have invested in an intricate dramaturgy of intention to activate what could read on the page as dry, emotionless language. Davis plumbs the depths of Winner's unclear motivation; the tectonic plates of emotional intensity subtly shift and grind against each other as questioning ramps up. The interrogation itself—during which Winner is never read her rights—has three phases: disarming small talk (with some logistics, searching, and pet management), evasion, and a definitive escalation into an emotional scene of recognition and confession. There's plenty of slippage between these phases—the small talk especially circles back frequently as the agents attempt to disarm Reality and bring her closer to confession.

The players of the interrogation are well-versed in security jargon, and Reality fluctuates between intelligence-speak and light, friendly conversation about work-outs or her pretty paper at work. She is a fascinating and challenging character who teaches yoga and owns pink guns, a highly trained cog in the military machine and gracious host. Davis manifests that tension between officer and civilian in her posture, often standing at attention, legs apart, hands clasped either in front or behind her. At other times she appears deliberately casual, hip cocked, or nervously pulling at her shorts or bracelets. We see a woman who is simultaneously evading and accommodating, pedestrian and disciplined. It's impossible to ignore Reality Winner's extraordinary and thematically appropriate name. The interrogation seeks truth, while the production explores the limits of understanding what *exactly* happened. Satter's choice to only stage what is on the page, with redactions honored and without realism of place (because it is unseen and unheard in the transcript), is key to this exploration. By leaning on the contradictory reality of Reality, Satter destabilizes the assumed factual certainty of the transcription document and points us instead to Reality's complexity, underscoring how little we actually know about her and her motivations.

A story of power, accommodation, and evasion is clearly articulated through Satter's precise, choreographic staging. As the agents slide from small talk to interrogation, Agent Garrick stands far too close to Reality, consciously intimidating her. With Texan politeness, Reality breaks away each time, moving in rectilinear patterns around the space; she seems to slip away, denying gracefully with a quick pivot. As the ten-

sion ratchets up, Reality spends more time isolated: she's left alone on one of the elevated sections of the stage or ignored as the men continue a conversation without her, clumped together, dialogue overlapping. Accommodation eventually turns to acquiescence, but when Reality admits to sneaking the condemning article from an internal website out of the office in her pantyhose, effectively admitting guilt, the choreography of proximity and power shifts. Now it's Reality who stands too close, gesturing too emphatically as she gives rapid-fire answers to their questions, controlling the pace while the three masculine figures stand at attention.

Though there are more "male" bodies on stage here than in any of Half Straddle's previous pieces, Satter's commitment to a central, complex female figure roots *Is This A Room* in the company's feminist repertoire. The choreographic staging provides a slow, simmering critique of the interview's gender dynamics. Both Becca Blackwell and TL Thompson are nonbinary, and Blackwell, wearing an army-green bulletproof vest, talking simultaneously into a walkie-talkie and cell phone, is tasked with playing the menacing "Unknown Male," a compilation of the rest of the agents, eleven in total, who were also present searching Winner's home that afternoon. Blackwell is partially responsible for creating a tone of surveillance, moving around the space as the agents interrogate Winner, and is the sole figure who has the power to physically alter the

Tina Satter / Half Straddle's *Is This A Room*: REALITY WINNER VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION, the Kitchen, New York, 2019. Photo: © Paula Court. Courtesy of the Kitchen



room. Reality is preoccupied with her pets—a new foster dog and a fat black cat—who don't like men (this is one of the delightful, sly moments of gender commentary in the text that Satter subtly, humorously nods to but never underlines). As each pet is relocated, Blackwell walks around the perimeter of the stage space with life-sized animal puppets. Two or three times, Reality and the Unknown Male make eye contact, the lights shift, and music plays softly in the background. Satter juxtaposes often banal language or gesture with moments of strangeness, pointing to the unacknowledged forces at work in the interview with theatricality. In Satter's staging, these men's false courtesousness, their blatant intimidation, and the depiction of a menacing male presence constantly in the space, all work to strip Reality of her agency and shrink her certainty. She is an unassuming suspect, apparently nonthreatening but in actuality a powerful player, subverting gendered expectations of who can be dangerous—she is complex, and they are a blank threat; she may be fighting a system, and they are the instrument of the state. *Is This A Room* is undeniably political—consistent with Half Straddle's larger project, Satter centers a young woman's story and shines a spotlight on the unseen or ignored dynamics at work that have a powerful influence on her story.

The intelligence Reality leaked to *The Intercept* gave the general public evidence and confirmation of Russia's interference in the 2016 election. Her justification for her action is ultimately quite simple. Yes, she's frustrated and angry at the current administration, at having to listen to FOX News played in her office, but ultimately she's asking a question: "Uhm, seeing that information that had been contested back and forth in the public domain for so long, trying to figure out, like, with everything else that keeps getting released and keeps getting leaked—why isn't this getting, why isn't this out there? Why can't this be public?"²⁴ She insists time and again that she was not thinking about herself; instead she made a snap decision that, to her, was right. What makes her so fascinating, in the schema of other intelligence leakers, is that she acts ideologically, without blatant partisanship. Reality is not explicitly working against a political party or figure; rather, she has an idea of what is morally sound and acts regardless of her other potentially conflicting identities. So is she heroic? Patriotic? Treasonous? Satter and the Half Straddle company acknowledge Reality's moral imperative, but also choose to live within the ambiguity of both the document and her action. Like Reality, they refuse to distill her action to simple partisanship. Satter acknowledges both the release and the interrogation as patriotic and treasonous, inflected by gender dynamics and part of a larger system of danger and intelligence, and, importantly, defined by the highly trained personnel at the center with all of their shifting intentions, contradictions, and emotional underbellies.

In our current political moment the American public has all but forgotten about Reality Winner. This may be by design—some would say her actions were covered up and the leak suppressed—or, more simply, as a result of attrition; there are other whis-

tleblowers to think about, other elections sucking up our attention. Reality has been in jail since the evening of the interview, serving a record-breaking sentence under the Espionage Act of five years. By staging a single document and giving the role of Reality to such a talented, empathetic actress, Satter is asking us to see the humanity behind the headline, the unknown in the factual record. *Is This A Room* requires its activated spectators to think more carefully, skeptically, about the filtered, redacted information we receive from governmental sources, structures that see themselves as the arbiters of truth. The show reveals gender and power dynamics so often invisible in the cold data or transcriptions that we, the American public, have been trained to accept as fact. Satter demands a look below the surface and delivers that viewpoint by prioritizing complexity, unveiling the complication of human intention. Reality is frequently ambiguous—an individual, not a villain, not a sensation, wrestling imperfectly with patriotism and morality, in a world turned upside down.

NOTES

1. Much of the information about *Half Straddle* comes from collected interviews with Tina Satter, including Dahlia Bloomstone and Rayna Holmes, “Checking In with Tina Satter: An Interview,” *The Kitchen* (blog), January 4, 2019, thekitchen.org/blog/89; and Eleanor Bishop, “Interview: Tina Satter—Girlhood, Adolescence, and Framing Intangible Moments,” *Contemporary Performance*, March 31, 2016, contemporaryperformance.com/2016/03/31/interview-tina-satter-girlhood-adolescence-framing-intangible-moments/.
2. Peter Weiss, “Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theater,” quoted in Alexis Soloski, “What’s Up, Doc? The Ethics of Fact and Fabulation in Documentary Performance: A Forum,” *Theater* 43, no. 1 (2013), 10–11.
3. Alexis Soloski, “What’s Up Doc?”
4. Reality Winner interview transcript, courtesy of the Vineyard Theater, www.documentcloud.org/documents/4334950-Reality-Winner-Interrogation-Transcript.html (accessed October 21, 2019).

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