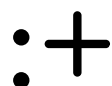


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Towards the Private: Notes on Contemporary
Non-Fiction Theatre

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Towards the Private: Notes on Contemporary Non-Fiction Theatre

This will not be a perfectly objective text written from the perspective of an all-seeing observer of theatrical life attempting to show the development of documentary theatre dating back a century. Instead, these are notes penned by someone who, for a dozen years or so, has busied himself within the genre, first as a critic then as a practitioner, playwright and theatre curator. It is an attempt to consider the direction in which contemporary non-fiction theatre is heading, and to record personal experiences of staging documentary material.

In 1995, exactly twenty years ago, I saw a show at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh which left in ruins the criteria I had developed for evaluating theatre as part of my theatrical studies. It was enigmatically titled *20-52*, staged by the Grassmarket Project company from Edinburgh, directed by Jeremy Weller. The title came from the name given to a document which prison authorities in Great Britain complete when there has been a case of self-harm or the death of a prisoner. The central character was a black woman trying to conduct her own investigation into the death of her twin brother, which occurred while he was in custody in Manchester.

What separated *20-52* from other productions at Edinburgh that year was the fact that we were not dealing with fiction, but with fact. The lead role was played by Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett, the surviving twin, playing herself. It had been her brother, Leon Patterson, who had been found dead in his cell six days after his arrest. The other roles – including the lawyer assisting our protagonist and her partner – were played by professional actors. The show was part of a social campaign trying to raise awareness of unexplained deaths in British jails and, after the show ended, stage assistants handed out flyers for INQUEST, an organisation which championed this cause. Speaking personally, I was left helpless by the format of the production. At university, I had been taught that theatre is a representation of reality, a laboratory of fiction in which actors experience emotions on behalf of the audience. In *20-52* the emotions were real: during a scene showing a marital row, Stephanie's husband would demolish the stage set, with bits of furniture flying at the audience. The dialogues were improvised, no one bothering with diction or logic. Lengthy pauses increased the sense of time passing, as it would in real life. At the end of the performance, lights would go up and Stephanie would turn to the audience to say: 'I wish this was fiction. But this happened for real. My battle goes on'.

This was not the only show I saw that summer in Edinburgh which had real history and real-life characters appearing on stage. Also in the Traverse Theatre, Ningali Josie Lawford, an aboriginal actress from Sydney who came from the Great Sandy Desert, was putting on her own show. In it, she traversed her own cultural path: appearing at the start as a middle-class woman, in a jacket and tidily arranged hair, and ending

it naked, her body painted, performing 'primitive' dances of her native people. The show, featuring many languages – Aboriginal, English and Creole, a mixture of the two – touched upon themes of cultural identity which civilisation is trying to erase, and which are hidden in all of us. Do I need to add that the show shared its name, Ningali, with its own creator and character?

I had no idea how to write about these plays. Traditional criteria of judging theatrical crafts failed when confronted with shows featuring real people in situations they had lived through. Their acting abilities were suddenly of lesser importance, same as the stage design – what counted instead was the awareness that we are sharing a space with real people. Their strength and spontaneity dismantled the theatrical process from within, blurring the lines between theatre and reality. What was it? Psychodrama? Psychodramas don't sell tickets and aren't repeated night after night. Talk show? Not that either, there was no host to ask questions, no audience who could react to what was happening on set. This was a new kind of performance – writing about it for the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, I called it 'theatre vérité' then, echoing 'cinéma vérité', the French genre of documentary film art which valued reality of depiction above effective presentation. This was, for me, a manifestation of doubt in the power of fictional narrative, and at the same time a testimony to the emancipatory processes which were taking place in Western societies. The protagonists of such shows were people who would not otherwise have had a voice due to their social standing, race or ethnic group. The stage gave them the ability to express themselves.

I was not the only one who struggled to comprehend this phenomenon: the public walked out en masse from 20-52, disgusted by the swearing and the naturalistic behaviour. Critics had a similar problem, accusing such shows of delighting in human suffering. A year earlier, a heated discussion had erupted around a show by the remarkable American choreographer Bill T. Jones, *Still/Here*, in which he used images of and actual voice recordings from people suffering with HIV/AIDS. According to some reviewers, the use of real-life stories placed this form of theatre vérité beyond the reach of artistic criticism. Arlene Croce, a *New York Times* dance reviewer, refused to write a review of the show, instead publishing an accusatory article in which she claimed it had profited from the suffering of others, terming it 'victim art'.

The problem with theatre vérité was not emotional blackmail, but the use of tools of traditional theatre for completely new ends. The public, used to metaphors and shortcuts, did not take well to the literalness of these shows, with actions which bordered on verism, pasting quotes from reality into the theatrical convention. A separate new theatrical language would have to be found in order to give validity to the presence of the real in the kingdom of fiction. And this is what I intend to write about here.

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In June 2008, Janek Turkowski, working with Ośrodek Teatralny Kana in Szczecin, bought a projector and a boxful of amateur 8mm films at a vintage market in Germany. This collection of sixty-four rolls of film was actually the record of the private life of a certain East German woman from the 1960s and 1970s: social gatherings, trips, holiday

adventures. The only trace of her identity was her name, written on the boxes themselves.

Turkowski decided to investigate the life of the woman shown in the films. For two years, he studied the footage and looked for traces of her all across Germany. What he did manage to find became the basis of the show *Margarete*, which was then staged at Ośrodek Teatralny Kana. The show, called a 'video-ramble' by its author, is reminiscent of a family gathering. Turkowski screens bits of the films and talks about them. The audience sits round a small screen on a knitted rug and drinks tea. This collective viewing of home movies becomes a nostalgic trip into the past, while also being an intimate seance of memories.

I didn't know the show by Turkowski when, in autumn 2012, my *Jeżyce Story* project with Marcin Wierzchowski began at Nowy Theatre in Poznań. Yet a common thread existed between these two shows, as if we had conspired together. We were also interested in privacy and the mundane, at the scale of a single city district.

Jeżyce Story project came out of a need to research the social context in which Nowy Theatre was working, specifically the unusual district in which they are based, one of the most beautiful parts of Poznań yet one of the most ill-kept. In historical town houses there are both middle-class residents who have benefited from Poland's post-communist transformation and those who have lost their social security and found themselves destitute. Those reclaiming ownership of some of these properties are rehousing the former residents elsewhere, replacing them with students who unwittingly become involved in the process of gentrification. New apartments buildings rise alongside dilapidated homes no one cares for.

In working on this project, we took the opportunity to assess how experiences of residents in a single Poznań district may reflect wider processes taking place in Poland and around the world, connected to social changes, demographics, emancipation and changes in property ownership. We were interested in seeing whether it was possible to use 'a part' to talk about 'the whole', and whether it is possible to perceive global phenomena from a local perspective – and what theatre and its creators can say or do in all of this.

We were inspired in *Jeżyce Story* by the experience of the British theatre vérité, as well as Teatr.doc, a Moscow-based theatre company set up at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which specialises in documentary theatre. They provided us with a subtly modified method of theatrical 'verbatim', based on quotes from real people being introduced into theatre. The actors themselves conducted interviews with protagonists who were their friends, neighbours, people suggested by their families or family friends, or even by us. We wanted to create a close relationship between the performer and the character being performed.

The actors recorded twenty-two conversations, with well-known people across Poznań including the entrepreneur Jacek Jaśkowiak (who would go on to become the city's mayor) and the rapper Peja, as well as anonymous individuals such as a woman threatened with eviction from her townhouse and three women neighbours who looked after stray cats. We used excerpts to construct four half-hour segments, each devoted to a specific theme. In *Residents*, it was the dynamic between people and their places of residence, in *Rebels* the energy of crossing boundaries and changing the world, in *Players* the male psyche and in *City of Women* the lives of contemporary women.

This experience proved unique for both the actors, who went from being performers to being authors of their own performances, and for the real-life characters they played, who saw their own lives being staged. The dividing line between theatre and reality became blurred when the people the play was based on appeared on stage at the end to receive applause along with the actors playing them, or actually took part in the performance to add some comment or clarifying points. Sometimes, the shows had a cathartic effect, as in the case of a retired worker and his son, an anarchist and rock musician: their on-stage dialogue, which we created out of separate interviews we had recorded with them, was their first honest conversation about the values they lived by – that which connected and that which separated them.

We extended the project by taking it outside, into Jeżycki Square, the trading and socialising centre of the district, where we organised the show *The Square of Jeżycki Tales* on two occasions. For a few hours, on a Sunday, actors took over stalls and acted out parts of their monologues. The limits of convention were utterly erased, with audiences and passers-by talking with the actors as if they were real people. I saw how people were affected by the *Rugby Player* monologue, delivered by Sebastian Grek – some of those watching were convinced that it wasn't an actor but a real rugby player in the wheelchair, who had managed to rebuild his life after an accident. There were similar reactions to a performance by Agnieszka Różańska, who played a gynaecologist from a local hospital. At one point, a woman in the audience turned to her daughter and said: 'Look, child, that woman assisted with your delivery!'

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It is not easy to see changes when the observer is in the midst of the changes taking place. Yet there can be no doubt that *Jeżyce Story* in Poznań, much like *Margarete* in Szczecin, created a model of documentary theatre different from that formed in the 1920s and 1930s, which had been influenced by leftist ideas and was then practiced for almost the rest of the twentieth century in Europe and the US. Initially, the appearance of documentary forms in theatre had been related to the appearance of someone new on stage – the working-class actor. The true protagonist of those early documentary shows was not an individual but their social class, their character evidently propagandist and didactic, their form reaching out to the masses, trying on one hand to use the formula of folk theatre and on the other modern audio-visual techniques – photography, radio and film – thereby strengthening the effectiveness of the message. Subjects were mostly centred around life experiences of the working classes: US theatre companies, working within the remit of the Federal Theatre Project during the New Deal period of the late 1930s, touched upon questions of employability and rent rates. Erwin Piscator staged grand shows in Germany on the subject of key moments in the history of the labour movement, while Soviet proletarian satirical companies battled with bourgeois ideologies and the Deep-Blue Blouse group performed in factories and streets, shows which antagonised with their form as 'living newspapers'.

This class aspect was also shared by the first documentary theatre production in Poland – *Social Politics in the Polish Republic*, the fact-montage by director Leon Schiller and the poet Aleksander Wat, in which

optimistic attitudes of the government at the time were challenged with statistical data relating to bankruptcies, the number of workplace accidents and unemployment levels. Shown at the National Exhibition in Poznań in 1929, it challenged the supposed achievements of the recently independent nation and presented reality from the perspective of the working masses, with which the left-leaning artists sided.

Schiller's *Zeittheater*, 'theatre of its time', tackled the most important aspects of its era – questions of economic inequality, war, exploitation and so on – and established a new relationship between theatre and reality. Bertolt Brecht said, in writing about Erwin Piscator, that the director turned the stage into a machine-room, the auditorium became a public meeting. Piscator saw the theatre as a parliament, the audience as a legislative body. All the great public questions that needed an answer were presented to this parliament in vivid form. Instead of a member of parliament speaking about certain intolerable social conditions, there was an artistic copy of these conditions. It was the stage's ambition to supply representations, statistics, slogans, that would enable its parliament, the public, to reach political decisions. Piscator's stage was not indifferent to applause, but it preferred a discussion.¹

Polish documentary theatre of the post-war period developed in a similar direction. In *The Nuremberg Epilogue* by Jerzy Antczak, on the weekly broadcast *TV Theatre* in 1969 – as with the famous documentary shows of the 1980s and 1990s, *The Accused: June '56* by Izabela Cywińska or *Who Let the Journalists in Here?* by Marek Miller – the central protagonist was always some kind of collective, separated into voices. In the case of *The Nuremberg Epilogue*, which included transcripts from the Nuremberg Trials, they were the executioners in and the victims of the German military's killing machine; with Cywińska's production it was participants in and witnesses of worker protests in 1956; in the case of Miller it was state-media journalists from who wrote about the Gdańsk Shipyard strikes in 1980. The individual perspective here was key, in that it related to the whole phenomenon which was Nazism or workers' uprisings in communist Poland. Individual fates surrendered pride of place to historical mechanisms, protagonists becoming witnesses to grand processes which overwhelmed them, the emotional response coming from the awareness that, much like them, we too are the object not the subject of historical narratives.

This was then to be seen clearly in productions staged at the outset of the twenty-first century, such as Jan Klata's *Transfer!*, which related to problems associated with huge forced migrations which followed the Second World War, and the play *Don't Be Surprised When They Come to Burn Our House Down* by Paweł Demirski, which explored issues of exploitation and breaches in employment law. Grand social processes were shown here through the fates of individuals, crushed by history or systems: in Klata's play, these were Poles and Germans forcibly relocated after post-war borders had been shifted, and in the play by Demirski it was a worker who had died in a Łódź fridge factory and his wife, struggling to get to the truth and secure compensation. In new documentary theatre, the perspective has changed and individual experiences don't have to be a part of the whole, but can be values in and of themselves. Micro-histories are confronted with grand histories, with the individual

1 Erwin Piscator, *Political Theatre* (New York: Avon Books, 1978) p. 136.

becoming the focus. Along with social issues and grand narratives, we come across private intimate histories, without aspiring to shed light on complex mechanisms of contemporary politics and economics. They are accompanied by the search for new, intimate forms of meeting the audience – shows performed in people's homes and other non-theatrical spaces, usually for a small audience, with the performers up close to those viewing.

The drive for change came simultaneously from Germany and from Russia, where as the century began independent companies experimented with the concept of documentary theatre. This is especially true of Rimini Protokoll, based in Berlin, which was the first company to work with non-professional actors on such a scale, referred to as "life experts", and of Teatr.doc from Moscow, a group of directors, playwrights and actors who practiced verbatim, the most orthodox form of non-fiction theatre, based on quoting real-life characters word by word.

I remember *Torero Portero* (2001), one of the first shows by Stefan Kaegi, co-founder of Rimini Protokoll. The central characters were hotel porters from Cordoba, Argentina, who stood in the streets of Düsseldorf and talked about their everyday working routine, while the audience sitting at a distance in a gallery listened to their stories using headphones. I was also impressed by the show *Doc.tor* (2005), the documentary sound-drama by Vladimir Pankov based on a play by Elena Isaeva, about the life of a provincial doctor who, under extremely difficult circumstances, without medicine or equipment, armed only with a trusty vodka bottle, treats people and delivers babies. In both cases, it was for me a continuation of the method developed by British theatre vérité, the theatre of everyday micro-histories I had encountered a decade earlier in Edinburgh.

Poland first saw this kind of performance in 2004–2005 with *Quick City Theatre* (STM), curated by Paweł Demirski at Wybrzeże Theatre in Gdańsk. Here, journalists and directors staged shows based on journalistic reports and their own documentation. Topics came from headlines: neo-Nazism, homelessness, illegal abortions, but the narration was different than in documentary theatre of the 1960s or 1980s. Global problems were shown from the point of view of ordinary people, as in Demirski's show *Fall Down*, in which we saw the engagement of Polish soldiers in the Iraq conflict from the perspective of their wives, waiting for the return of their husbands from war zones and experiencing the overwhelming sense of trauma, fear and emptiness. The play's plot, was created on the basis of interviews which the playwright and actresses had conducted with wives of Polish soldiers in one of the residential garrisons in western Poland.

Some of the STM performances, such as *Fall Down* and *Ours*, were presented in private apartments, for a handful of viewers, almost without stage sets. The texts were by nature basic, raw, and actors used sparse means in order to create the illusion of an encounter with real experiences.

The STM project was directly inspired by visits to Gdańsk by Moscow's Teatr.doc which, as part of the *Saison Russe* festival of Russian drama in 2003, staged several verbatim-method performances at Wybrzeże Theatre. These were Galina Sinkina's *Crimes of Passion*, the story of women sentenced for murder, done in the style of Aleksandr Vartanov, Ruslan Malikov's *Great Troughing*, a portrait of people working

in the media, and *Gay* by Aleksandr Vartanov, a play about Russian homosexuals based on posts taken from an online gay portal.

But also of real importance were experiences Demirski returned with following his internship at the Royal Court Theatre in London, which helped develop documentary theatre and the verbatim method at the turn of the century. The geography of influence changed, with new ideas no longer coming from just the one direction but now from many places, which were then adapted to Polish circumstances and the theatrical context.

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The fundamental aspect which comes into play when working with documentary material is the problem of representation. When we place real stories on the stage, are we really moving closer to the truth about reality, seeing how we modify it, choosing moments which are interesting from a dramatic point of view, shutting life stories up into fifteen-minute monologues? What gives the authors of such performances the right? Where is the border between artistic conversion and manipulation and/or instrumentalisation? Who directs the narrative and towards what ends?

The creators of left-leaning documentary theatre in the early twentieth century did not have problems with answers to these questions: they were acting in the name of exploited classes, theatre for them being the scene of political dispute. Leon Schiller, in his lecture 'The Fall of Bourgeois Theatre' in 1930, said it clearly: 'Today, anyone working in the arts must contend with the fact that a new class has appeared on the horizon of history, one which is openly struggling not for "equality" but for hegemony in the competition over tomorrow'.²

Today, when class hegemony has vanished from our stages as a result of the collapse of the previous political system and changes in the global economy, documentary theatre must look for a new programme, along with new points of reference. Today, speaking in the name of another social group would be perceived as usurpation and abuse. The individual voice is what counts. How do we make sure that theatre does not falsify it? How to turn a realistic protagonist into the subject of the tale, not the object?

Answers to these dilemmas can come from autobiographical theatre, based on the personal experiences of those involved. Ningali's performance at Edinburgh belongs to this brand of theatre. In Poland, Wojtek Ziemilski was first to recognise the power of the personal first-hand story. In the acclaimed production *Small Narration* (2010), Ziemilski told the story of his grandfather, Count Wojciech Dzieduszycki, who near the end of his life was accused of collaborating with the political authorities, then with the secret services and the political police (SB). Dzieduszycki went on television to apologise to everyone who had been harmed by his actions, and withdrew from public life. He was 94 then and died two years later, in 2008, without ever setting foot outside his home again.

Ziemilski presented his play in the form of a lecture, in which accusations levelled against his grandfather are mixed in with his own personal commentary. The stage features projected scenes from theatre and

² Schiller, Leon, *Upadek teatru burżuazyjnego*, in *Droga przez teatr 1924–1939*, ed. Jerzy Timoszewicz (Warsaw: PWN, 1983), p. 81.

dance performances which touch upon themes of the body and identity, along with film of his grandfather. Questions about Dzieduszycki's actual collaboration with the Communist authorities become a way in to asking questions about the artist's own identity. Ziemilski belongs to the generation which grew up after the collapse of Polish communism, and spent a large part of his youth and adult life abroad, in Canada, France and Portugal. When confronted with history and his family past, both of which begin to overwhelm his own life, he asks the question: 'Is not each one of us a self-made man? Are we not above all our own bodies? Is this not where we begin and where we end?' He then lists celebrated dates on the Polish calendar which he would like to forget: 1 September, 17 September – the German and Soviet invasions in 1939, respectively – 8 May, 3 May, 1 August, 13 December and 4 June. Yet one cannot escape history.

The continuation of such explorations was the show *High Noon*, which Ziemilski created with actors from the Szaniawski Theatre in Wałbrzych in 2013. Almost a quarter of a century after the first democratic elections in post-war Poland, he was asking what was left of those democratic ideals. Here – again, much like in the *Jeżyce Story* show – actors were co-creators: they met with 1989 parliamentary and senatorial candidates from the Wałbrzych region and talked about what happened in their lives. But their role was not done just yet. A second source of script material were their own ideas, memories and anecdotes relating to the Polish transformation. Personal items became a catalyst for remembrance: a video tape with the film *Dogs* by Władysław Pasikowski, a bathrobe which belonged to a beloved granny, car keys, an old magazine. Using such props, the actors brought to life recollections from their first trips abroad, the first consumerist crazes, first money earned, first loves.

Ziemilski's show talked about the selective workings of memory and personal perspectives on history. The purchase of a pair of jogging shoes or a first communion were of equal importance to grand historical changes. Small narratives were contrasted to vast historical narratives and, in this context, created their own space for freedom.

Ziemilski is now being followed by other artists. Two more shows in this genre are based entirely on autobiographical aspects of the lives of actors and actresses: *Sonny* by Marcin Gaweł, directed by Maciej Podstawny (Zabytkowa Kopalnia Węgla Kamiennego Guido, Zabrze 2013) and *Daddy's Not Coming Home* by Agnieszka Przepiórska, directed by Piotr Ratajczak (WARSawy Theatre, 2013). In both cases, the artists are confronting their own intimate narrations: in Gaweł's solo show, it is a tale of Silesian regional identity and of being torn between tradition and the need for escape, and in Przepiórska's case, the story of a young woman raised without a father. What is interesting is that in both shows facts were overlaid with a level of theatrical fiction: in *Sonny*, references to Franz Kafka, Martin Luther and the history of American Indians combined with a collage-based, post-dramatic form, and in *Daddy's Not Coming Home*, the actress's history was camouflaged by a story of a fictionalised bank employee who recognises in a customer the father who had abandoned her many years before. The theatrical format is a buffer here, protecting actors' and actresses' intimacy, building distance and universalising individual experiences. These shows explore the space between the theatre of personal facts and theatrical fiction.

The genre of auto-theatre also fits into changes taking place in terms of privacy under the influence of new technologies. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat transform private lives into an all-day public transmission relayed in the form of photos, films and status updates. With the help of emoticons, their users can imagine all sorts of emotional states, from delight, hope and the sense of being valued to sadness, disappointment and a sense of belittlement. All it takes is one click for the narrative of our lives to be beamed out to millions. Autobiographical theatre is therefore a response to the collapse of grand narratives, which so fascinated documentary artists of the twentieth century, and is on the other hand a reaction against the democratisation of media presentations and cultures which users are themselves creating today.

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Is it possible to go further and completely smash theatrical conventions? Turn documentary theatre into just a document created using theatrical means? This was part of the *Teren TR* Programme research, developed with the company TR Warszawa's team during the 2014/2015 season, a project of which I was the curator. Three of the five staged performances which formed part of its repertoire were of the documentary genre. In the other two cases, personal experiences of the artists were involved, including the biographies of actors taking part in one of the shows. Piotr Trojan, in the show *Grind/r*, told stories of sexual encounters with partners he met through a telephone app. Agnieszka Przepiórska, in her project *Documented Journey*, focused on the question of personal origin – as an adult, she learned that her mother was Jewish. But in the project *Ewelina Cries* by Anna Karasińska, three actors from TR Warszawa – Adam Woronowicz, Rafał Maćkowiak and Maria Maj – played themselves. They were accompanied by Ewelina Pankowska, who was in turn playing another actress: Magda Cielecka.

All three projects were linked by the presence of real-life characters up on stage, as well as by the fact that they were theatre people. All three tried to find new forms which would move away from theatrical conventions in the direction of simple encounters. The most 'theatrical' of these was *Grind/r* – taking place on a small stage, in close contact with the audience. Eccentric costumes (one of the actors wore a cauliflower on his head, and others had latex BDSM gadgets) and mirrored stage sets created a space somewhere between theatre and nightclub. Virtuality and reality swapped places: the real world seemed to be an 'incredible' dream, and erotic online chats projected onto screens became reality itself. At a certain point, actors used the portal Chat Roulette to link up with users around the world unaware that they were taking part in a staged performance. For them, it was an extension of virtual reality.

The play by Agnieszka Przepiórska was a lot more sparse and stripped of effects, linking performance with film. During the hour-long show, the actress showed fragments from a documentary film she shot about her search for Jewish roots in Poland and Israel, commenting as she went along. The actress Maria Maj played her mother, as the actual person had refused to play herself (worried about public reaction should she appear on film). But the story of a family secret was less important than dialogue with the public: at a certain point, Przepiórska would interrupt

the screening and, with help from the journalist Jacek Żakowski, would initiate a discussion with the audience about their own heritage and family secrets. After some silence, the first voices would be heard: someone talked about their childhood in Oświęcim, the town in the shadow of the Auschwitz camp, and someone else about an absent father, while someone else again would declare that their roots were in no way problematic for them. When I was watching this show staged later in the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, the public reacted very emotionally: one woman wanted to speak, but was unable to utter a single word and started crying. The show became a seance which aired the ghosts of personal memory, each of those watching forced to answer questions about their own identity.

Anna Karasińska used an even more simple form of theatrical language in her show. Four actors, on an empty stage alongside a choreographer, perform exercises in direct improvisation. All of them then stand facing the audience and introduce themselves as understudies, meant to be replacing TR Warszawa actors and actresses, absent due to other commitments. The script for the show came about through workshops, in which real students tried to become actors from the TR Warszawa company – based on fantasy and gossip, they tried to reconstruct their passions, characters, habits. A similar process was repeated in the show – the actors try to repeat the workshop exercises, creating a comic effect of alienation, seeing as they are playing themselves. The problem lies in the fact that they don't feel at home in their adopted roles: Maria Maj doesn't want to play Maria Maj, because she thinks she's too old; Rafał Maćkowiak playing Monika complains that little is known about Rafał Maćkowiak; only Adam Woronowicz as Kasia playing Adam Woronowicz boasts that he/she has seen the film *Popiełuszko* several times. Freedom is in us, and knows everything about its hero. Meanwhile, Ewelina Pankowska – the only one not playing herself – surrenders to despair, because she can't play Magda Cielecka, the TR actress she's playing, as suggestively as the rest of the workshop participants.

The problem of acting identities has here become a point of reference regarding the separation between that which we think of ourselves, how others see us and how we really are. What is a role, and what is a reality? Where is the line between truth and invention? How does one's public person influence the personal self? This show allowed actors to exit their life roles and to see the self from a certain sort of sideline. It allowed a degree of distance, which in turn helped them to cross their own limitations and tell an honest, if painful, personal tale, without fancy or attempts to appeal to the audience.

In the final scene of *Camera Buff*, a classic film by Krzysztof Kieślowski, Jerzy Stuhr (playing the titular amateur filmmaker) turned the camera on himself and began to speak about his own life. This finale was interpreted in a range of ways – as an escape from communist censorship into the sphere of privacy, as a metaphor for self-awareness or as a symbolic scene showing the artist being born. I have the impression that the direction documentary theatre is heading in today is a similar gesture. Following a period of registering reality, we are back to asking

questions about our own identities. Is withdrawing into private themes a sign that social engagement has come to an end, having dominated non-fiction theatre thus far? Certainly not. You cannot know the world without knowing the self within. In this context, the return to biography is a cause for hope.

Translated by Marek Kazmierski

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ABSTRACT

Roman Pawłowski

Towards the Private: Notes on Contemporary Non-Fiction Theatre

Roman Pawłowski, playwright, critic and curator, analyses new models of documentary theatre (based on individual case studies), appearing in opposition to twentieth-century political theatre, which expresses the problems of entire groups and social classes. This turn towards the private sphere is a response to the crisis in grand narratives which had fascinated twentieth-century makers of documentary theatre, and at the same time it is a reaction against democratisation of media formats and culture created by users themselves. In new documentary theatre, individual experiences don't have to be a part of historical process but can instead be values in and of themselves. Alongside grand narrations, there are more personal tales, not designed to deal in complicated mechanisms involving contemporary politics and economics but to express individual experiences. The author presents a move towards the private sphere in the contexts of Polish and world documentary theatre, with specific focus on recent developments at the transition between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sample materials analysed in the article include performances involving new strategies of documentary theatre, including productions by Jan Turkowski, Marcin Gaweł, Agnieszka Przepiórska, Wojtek Ziemilski, Piotr Trojan, Anna Karasińska and Marcin Wierzchowski, along with personal theatre experiences of the author.