

***Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. Carol Martin (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)**

Caroline Wake

In her seminal essay, 'Bodies of Evidence,' Carol Martin defines documentary theatre as 'created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, etc' (2006: 9). In other words, documentary theatre both depends on and depicts history, or at least history as it has been recorded in the archive. Yet in depicting history, documentary theatre inevitably alters and augments it and Martin identifies four historical functions for the form: (1) 'to reopen trials'; (2) 'to create additional historical accounts'; (3) 'to reconstruct an event'; and (4) 'to intermingle autobiography with history' (12-13). In addition, she also identifies two representational tasks for the genre, namely 'to critique the operation of both documentary and fiction' and 'to elaborate an oral culture of theatre' (13). In short, documentary theatre interrogates the relationship between reality and representation through a combination of repetition (by retelling, reconstructing, re-enacting) and addition (by including formerly excluded stories, incorporating not only the archive but also the repertoire). For Martin, as for many, it is these paradoxical pairings of the actual and the fictional, the real and the representational, the personal and the political, that makes documentary theatre so complex and compelling.

The figure of Martin looms large in both *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2008) and *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010), not only because she is an author in the former and the editor of the latter, but also because her edited issue of *TDR* (2006) is the foundation upon which both books are built. In the case of *Get Real*, editors Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson state at the outset that Martin's 'collection of articles mapped the conceptual parameters of a burgeoning field of theatre practice ... and we are indebted to the scholarship in her collection' (1-2). In the case of *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, three of the opening essays and one of the playscripts were first

published in *TDR*. It's true that the issue was a turning point for the discourse on documentary theatre: what had been a large and lively conversation in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Weiss 1968, 1971; Cheeseman 1970; Isaac 1971; Elvgren 1974) petered out somewhat in the 1980s (Filewod 1987; Paget 1987). Even when a significant number of performance practitioners started to revisit and revise the form in the 1990s, the scholarship still lagged, despite the efforts of Paget (1990), Favorini (1995) and Dawson (1999). By the time Martin's issue emerged it had been about a decade since anyone had attempted a wider survey or deeper theorisation of the documentary form. [1] Now, five years on, and with the arrival of two new volumes, it is fair to say that we are gaining, even breaking, new ground.

Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present

Like the documentary plays it analyses, *Get Real* presents a multiplicity of voices and a diversity of viewpoints. Indeed, the volume offers several definitions of the term 'documentary' itself. In the opening essay, 'The Promise of Documentary,' Janelle Reinelt argues that documentary is a relational rather than ontological descriptor, stating that: 'documentary is not in the object but in the relationship between the object, its mediators (artists, historians, authors) and its audiences' (7). On this basis, she proposes extending the category to include Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, because although it is a memoir, it shares 'the truth-claims of non-fiction and the reliance on personal *documentation* in addition to personal voice' (20; emphasis added). In view of this expansive gesture, it is not surprising that Reinelt dismisses the term "verbatim" as unnecessarily narrow, saying that it 'needlessly ups the ante on the promise of documentary' (14). For Alison Jeffers, however, it is precisely the term's specificity in 'designat[ing] a ... technique whereby the exact, albeit edited, words of the subjects are inserted into the play' that makes it necessary (92). Nevertheless, Reinelt does concede the term 'tribunal theatre' because 'at least [it] accurately delimits the materials used in the performance it categorises' (14). While Reinelt does not offer a definition, Megson does later in the book, stating that it 'consists of the meticulous re-enactment of edited transcripts of state-sanctioned inquiries that address perceived miscarriages of justice and flaws in the operations and accountability of public institutions' (195).

Several other writers cite Martin's definition of documentary theatre, as I do above, but Martin herself—like Reinelt—seeks to expand the category in order to include the vocal performances of Israeli artist Victoria Hanna (83). Hanna's work, according to Martin, can be considered documentary firstly because she sings sacred texts from the bible, i.e. it derives from the archive, and secondly because she sings digital sounds, thus gesturing towards the dematerialisation of the document, and the simultaneous implosion and explosion of the archive, that is characteristic of the digital age (84-85). By including work such as this, we 'expand the ways in which we think about documentary theatre and ... the ways in which the idea of documentary might help us further theorise oral tradition and performance' (84). Other writers work with less contentious case studies, but this does not prevent them from offering new terms such as 'cross-cultural documentary theatre' (Casey, 127) or 'semi-documentary theatre' (Smith, 115). Strange then that no one seems to have taken up the term "post-documentary" (Corner 2000), as has happened in film studies, or attempted to develop a sort of taxonomy of documentary, as has also happened within that discipline (Nicols 2001: 99-138). [2] Strange also that the editors themselves don't discuss the problems of vocabulary and taxonomy in more detail in their introduction, preferring instead to say 'we have sought to avoid homogenised definitions and approaches ... while there are points of tension as well as consensus, we have encouraged such variety in order to probe the utility and viability of these terms' (2). Fair enough, but the selection and organisation of these essays indicate an acute eye, and I would be interested to read what Forsyth and Megson themselves think of these debates.

If a diversity of opinion is one feature of documentary theatre, then a curiosity about history is another, including documentary theatre's own history, which is elegantly described by Alan Filewod as 'neither a coherent narrative nor a genealogical through-line but an assembly of experiments and local practices that produce mutually-informing connectivities' (63). One such experiment is analysed in the second chapter by Ben Harker, who considers Theatre Union's production *Last Edition* (1940) as a 'significant but critically neglected intervention into the living newspaper genre' (24). In the third chapter, Colin Chambers examines how notions of the 'real' changed, or rather didn't, across Unity Theatre's 40-year existence. The following chapter, by Filewod, connects this

British tradition to the Canadian one, both historically through the travels of Canadian artist George Luscombe and currently through the travels of British company Banner Theatre. In a discourse that tends to fixate on how the text negotiates reality, Filewod's chapter is also important for its analysis of how the actor negotiates reality, particularly when representing work and the working-class (65). Filewod, like Reinelt, also emphasises the role of the spectator, saying that 'a theory of documentary theatre must necessarily be a theory of the audience,' and suggesting that further research be done into 'whether audiences are local communities in formation, legitimising communities summoned by the performance, or metonymic agents' (69).

Having rehearsed the history of documentary theatre, the book then opens out onto history more generally, starting with Jeffers' chapter on *I've got something to show you*, a documentary play made about an asylum seeker who set himself alight when his final appeal to stay in the UK was rejected. Issues of migration and marginalisation also emerge in the next chapter, by Liberty Smith, which examines *Circles in the Dirt*, a documentary play produced within the context of a community project in Palo Alto. Forsyth also deals with issues of community in her analysis of Anna Deavere Smith's plays *Fires in the Mirrors*, made in response to the Crown Heights riots, and *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, made in response to the riots there. Interestingly, this comparative methodology is deployed across several chapters in the book. While Forsyth compares similar treatments of different events, Casey contrasts different treatments of the same event, placing *Ngapartji*, *Ngapartji* alongside *The Career Highlights of the Mamu*, two documentary plays that deal with the nuclear tests conducted in Maralinga, Australia, in the 1950s. Similarly, Carol Ann Upton discusses different responses to and representations of Bloody Sunday, ranging from little known local productions to the most famous and most recent, Tricycle Theatre's *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*. If Casey and Upton focus on a single event, then Nels P. Highberg focuses on a single historical figure, placing Doug Wright's theatrical documentary about Charlotte von Mahlsdorff, *I Am My Own Wife*, alongside Rosa von Praunheim's television documentary, *I Am My Own Woman*. From a single character to a single author, in the next chapter Attilio Favorini analyses Emily Mann's documentary plays, specifically the differential operations of history, memory and trauma within and between them. Megson also

focuses on a single artist, or rather company, in Tricycle Theatre, examining one of their earlier works *Half Life*, which in retrospect now appears somewhat anomalous in terms of its approach. Finally, Yvette Hutchison looks at different verbatim plays, indeed different verbatim forms, that have emerged in post-reconciliation South Africa.

In many instances, the author argues for a particular production to be valued over another. For example, Casey criticises *Ngapartji Ngapartji* for focusing on stories of suffering rather than survival. In doing so, she argues, the play promotes a 'pathology of oppression' and enacts a form of 'epistemic violence' (136). In contrast, she praises *The Career Highlights of the Mamu* for placing traumatic stories within a longer history of endurance and resilience, thus 'expressing Indigenous epistemologies rather than [simply] using the stories' (137). Similarly, Upton argues that Tricycle Theatre's *Bloody Sunday* produces a 'sympathetic portrayal of the victims of injustice rather than an interrogation of judicial responsibility' and instead of 'deconstructing [the judicial] process ... the dramaturgy of the play simply *re-constructs* it' (187-88). In this way, 'the production le[aves] itself no scope to explore its own ideological process' (188). Upton prefers plays that examine the limitations of the judicial process and solicit stories from subjects who were not invited to testify in that initial context. While Casey and Upton criticise their case studies for reproducing the subjects within them as victims, Favorini finds himself with the opposite problem in Mann's *Greensboro*, which presents such a neutral account of the massacre that it 'feels unfinished, leaving no coherent impression other than of invincibly ignorant racism' (163). In other words, by repeating the words of the perpetrators of the crime, the play risks reproducing their problematic politics (163). In fact, politics is the common denominator in all of these assessments, as the vocabulary of "oppression," "violence" and "ideology" would seem to indicate. Specifically, these writers are concerned with the politics of form—an intriguing and important shift for a discourse that has recently tended to focus on ethics at the expense of politics.

In the book's final chapter, Derek Paget identifies two strands of documentary theatre, which he calls the 'objective' and 'subjective' approach. Of course, many plays are a hybrid of these forms but it seems to me, as it does to Paget, that there are important differences between finding and repeating the words of the powerful, which are already

on the record, and soliciting the words of the marginalised. To borrow from social scientists, it is the difference between 'researching up' and 'researching down' (Bartunek and Louis 1996). Of course, another way of distinguishing between these two forms would be to call one documentary theatre and the other verbatim, but this would bring us back to Reinelt's original objection and the absence of a broader taxonomy or framework within the discourse. Perhaps the general point here is that different documentary forms do different kinds of cultural work.

The mention of culture prompts me to think about the cultures represented within the book and to wonder about just how diverse they are. The majority of case studies are from the United Kingdom and the United States, with additional examples from Canada, South Africa, Australia, Lebanon and Israel. Examples and authors from the so-called 'global south' are almost entirely absent. Unfortunately this is true not only of this volume but of the discourse more generally and in view of documentary theatre's concerns with marginalised voices, it is deeply problematic, not only in ethical but also in theoretical terms. As Pal Ahluwalia has argued recently, it is no accident that many of the major French thinkers from the twentieth century were either born in or were otherwise deeply entangled with Algeria (2010). This absence has ramifications not only for the present discourse, but for the future's as well, for what is analysed and recorded now will affect what is remembered in the future. In Diana Taylor's terms, some of this work is entering the archive, or what Megson and Forsyth term the 'emergent canon of published playscripts' (1), while other work will remain in the repertoire (Taylor 2003). This is not to say that it will disappear altogether, simply to say that these plays may not have the chance to influence the conversation as much as some others might.

Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage

The complex issue of documentary theatre's own archive and repertoire is presumably part of the impulse behind Carol Martin's edited book *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*. The book consists of two sections: the first of six theoretical essays and the second of seven playscripts, each with an introductory note. The three opening essays, by Martin, Reinelt and Wendy Hesford, each appeared in the *TDR* issue. Nevertheless,

republishing can provide a prompt for rereading and it is a pleasure to revisit these particular pieces. Martin's essay, the aforementioned 'Bodies of Evidence,' is of course clear and concise, but I wonder whether it might have been better placed in *Get Real*. That way, the essay that appears there, which includes an analysis of Elias Khoury and Rabih Mroué's *Three Posters*, could appear alongside the *Three Posters* script in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*. Reinelt's essay is also approaching classic status within the discourse, dealing as it does with one of Tricycle Theatre's most famous productions *The Colour of Justice*. If ever you need an essay to illustrate Victor Turner's famous figure of eight, Reinelt's essay is it—elegantly explaining how the social drama feeds into the stage drama, feeds into the social drama and so on. Hesford's essay places the documentary play *Guantánamo* alongside an exhibition of documentary photographs from the same place, arguing that while they may at first appear 'as two disparate performance[s] ... [they] are actually complementary aspects of the traumatic real' thus suggesting 'a correspondence between the documentary spectacles of war and theatre' (48).

The next three theoretical essays are fairly brief (six to eight pages as opposed to 10-16 page essays at the beginning of the book and the 16-20 page essays in *Get Real*) but they provide an important shift of focus, by moving the discussion from the Anglo-American context to Poland, Germany and South Africa. Agnieszka Sowińska's article (translated by Benjamin Paloff) offers an excellent history and summary of documentary theatre as it has evolved in Poland. There, documentary practices include 'verbatim' and 'paradocumentary theatre' as well as the 'theatre of fact' and the 'televised theatre of fact,' where documentary plays were broadcast on national television (71-74). Further west, in Germany, Florian Malzacher considers the paradoxical practice of 'scripting realities' in the work of Rimini Protokoll, i.e. how the company works to structure and contain reality and how reality resists such limitations, spilling onto the stage in its own way anyway, such as when the 'everyday experts' forget their lines. Hutchison's article reads as an abbreviated version of her essay in *Get Real*, examining many of the same case studies, though her theoretical emphasis shifts from concepts of "verbatim" to concepts of "truth."

The plays themselves are similarly international coming from the Netherlands, Lebanon, Poland, Argentina and the United States. It is difficult to imagine that any company is going to produce them, recalling Filewod's warning that documentary is better thought of as a performance rather than as a play, since the vast majority are neither published nor remounted and thus disappear (1987: viii-ix). Yet even if they are not going to be produced, scripts can still be studied, though the hardback is far too expensive to be textbook, even for a course devoted solely to documentary theatre. When the paperback does arrive, there will still be the issue of documentation—there are surprisingly few images and no accompanying website, meaning that one might find oneself teaching a rather old-fashioned script analysis or drama course.

While the lack of documentation is not necessarily problematic, the lack of discussion about it is, for what happens when we document a documentary play? How does it change, what is lost, found and gained? What happens when the text survives, but the images do not? This lack of discussion about the documentation is indicative of a wider lack of self-reflexivity within the discourse. In *Get Real*, for example, very few authors articulate their subject position in relation to their case studies and fewer still analyse it. Nevertheless, to be complaining about the lack of meta-theory is itself a kind of meta-complaint, one that shouldn't diminish the accomplishment of both books. On its own, *Get Real* provides a valuable overview of both historical and contemporary documentary practices. Likewise *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* collects some classic essays and places them alongside some newer ones as well as some scripts. Taken together, the two books both broaden and deepen the discourse, offering an impressive range of definitions, case studies and theoretical approaches to documentary theatre.

Caroline Wake teaches in theatre, performance and media studies at the University of New South Wales. Her doctoral thesis examined documentary and verbatim theatre made by, with and about refugees and asylum seekers. She also contributed five chapters (three as sole author, two as co-author) to Paul Brown's edited book Verbatim: Performing Memory and Community (Sydney: Currency Press, 2010).

Endnotes

[1] This is not to say that the conversation about reality-based performance had disappeared altogether; indeed it is arguable that it was just happening elsewhere, for instance within the paradigm of performance ethnography. Hence an artist like Anna Deavere Smith—whose work could be categorised as both ethnography and documentary—tended to be discussed in terms of the former rather than the later (see for example Kondo, 1996: 325-328).

[2] For an interesting attempt to transport Nicols' taxonomy of documentary film into theatre and performance studies, see Gorkem Acaroglu's Honours Thesis 'Reporting, Recording or Re-Sorting: Modes of Documentary Theatre' (2003).

Works Cited

Acaroglu, Gorkem. 'Reporting, Recording or Re-Sorting: Modes of Documentary Theatre' Honours Thesis, University of New South Wales (2003).

Ahluwalia, Pal. *Out of Africa: Post-Structuralism's Colonial Roots* (London: Routledge, 2010).

Bartunek, Jean M. and Meryl Reis Louis. *Insider/Outsider Team Research* (Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1996).

Cheeseman, Peter. 'Introduction: Documentary Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent' in *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (London: Methuen, 1970), vi-xx.

Corner, John. 'Documentary in a Post-Documentary Culture: A Note on Forms and their Functions' *Changing Media-Changing Europe Working Paper No 1*(2000):
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/changing.media/John%20Corner%20paper.htm>

Performance Paradigm 7 (July 2011)

Dawson, Gary Fisher. *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999).

Elvgren, Gillette A. 'Documentary Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent', *Educational Theatre Journal* 26.1 (1974): 86-98.

Favorini, Attilio (ed.). *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater*. (New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1995).

Filewod, Alan. *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

Isaac, Dan. 'Theatre of Fact', *TDR: The Drama Review* 15.3A (1971): 109-135.

Kondo, Dorinne. 'Shades of Twilight: Anna Deavere Smith and Twilight: Los Angeles 1992' in *Connected: Engagements with Media*, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Martin, Carol. 'Bodies of Evidence', *TDR: The Drama Review* 50.3 (2006): 8-15.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

Paget, Derek. "'Verbatim Theatre": Oral History and Documentary Techniques', *New Theatre Quarterly* 3.12 (1987): 317-336.

—. *True Stories: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen, and Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Performance Paradigm 7 (July 2011)

Weiss, Peter. 'Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre', *World Theatre* 17.5-6 (1968): 375-389.

——. 'The Material and the Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', trans. Heinz Bernard. *Theatre Quarterly* 1.1 (1971): 41-46.