Bodies of Evidence

1. Stuff Happens, written by David Hare and directed by Daniel Sullivan—in production at the Public Theater in New York as this article was going to press—offers another perspective on the use of documentary theatre to interrogate political power. From left: Peter Francis James as Colin Powell, Gloria Reuben as Condoleezza Rice, Jay O. Sanders as George W. Bush. (Photo by Michal Daniel)

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Contemporary documentary theatre represents a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history—the complex ways in which men and women think about the events that shape the landscapes of their lives. Much post-9/11 documentary theatre is etched with the urgency of the struggle over the future of the past.

Those who make documentary theatre interrogate specific events, systems of belief, and political affiliations precisely through the creation of their own versions of events, beliefs, and politics by exploiting technology that enables replication; video, film, tape recorders, radio, copy machines, and computers are the sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, technological means of documentary theatre. While documentary theatre remains in the realm of hand-craft—people assemble to create it, meet to write it, gather to see it—it is a form of theatre in which technology is a primary factor in the transmission of knowledge.

Here the technological postmodern meets oral-theatre culture. The most advanced means of replication and simulation are used to capture and reproduce “what really happened” for presentation in the live space of the theatre. Technology is often the initial generating component of the tripartite structure of contemporary documentary theatre: technology, text, and body. The bodies of the performers as well as the bodies of those being represented in documentary theatre are decisive in ways that overlap but are also different from fictive theatre. In documentary theatre, the performers are sometimes those whose stories are being told. But more often than not documentary theatre is where “real people” are absent—unavailable, dead, disappeared—yet reenacted. They are represented through various means, including stage acting, film clips, photographs, and other “documents” that attest to the veracity of both the story and the people being enacted.\(^1\)

How events are remembered, written, archived, staged, and performed helps determine the history they become. More than enacting history, although it certainly does that, documentary theatre also has the capacity to stage historiography. At its best, it offers us a way to think about disturbing contexts and complicated subject matter while revealing the virtues and flaws of its sources. “History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it,” writes Roland Barthes (1981:65). Yet as Freddie Rokem points out: “The theatre ‘performing history’ seeks to overcome both the separation and the exclusion from the past, striving to create a community where the events from this past will matter again” (2000:xii). In practice, much of contemporary documentary theatre is written contemporaneously with the events that are its subject. It directly intervenes in the creation of history by unsettling the present.

In the interest of differentiating documentary theatre from other forms of theatre, especially historical fiction, it is useful to understand it as created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, etc. Most contemporary documentary theatre makes the claim that everything presented is part of the archive. But equally important is the fact that not everything in the archive is part of the documentary. This begs the crucial question: What is the basis for the selection, order, and manner of presentation of materials from the archive? The process of selection, editing, organization, and presentation is where the creative work of documentary theatre gets done.

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1. Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* (2000) is interesting as it employs different kinds of acting. The style of acting varies depending upon the actor involved. According to dramaturge Steve Wangh, Andy Paris was more interested than the other actors in gestural veracity, performing in the style of Anna Deveare Smith. Other actors adhered to conventional acting, using their research to “build characters.” In an email Wangh wrote: “Amanda Gronich was always a natural ‘character’ actor, doing vocal imitations, while Greg Pierotti made only slight personal adjustments in the direction of character” (2002). According to Wangh, Kaufman insisted on actors maintaining a Brechtian distance between themselves and their characters, as he did not want the actors’ personae to entirely disappear. In fact, the boundaries between different approaches to documentary acting are very fluid.
Creating performances from edited archival material can both foreground and problematize the nonfictional even as it uses actors, memorized dialogue, condensed time, precise staging, stage sets, lighting, costumes, and the overall aesthetic structuring of theatrical performance. The process is not always transparent. Documentary theatre creates its own aesthetic imaginaries while claiming a special factual legitimacy.

Documentary theatre takes the archive and turns it into repertory, following a sequence from behavior to archived records of behavior to the restoration of behavior as public performance. At each phase, a complex set of transformations, interpretations, and inevitable distortions occur. In one sense, there is no recoverable “original event” because the archive is already an operation of power (who decides what is archived, and how?). The interpolation of a document between what is behaved and what is performed underscores Richard Schechner’s theory of “restored” or “twice-behaved behavior.” The three core ideas of Schechner’s theory are that the future creates the past, that all behavior is twice-behaved, and that public performance is of the “not” and the “not-not” (1985). The future creates the past by constructing a past specifically designed to make a particular future more likely to occur. All social behavior is actually the performance of “strips of behavior” that have already been behaved and are, therefore, “twice-behaved.” Apparent originality occurs at the level of arrangement and context. The “not” and the “not not” are inherent in role-playing. The roles one plays—in social life as well as in the theatre—are not oneself but are not not oneself. As staged politics, specific instances of documentary theatre construct the past in service of a future the authors would like to create. As twice-behaved behavior, documentary theatre self-consciously blends into and usurps other forms of cultural expression such as political speeches, courts of law, forms of political protest, and performance in everyday life. As a condition of performance, the actors on documentary stages perform both as themselves and as the actual personages they represent. The absent, unavailable, dead, and disappeared make an appearance by means of surrogation. What makes documentary theatre provocative is the way in which it strategically deploys the appearance of truth, while inventing its own particular truth through elaborate aesthetic devices, a strategy that is integral to the restoration of behavior.

With the use of technology, embodied practice does not necessarily proceed body to body. Nor is the move from repertory to archive a one-way move. Diana Taylor asserts that the repertoire is distinct from the archive in that it requires presence (2003:20). With documentary theatre, the repertoire still requires presence but it also often requires technology as an integral part of the means to embodied memory and as necessary for the verification of the factual accuracy of both the text and the performance. Performance knowledge becomes reproducible, even embodied, via an archive at least partly created from film, video, audio recordings, and digital manipulations. Taylor observes that history and memory exist on two parallel but not identical lines: the archive (documents) and the repertoire (embodied memory, oral tradition). With documentary theatre, the domains of the archive and the repertoire are blurred. Theatre director Chris Mirto commented that performing documentary theatre was “like lip-synching, a frozen thing—but the body still moves. The voice and body are together and separate at the same time,” reminding us that new media creates new ways of understanding and experiencing embodiment.2 The very “origina ls” that documentarians draw on are increasingly virtual archives, which confer legitimacy and give a strong feeling of “being there,” of the “real thing.” Adherence to an archive makes documentary theatre appear closer to actuality than fiction. The archive is concrete, historically situated, and relatively permanent; it is material and lasting while theatrical representation is intangible and

2. Chris Mirto and I had this conversation on 21 January 2006 after I saw his staged reading of Dionysus in ‘69 at the Jefferson Market Library. Mirto had seen Brian De Palma’s film of The Performance Group’s 1968 production, which leaves out major portions of the play. The film, the original performance text, production photographs, and Max Waldman’s studio photographs of the birth and death rituals were the documents Mirto used to mount his staged reading.
ephemeral. We know, also, that filming and recording change what is documented; the instruments of preservation affect what’s preserved.

Documentary theatre emphasizes certain kinds of memory and buries others. What is outside the archive—glances, gestures, body language, the felt experience of space, and the proximity of bodies—is created by actors and directors according to their own rules of admissibility. The hidden seams of documentary theatre raise questions about the continuum between documentation and simulation. Extratextual and subtextual “languages” are what we normally think of as theatre. It is precisely this way interpretation is built from what is not part of the archive that brings “real life” and believability to documentary theatre. The testimony of the actors gives the evidence of the playwright factual verisimilitude. Ironically, then, it is precisely what is not in the archive, what is added by making the archive into repertory, that infuses documentary theatre with its particular theatrical viability.

Evidence and testimony are used in ways not unlike a court of law. The path of evidence can be forensically constructed from the archive, as a good prosecutor reconstructs a crime. In both the theatre and the courtroom, the evidence serves as a pretext for the testimony of actors, of witnesses and lawyers.

Evidence is typically impersonal—material objects, laboratory reports, bank records, etc.—while testimony involves the narration of memory and experience. The drama of a trial, at least U.S. trials, depends on presenting evidence in the form of conflicting testimony. Documentary theatre draws on this courtroom tradition of conflicting narration. Its practitioners use the archive as evidence to create a performance of testimony; audiences understand what they see and hear as nonfiction; the actors ostensibly perform “verbatim.” This allows an audience to forget that creating any work out of edited archival materials relies on the formal qualities of fiction as much as on archival evidence. The real life drama of the courtroom is no different, finally. In court, as in documentary theatre, the forensic evidence stored in the archive is as much constructed as it is found. Not only do the police frequently fabricate evidence, but also both the prosecution and the defense do everything they can to credit/discredit evidence that might support/destroy their case.

Herein lies the problem. Is documentary theatre just another form of propaganda, its own system of constructed half-truths for the sake of specific arguments? Typically its texts and performances are presented not just as a version of what happened but the version of what happened. The intention is to persuade spectators to understand specific events in particular ways. Even when the text is indefinite in its conclusions, audience response may not be. The occasion of documentary theatre can be seen as a political affiliation in and of itself. The outrage at New York Theatre Workshop’s decision to postpone a production of My Name is Rachel Corrie, the story of the 23-year-old pro-Palestinian American activist crushed to death by an Israeli bulldozer while trying to protect a Palestinian home is a case in point. James Nicola, the artistic director of New York Theatre Workshop, made the decision to postpone the play after canvassing unidentified Jewish friends and advisors. “The uniform answer we got was that the fantasy that we could present the work of this writer simply as a work of art without appearing to take a position was just that, a fantasy,” Nicola commented (in McKinley 2006:2). The play aside, after her death Rachel Corrie became a polarizing figure. Yasser Arafat lionized her as a martyr, aligning her memory with that of suicide bombers (Segal 2006:1). Nicola expressed concern that the January 2006 Palestinian election of Hamas, bent on the destruction of Israel, would overly determine the reception of the play in the U.S.

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Rachel Corrie was unequivocally on the side of the Palestinians. Toward the end of the play, she answers her mother’s suggestion that Palestinian violence against Israel may justify Israel’s actions by defending Palestinian action as resistance to occupation. Corrie accuses the Israeli government of defying the fourth Geneva Convention “which prohibits collective punishment, prohibits the transfer of an occupying country’s population into an occupied area, prohibits the expropriation of water resources and the destruction of civilian infrastructure such as farms […]” (Rickman and Viner 2005:48). Corrie’s story—as represented in the editing of her emails, letters, and diary entries—presents her desire to end the suffering of Palestinians even at the cost of her own life.

The play does not mention the tunnels from Egypt into Gaza used for transporting rocket launchers, guns, and explosives (Rothstein 2006:1). Nor is there any discussion of the countless and continuing attacks on Israeli civilians intended not only to kill with explosives but also to maim with packed nails and traumatize the memory of Jewish festivals. (The 1996 Purim massacre at Dizengoff Center, including the murder of children dressed up in costumes for the holiday, and the 2002 Passover massacre at the Park Hotel in Netanya where many of the celebrants were Holocaust survivors, and for which Hamas claimed responsibility, are only two examples.) On both sides, the lists are long. And on both sides there are many—Israelis and Arabs, Jews and Muslims—who work for peace every day of their lives.

*My Name is Rachel Corrie* is a very disturbing and moving play. Rachel was so young when she died and yet had been an activist for so long. Rothstein is correct when he points out, “Corrie’s is an unusual voice, engrossing in its imaginative power, hinting at adolescent transformation and radicalization” (2006:1). The play is finally about Rachel Corrie, not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The last scene of the play is a video of Rachel recorded at her Fifth Grade Press Conference on World Hunger:

My dream is to stop hunger by the year 2000. My dream is to give the poor a chance. My dream is to save the forty thousand people who die each day. My dream can and will come true if we all look into the future and see the light that shines there. If we ignore hunger, the light will go out. If we all help and work together, it will grow and burn free with the potential of tomorrow. (Rickman and Viner 2005:52)

Rachel’s light did go out while enacting her political conviction. We need to know this. We need to weep over our collective failure to make the world the place it could be. We need to see *My Name is Rachel Corrie* and react according to our own convictions.

Asking spectators to examine the ways in which documentary functions is very much a part of some forms of documentary theatre. Artists such as the Lebanese Walid Raad and the German director Hans-Werner Kiesenzer create work that subverts ordinary documentary theatre by complicating and interrogating archival truth. The result is a genre that can invite contemplation of the ways in which stories are told—a form of Brechtian distancing that asks spectators to simultaneously understand the theatrical, the real, and the simulated, each as its own form of truth.

The paradox of a theatre of facts that uses representation to enact a relationship to the real should not be lost in the enthusiasm for a politically viable theatre.


3. To reconstruct an event, as in Three Posters: A Performance/Video (2000) by Elias Khoury and Rabih Mroué (in this issue), and even a total environment such as Plimoth Plantation.

4. To intermingle autobiography with history, as in Ron Vawter’s part-documentary Roy Cohn/Jack Smith (1994) in which Vawter sutures the lives of three very different gay men: Roy Cohn, Jack Smith, and himself; in Leeny Sack’s The Survivor and the Translator (1980), built around an interview she did with her maternal grandmother, Rachela Rachman, a Holocaust survivor; and in Emily Mann’s Annulla: An Autobiography (1977), the story of a Holocaust survivor and her interviewer.

5. To critique the operations of both documentary and fiction, as does Walid Raad’s Atlas Group (discussed in this issue) in which the archives are real, simulated, and invented.

6. To elaborate the oral culture of theatre in which gestures, mannerisms, and attitudes are passed and replicated via technology, as does Anna Deavere Smith’s process in which she uses tape recordings of her interviewees to both become possessed by them and to allow a separation between the actor’s self and the other (see Martin 1996:192).

The paradox of a theatre of facts that uses representation to enact a relationship to the real should not be lost in the enthusiasm for a politically viable theatre. Documentary theatre’s blurring of the real and the represented is just as problematic as television’s ambiguous “reenactments,” “docudramas,” and “reality” shows. It is part and parcel of the mediatization of everyday life. Where does one type of performance leave off and another begin? No doubt the phrase “documentary theatre” fails us. It is inadequate. Yet at present it is the best phrase available. In the U.K., documentary theatre is known as “verbatim theatre” because of its

From an email to Carol Martin from Ari Roth, Artistic Director, Theatre J, Washington DC, 21 April 2006

Like me, you’ve noted that this powerful play [My Name Is Rachel Corrie] is significant also by what it leaves out. It leaves out the other people who’ve died; it leaves out some of the reasons for the bulldozing of tunnels and homes in the West Bank and Gaza.

It also leaves out explicit references in Corrie’s emails to the IDF perpetrating “genocide” against the Palestinian people [see Rachelswords.org]. While violence does abound in the Territories, it wouldn’t be accurate to characterize it as genocidal violence, nor should it look, smell, and feel like it in all but name. The play presents the portrait of a defenseless population being systematically starved, terrorized, crushed, and murdered. Who are the perpetrators? Some 60 years after the Shoah, victims and perpetrators have seemingly switched places.

The creation of the dramatic protagonist, Rachel Corrie, is an unconscious, or very deliberate hijacking of the symbol of Anne Frank as icon of indiscriminate violence and victimization. Its emotional effectiveness serves to shove the icon of Anne Frank off the stage and replace it with a newly minted edition of our millennium’s new martyr. Shalom, Anne Frank and Ahalan, Rachel Corrie.


4. What makes restored villages such as Plimoth Plantation in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and museums such as the Tenement Museum in New York different from other kinds of documentary theatre is that the actors interact with the audience. Their dialogue is scripted, planned to be historically accurate, but not texted, so that they can answer questions and have conversations with the audience as long as the frame of reference is their time period and/or event.
pendent for direct quotation. However, verbatim theatre does not necessarily display its quo-
tation marks, its exact sources. “Verbatim” can also be an Unfortunately accurate description 
of documentary theatre as it infers great authority to moments of utterance unmitigated by 
an ex post facto mode of maturing memory. Its duplicitous nature is akin to the double-dealing 
of television docudramas.

Because so much documentary theatre has been made in order to “set the record straight” 
or to bring materials otherwise ignored to the public’s attention, we ought not ignore its 
moral and ethical claims to truth. It is no accident that this kind of theatre has reemerged 
during a period of international crises of war, religion, government, truth, and informa-
tion. Governments “spin” the facts in order to tell stories. Theatre spins them right back in 
order to tell different stories. Poststructuralist thought has correctly insisted that social real-
ity—including reporting on social reality—is constructed. There is no “really real” anywhere 
in the world of representation. Depending on who you are, what your politics are, and so on, 
documentary theatre will seem to be “getting at the truth” or “telling another set of lies.” 

Representation creates multiple truths for its own survival; oral, textual, and performed 
stories invite repetition, revision, and reconfiguration.

Theatre, after all, combines the emotional weight of storytelling with truth-telling and 
a sense of experiencing something happening right in front of our eyes. At the same time, 
theatre is miragelike. It disappears as you get closer to it, and as you submit it to rigorous 
examination. Documentary theatre’s seemingly stable telling and retelling in the context 
of the ephemeral medium of theatre points to how quickly the past can be broken and 
reassembled. Official memory laws announce both the importance and political liability 
of memory in determining historical truth. Even when the laws are apparently objective and 
accurate, legislating historical truth raises suspicion because it dictates opinion and forecloses 
freedom of speech. Nonlegislative memory regulation—such as some forms of documentary 
theatre—is ostensibly designed to offer the opportunity to reexamine and reconsider evidence 
and opinion and exercise freedom of speech. In practice, documentary theatre can be as 
prescriptive as it is provocative in the way it functions as its own domain of memory.

5. France’s 1990 Gayssot law made denying the Holocaust a crime. Many countries—including Germany, 
Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, and Poland—followed suit with similar memory laws.

6. In “Another Kind of Metamorphosis” I wrote about contested memory: “Memory, when given its time and 
space, is often anguishing. So distressing are parts of Poland’s social and religious memory that a team of 
historians at the Institute of National Remembrance has to help determine what national memory might be. 
Right now Radzilow of sixty years ago bleeds in the brains of its citizens, as it should. Taunted, beaten, tor-
mented, stabbed, and burned alive were the Jewish women, children, and men. Yet the monument commemo-
rating the massacre is wrong: the wrong date, the wrong perpetrators. Bishop Stanislaw Stefanek of Lomza 
says the people of the region were innocent. In a compelling performative act, Reverend Henryk Jankowski 
agreeing with Stefanek made a model of the charred barn where 500 Jewish people were burned alive and 
placed it in his church to remind congregants of the false accusations against them. A model of a charred 
barn where 500 were murdered as a reminder of innocence? Why would anyone want to disguise a symbol 
of murder as a symbol of innocence? This must be what the Catholic Church means by the ‘mystery of God’” 

7. In 1992 Anna Deavere Smith performed Fires in the Mirror at the Public Theatre in New York. In the play, 
Smith told the stories of the Crown Heights riots after an accident involving a rebbi whose car struck and 
killed Gavin Cato, a black child, which was followed by a retaliation murder of a young Jewish scholar, 
Yankel Rosenbaum. Fires in the Mirror shifted our understanding of the ways in which social justice can be 
theatrically conceptualized and staged. Predating Smith’s work is that of Emily Mann who also addresses 
social justice. To date, Mann’s documentary plays are: Annulla Allen: The Autobiography of a Survivor (1977; 
Theatre Communications Group, 1985), Still Life (1980; Dramatists Play Service, 1982); Execution of Justice 
(1984; Americas Theatre Magazine, 1985), Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years (1995; Theatre 
Annulla and Still Life were created from interviews. With Execution of Justice and Greensboro (A Requiem), 
Mann expanded her documentary technique by adding letters, recordings, films, videos, court records, historical 
records, interviews, and newspaper accounts to her interviews.
Late-20th-century documentary theatre tended to privilege local and national narratives. Things changed after 9/11. With the U.S. government using its enormous military and covert power in many parts of the world and shrouding its operations at home (the Patriot Act, Homeland Security) an increasing number of documentary theatre works began to address global crises across national borders. How should we look at the murders of Stephen Lawrence and Matthew Shepard, the abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, Lebanese car bombings, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church? How can we regard all this as theatre? Clearly there is no single ideology or style of presentation that best responds to these questions or typifies documentary theatre. As I write, I am sure the form continues to morph.

Finally, what is real and what is true are not necessarily the same. A text can be fictional yet true. A text can be nonfictional yet untrue. Documentary theatre is an imperfect answer that needs our obsessive analytical attention especially since, in ways unlike any other form of theatre, it claims to have bodies of evidence.

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