

ON WRITING *NOT ONE OF THESE PEOPLE*

At the beginning of 2020 I began a conversation with Vicky Featherstone, artistic director of London's Royal Court Theatre, about making work that could be performed as soon as the conditions of pandemic "lockdown" eased and audiences could return. Naively, we assumed it would happen soon.

I wondered what would be the ingredients of such a piece? Firstly, to avoid physical contact between actors and involve little or no rehearsal: a text to be read off the page — possibly "at sight". Secondly: a text of long duration — maybe even several hours — so that small audience groups could enter at intervals, sampling the text, as it were, before leaving to let the next group in. This second, "durational" idea was inspired by the UK company Forced Entertainment whose show *Speak Bitterness* — a long enumeration of confessions — had made an indelible impression on me in the 1990s.

So I quickly came up with a plan to write a text of 1000 voices, each one different, each one to be read from a script with no preparation.

Why this? Literary antecedents, clearly — like a number of people during the pandemic I re-read *The Decameron*, falling back in love with its robust story-telling, while absorbing the usefulness of its strict formal scheme. Then there were some recent encounters I'd had with young dramatists where I'd been struck by their anxiety about who or what they were permitted to write about, about who they could "give voice" to. As a playwright — whose job, traditionally at least, is to create conflict between invented humans of diverse characters and biographies, and of opposing but equally valid points of view — I believed this anxiety of theirs to be unfounded — but the more I thought about it, the more I felt my response to them had not been adequate. Perhaps then *Not One Of These People* is my much-delayed answer to those young people — an improbably extended *esprit d'escalier* — while at the same time being, in a more Boccaccian mode, what I hope is an entertaining tour of the streets, squares, public gardens and dead-ends of my own imagination.

I never made it to a thousand. August came and the theatres were still closed. Two years later, Vicky was still keen to produce the work, but, like myself, not sure what a *mise en scène* would look like. The Québécois director Christian Lapointe intervened, with a concept brilliantly linking the text to contemporary internet culture. From this new perspective, it was no longer a text of long duration, but a strange kind of 90-minute monologue. He asked me if I'd like to perform it.