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TRUTH CLAIMS IN POLISH DOCUMENTARY THEATRE

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Wojciech Ziemilski, declare that this thesis is composed by me and that all the work herein is my own, unless explicitly attributed to others. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.



Wojciech Ziemilski, 21.04.2025

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Abstract

This thesis analyses instances where facts are effectively shared in documentary theatre. I argue that documentary theatre, understood as a realist approach asserting that 'something happened' (Reinelt 2009), can provide truth claims acknowledged by both creators and audiences. Through a historical and analytical framework focusing on the Polish stage, I explore how theatrical practices engage with veridical representation, challenging prevalent scepticism about truth in performance (Tomlin 2013; Garde and Mumford 2013).

Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of Polish documentary theatre from the 1920s until today. The evolution of those practices reveals the negotiation between factuality and theatricality across different historical and political contexts. Chapters 2 and 3 propose close readings of two study cases by contemporary Polish artists, establishing how theatre can produce 'theatrical factuality' – verifiable truth claims recognised by audiences. In Chapter 2, I argue that Michał Zadara's *Odpowiedzialność* (*Responsibility,* 2022) presents both weak and strong factuality. Focusing on Turkowski&Nowacka's *JaWa* (2023), Chapter 3 exposes how a non-heterotopic approach to documentary performance enables veridical representation. Comparing *JaWa* with Anna Karasińska's *Łatwe rzeczy* (*Easy Things*, 2021), I argue some performances intentionally refuse the heterotopic framework which reimagines hegemonic rules (Foucault 1986), and the corresponding epistemic autonomy. Chapter 4 culminates in an analysis of *Monolog Wewnętrzny* (*Inner Monologue,* 2024), a performance I developed within this PhD. Combining scientific, autobiographical, and sensorial truth claims, the performance constitutes a documentary laboratory of theatrical factuality. This chapter demonstrates how autobiographical performances can explore veridical representation, framing the stage as a site for trust, listening, and solidarity.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that specific Polish documentary theatre practices establish a shared truthful representation of reality, offering a mode of representation that not only reflects lived reality but actively engages audiences in re-evaluating dominant narratives and assumptions about truth in contemporary performance.

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The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art – and, by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less, real to us.

Susan Sontag (1966: 14)

INTRODUCTION

> My believing the trustworthy [person] stems from my admitting that it is possible for [them] to make sure.
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein (1969: §23)

How Can Theatre Be Documentary?

A fifty-year old man is standing on the stage, trying to repeat the Portuguese words he hears through his large headphones. He is struggling. As opposed to the audience gathered at Lisbon's Teatro da Trindade, he does not seem to understand the language. From the fragments he manages to convey, it appears the account is in the first person, and concerns being a Moldovan immigrant. It is plausible this is an autobiographical story. The fifteen-minute performance, which I directed in 2005, is called *Telefone estragado* (roughly translatable to *Broken Telephone*) and, as in the children's game to which I refer in the title,[1] the repetition seems to distort the original meaning. Some phrases are clear and obvious, while others are incomprehensible or confusing. The game is at once funny and cruel. Several times the performer himself laughs, as if to assure the audience he is in on the joke. At each such instance, some of the tension is released and the audience laughs with him. After about ten minutes, a video appears on a TV screen on the side of the stage: it is the recording of the same man being interviewed with the help of a Moldovan interpreter. The interview the audience sees is the source material for the text the performer was trying to repeat. It is an unscripted conversation about actual events from his life. The live event is a way of formalising – providing a theatrical frame to – a first-person autobiographical account. The truthfulness of the claims incorporated in the performance – understood as an alignment with objective reality or effort to convey one's truth (Maftei 2013) – becomes a fundamental aspect of its construction.

[1] The name refers to a children's game also known as 'Telephone', 'Whispers game' or, more problematically, 'Chinese whispers'.

This thesis investigates how Polish documentary theatre creators articulate and convey truth claims in their work, as well as the implications of these claims for audience perception. My inquiry builds on a question I initially explored in *Broken Telephone*: How can accounts be at once theatrical and acknowledged by the audience as factual? Scholars such as Liz Tomlin (2013), Jenn Stephenson (2019), or Mateusz Borowski (2007) argue that theatre – or theatricality – fundamentally blurs the line between fact and fiction. Yet, how should we understand audience reactions that acknowledge a performance's factual basis? I argue that such reactions have more than anecdotal or psychological significance. Rather than dismiss them as false consciousness, I propose that in explicitly documentary works, when audiences and creators agree on an account's truthfulness, a meaningful process is taking place which can provide knowledge about the outside world – knowledge that aligns with empirical facts, personal experiences, or social realities.

This raises further questions: What methods and dramaturgical tools do theatre makers use to establish credibility and truthfulness? For instance, in *Broken Telephone*, it was insufficient to leave the audience uncertain about the truthfulness of the account. I sought to provide corroborating material – what Amelia Jones calls an 'ontological anchor', evidence or external validation that confirms the account's veracity beyond the frame of the artwork (1998: 37). Thus, I used a video recording of the interview to validate the performer's personal account, thereby grounding the performance in an external reality. When, after six years abroad, in 2007 I returned to Poland, I observed an increasing number of theatre artists employing similar strategies, using ontological anchoring as a central tool in their work. Such productions as *Teczki* (*The Files,* 2007) by Teatr Ósmego Dnia*,* Agnieszka Błońska's *Grubasy* (*Fatties,* 2011), or Michał Buszewicz's *Kwestia techniki* (*A Technical* Question, 2015) were all reliant on established conventions of providing corroborating evidence which anchored them ontologically. For instance, *The Files* used archival photographs of the protagonists, as well as of old performances, to validate the personal testimonies on stage, making the performers' narratives more concrete and historically grounded. This trend unfolded within a specific socio-political context, which influenced how these veridical representations (Plantinga 2005) were constructed and shared. Consequently, this thesis also investigates how Poland's socio-political landscape has been shaping the production and reception of truth claims in documentary theatre.

What is documentary? Scholars have used a range of terms to signify theatre that stakes a claim to represent reality in some way. Eminent theatre scholar Carol Martin lists various terms reflecting the genres diverse interpretations in a theatrical context: 'documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre' (2013: 5). While Martin's own term – 'theatre of the real' – proposes to embrace all of the above, I adopt 'documentary theatre', as it highlights a common legacy with documentary cinema, photography, multi-media projects and other forms falling under the umbrella term of 'the documentary' (Kara and Marcus 2015). Indeed, the epistemological questions surrounding the documentary form – and which I address here – extend far beyond theatre. Exploring the broader concept of 'the documentary', Janelle Reinelt argues that there is no singular 'documentary' object, only a documentary relationship: an experience connected to reality, but one that 'is not transparent and is in fact constitutive of the reality it seeks' (2009: 7-9). Beneath the central realist claim that an event took place lies a phenomenological layer shaped by the spectators' prior experiences and cultural contexts. Importantly, while these contexts condition the documentary relationship, they do not preclude the possibility of 'construct[ing] an objective view' (2009: 19).

Reinelt frames the documentary as a communal way of gaining knowledge, grounded in 'indexical traces of a real past' (2009: 21), a phrase she picks up from Philip Rosen (1993: 63). Indexes are not tantamount to mimetic reproductions or descriptions. As Poppy Corbett notices, following Charles Sanders Pierce, indexes (and, by extension, indexical traces) are rather 'semiotic highlighters' which point the attention elsewhere – in the case of documentary, to a 'real past' (2019: 42-43). This explains not only why documentary performances do not need to rely on mimetic models of representation, but also why other forms of documentary media, such as non-fiction animation, which do not have a straightforward relationship to mimeticism, can make legitimate claims about reality (see: Ehrlich 2021). However, Reinelt tempers this optimism, concluding that 'It is never enough. Desire outstrips what is or can be provided' (2009: 23). This ambivalence – acknowledging the potential for knowledge through documentary while simultaneously questioning it – is a recurring theme in scholarship (e.g., Martin 2013, Krakowska 2016, Corbett 2019). It underscores a fundamental challenge that this thesis takes up: the credibility of representation.

Polish theatre critic and scholar Roman Pawłowski addresses this matter, writing:

> The main issue which appears when working with documentary material is the problem of representation. When transposing real stories to the stage, are we really getting closer to the truth about reality? After all, we are processing it, selecting moments which can be interesting from a dramaturgical point of view […] Where is the limit between artistic processing and manipulation or instrumentalization? (2015: 357)

Pawłowski sees a potential resolution in autobiographical theatre. Pointing to my *Mała narracja* (*Small Narration*, 2009) as the first explicitly autobiographical documentary performance in Poland, he asserts that this form enabled a production where theatre did not 'falsify' the individual voice, instead allowing 'the real protagonist to stay a subject, rather than an object of the documentary tale' (2015: 358).[2] But autobiographical performances are part of a broader shift toward works that establish more personal, situated relationships with truth. I sustain that this movement – from unilateral 'reading' to empathetic experiencing – marks a significant change in how knowledge is understood. In that line, anthropologist Dwight Conquergood employs Antonio Gramsci's call for engaged knowledge to argue for an epistemology of 'proximity, not objectivity' (2002: 149). However, I contend that this dichotomy is misleading. Conquergood's 'proximity' emphasises a humble, participatory *being with* – a way of engaging with others that involves listening and empathy, rather than the detached, distant perspective of judging from above. What I began realising with *Broken Telephone*, have pursued since, and now approach analytically, is that the experiential knowledge gained through *being with* in the theatre – knowledge rooted in the audience's direct, embodied engagement with the performance – can be not just compatible with but co-constitutive of what the spectators consider objective knowledge. To stick with the example of *Broken Telephone*, the epistemic ambiguity of gibberish or incorrect language need not hinder understanding. On the contrary, such moments can coexist with a deeper layer of epistemic clarity – in this case, that the performer is a Moldovan immigrant who speaks no Portuguese and is relating actual fragments of his journey. In other words: the knowledge gained when watching a performance can have the same epistemic status as that

[2] I address autobiographical performances in Chapter 4, focusing on my own production *Monolog wewnętrzny* (*Inner Monologue*, 2024).

achieved outside of theatre, demonstrating that theatre can be a valid site for understanding real-world events and experiences. What is more, I assert that theatre's specific conditionings allow for a sharing of truth claims difficult to achieve otherwise. Theatre and performance offer a unique modality of enquiry about the world.

Truth in Documentary Theatre

While it has been a central area of interest from Aristotle to Walter Benjamin, the relation of representations of truth to theatricality gained a new dimension in the 1960s with the surge of contemporary German documentary theatre (Irmer 2006). In 1968, the German playwright Peter Weiss published 'Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater' (the English version's title was 'Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre'), a manifesto asking for a combination of passionate engagement and scientific rigour (1968). It was not just possible, but necessary, claimed Weiss, to explain reality 'in minute detail' (1968: 389), although to do that one needed 'to take sides' (1968: 387). One of the means to achieve that goal was a 'shunning of all invention' (1968: 375). Paving the way for today's understanding of documentary theatre (particularly present in Anglophone countries) as a staged transcription of documented discourse, Weiss considered the creators as effective transmission belts between reality and the audience.

But how could such transmission belts provide any guarantee of reliability? If one acknowledged the transmission was biased – as Weiss explicitly did – would that not imply that it could not offer a trustworthy depiction of the world? As Marvin Carlson notes, the theoretical foundation for such an assessment was laid down in the 1960s and 1970s by the poststructuralist critique of objective truth (2016: 27). Progressively, this line of reasoning brought about a specifically theatrical version of critique, which established itself firmly as a new paradigm and persists until today. The problem of documentary theatre's claims to truth, according to such scholars as Liz Tomlin (2013) or Jenn Stephenson (2019), is structural: theatricality itself – understood as the separation between the onstage world and the real world – suspends the possibility of epistemological judgement. In other words, this argument claimed that it is impossible to achieve any certainty about the non-scenic world when we remain confined, by the condition of theatricality, in the scenic world. In line with this questioning of the documentary potential of the stage, Polish theatre scholar Mateusz Borowski describes how since the early

1970s, both in historiography and theatre 'the focus of interest… […] became not so much the documents themselves, but the way they were produced, sanctioned and influenced, depending on the historical context of each case' (2007: 210). In a text co-authored by Małgorzata Sugiera, Borowski positions himself as part of that broad movement, considering it crucial to divert from questions of representation of external reality to ones concerning strategies of authentication, or 'strategies of exerting a specific impact on the audience', which, in turn, would allow spectators to gain awareness of the ideological operation of theatre they are part of (Borowski and Sugiera, 2007: xv, xxvi). Yet such a stance can also be seen as 'ideological' – particularly when it attempts to substitute all and any accounts of a relation to the world with deterministic analyses of external forces conducting ideological operations. As Slavoj Žižek puts it,

> When we denounce as ideological the very attempt to draw a clear line of demarcation between ideology and actual reality, this inevitably seems to impose the conclusion that the only non-ideological position is to renounce the very notion of extra-ideological reality and accept that all we are dealing with are symbolic fictions, the plurality of discursive universes, never 'reality' – *such a quick, slick 'postmodern' solution, however, is ideology par excellence*. (2000: 17. Italics in original)

Borowski's stance is what Žižek calls 'the comfortable attitude of the distant observer' (2000: 5) who sees but the external circumstances, thus eliding the concrete presence of the subject, their engagement with the world. Meanwhile, that engagement is at the core of the documentary experience. Revealingly, when Borowski declares 'documentary theatre shall not live by documentary alone' (2007: 213), he is paraphrasing the New Testament: 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matthew 14:4). In this scenario, 'documentary' corresponds to mere bread, while the material conditions of its production are in the position of the holy word. The content of the documentary theatrical event – the reality it purports to represent – loses importance, while its placement in the world (both strategic and predetermined) acquires an aura of essential significance, emerging as the paradigmatic focal point.

By the end of the twentieth century, as the extent of globalisation and the power of media grew, so did the tensions around the capacity to represent – and present – the real in

theatre and performance. For instance, Peggy Phelan's highly influential *Unmarked* (1993), a proposal to see performance as an irreproducible experience whose reality is inalienable and immediate, was countered, among others, by Philip Auslander's depictions of an ever-mediated liveness (1999) and of performance as construct of its documentation (2006). The tension between a growing scepticism and an ongoing pursuit of authentic experiences mirrored societal changes. Picking up on Daniel Schulze's analysis of the elusive ideal of authenticity in early twenty-first century theatre (2017), Molly Flynn notes that a 'cultural obsession with self-representation has collided with a growing distrust of mainstream media, leaving artists and audiences in search of an alternative form of interpersonal engagement' (2022: 4). Writing about the Russian anti-establishment, independent documentary theatre projects in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Flynn points to a phenomenon also present in other countries since the beginning of the twenty-first century: a dismantling, by the political authorities and the media, of seemingly obvious facts which leads to a distrust of the idea of truth, as enabling autocratic forms of power. As I claim, this distrust has also led to a proliferation of conspiracy theories and more recently, to their gradual absorption into the mainstream. This shift has significantly shaped how documentary theatre responded.

I contend that in the face of the ever-rising wave of a mainstream revisionist criticism of what were once considered broadly accepted truths – from the Earth being round to the efficacy of vaccination – a number of artists have turned to theatre to establish an area of a commonality based on truth claims. While this attitude could be seen as a regression to a naive, uncritical worldview, I propose to see it, instead, as an overcoming of the impasse of paranoid criticism. I am using this term in the spirit of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's insight into how Paul Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' transforms into what she describes as a 'paranoid epistemology' – a critical stance that evolves toward an obsession with suspicion as a neutral, overarching ideal (or meta-ideal), rather than a positioned value and particular technique (2003: 124-126). Around the same time Kosofsky Sedgwick's article appeared, the problem was set out by Bruno Latour. Known for his social constructivist critical theory of the sciences, Latour shared his worries concerning the consequences of the critical spirit he had helped to establish. Comparing the tools of social critique to weapons of mass destruction, he pointed out that what used to be treated as a sophisticated apparatus of scholarship has now been repurposed as 'critical barbarity' (2004: 240), an 'instant revisionism' (2004: 228), which spares nothing and no one. Latour insisted

scholars realise that times have changed, and acknowledge the new position of the 'enemy' that are anti-intellectual revisionist movements:

> Threats might have changed so much that we might still be directing all our arsenal east or west while the enemy has now moved to a very different place. After all, masses of atomic missiles are transformed into a huge pile of junk once the question becomes how to defend against militants armed with box cutters or dirty bombs. Why would it not be the same with our critical arsenal, with the neutron bombs of deconstruction, with the missiles of discourse analysis? (2004: 230)

With the advent of an entire culture of conspiracy theories – 'mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland' – what until recently appeared as the universal tool of social critique seems to have 'outlived its usefulness' (230). Latour and Kosofsky Sedgwick share the conviction that the culprit, here, is a radicalised suspicion. Although it may claim to be rooted in a set of values or legible signs, suspicion becomes driven by what Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as a 'faith in exposure': the conviction that there is always yet another *illusio* to uncover, and that the uncovering is, on and of itself, a form of healing (2003: 138-143). Kosofsky Sedgwick bewails how the contagious character of paranoia turned the overused 'critical arsenal' from an object of analysis to an obligatory methodology, as if the fact that not everything is what it seems implied that *nothing* can be what it seems ('*you can never be paranoid enough'*), and anyone who refuses to accept this were 'in denial' (2003: 127-128).

Paranoid criticism not only becomes problematic in itself, but also creates fertile ground for cynicism to emerge. As Peter Sloterdijk ironically observes, 'enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers' (1984: 192), reflecting a broader cultural shift where scepticism and doubt become the default, undermining any engagement with truth claims. In the void created by the 'enlightenment' of paranoid criticism, choices are not made on the basis of worldviews (in the sense of *Weltanschauung*) – since all the *views* are being questioned – but from radically pragmatic, and egoistic, positions: 'New values? No thanks! With the passing of defiant hopes, the listlessness of egoism pervades' (Sloterdijk 1984: 193-194). Contemporary Poland is one of a distressingly large number of examples of how this, in turn, allows populist,

demagogic actors to occupy the political and social space. In their *Społeczeństwo populistów* (*Society of Populists*), sociologists Przemysław Sadura and Sławomir Sierakowski provide a simple yet convincing explanation: the ones who distrust everyone choose those who currently 'offer the most' – most money, biggest social transfers – turning a blind eye to broader axiological questions and thus becoming cynical (2023: 95-107).

Latour, however, refuses to accept that a generalised criticism, whether seen as paranoid or justified, has no alternative. Instead, he calls for a 'stubbornly realist attitude', which moves closer to facts instead of away from them (2004: 231), advocating for a form of critique that engages with the world, rather than dismissing it entirely as constructed or contingent, and ultimately standing against what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls 'the taboo that disqualifies the use of all concepts related to "substance" or "reality" as intellectual poor taste' (Gumbrecht 2003: 61).[3] Kosofsky Sedgewick, for her part, proposes the alternative 'reparative reading', which refuses to give ultimate value to the metanarratives claiming to sum up individual experience, focusing on disparate individual events instead (2003: 123-152). As Michael Warner points out, this is 'not so much a method as (principled?) avoidance of method' (2004: 18). While Latour stops short of accepting such a retreat of the critical method, he pleads for a criticism which is full of care and caution. Ultimately, the critic is to ensure a better world is possible: 'The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather' (2004: 246). It is in this formulation, I claim, that documentary theatre's reparative-critical potential lies. Just as the critic can offer an arena for gathering, documentary theatre has the capacity to provide a space where audiences can collectively engage with and critically reflect on the truth claims presented on stage.

Latour's 'arenas in which to gather' are no mere spaces of public entertainment. The gatherings serve a purpose: to create a shared worldview beyond the one determined by others. The dynamics of the gathering changes with the social dynamics: in the 1920s, the 'living newspapers' in Soviet Russia served as a substitute of media for an illiterate society; Brecht's

[3] In this, Latour follows Sloterdijk's diagnosis that the 'well-behaved rationality' the latter associates with traditional critique of ideology 'did not follow the twists and turns of modern consciousness toward a cunning, multi-faceted realism' (1984: 190).

1950s performances revealed ideologies at work in material practices to encourage different choices; while in his 1968 manifesto, Peter Weiss depicted a documentary theatre that fought 'the tendency of the mass media to keep the population in a vacuum of numbness and stupidity', from the position of 'every citizen of the state who wants to make their own inquiries' (1974: 59).[4] The diverse specific instances all illuminate Latour's 'gatherings': indeed, theatre, as an 'arena', a protected space for a temporary community, has the potential to allow for the construction of a common position, a 'situated knowledge', to use the term coined by Donna Haraway (1988). Haraway defines 'situated knowledge' as knowledge that is always produced from a specific social, cultural, and historical position, recognising that our understanding of truth is shaped by context and perspective. Contrary to some radical epistemological conclusions, such as those put forth by post-structuralist thinkers who claim there is no knowledge, only interpretation, Haraway insists positionality does not exclude the possibility of shareable knowledge. While our knowledge is always situated in specific social, cultural, material, and historical contexts, this does not prevent us from engaging with others' perspectives and constructing a common understanding. I argue theatre's arena, and more specifically theatricality, provides a frame for performers and audiences to navigate their positions in relation to truth claims, creating a space for the emergence of what Sandra Harding famously called 'strong objectivity' (1995). As *per* Haraway, situating knowledge accentuates the possibility of sharing, translating between 'knowledges', as long as the claims can be 'called into account'. Accountability (Haraway also refers to it as 'responsibility') of the producer of knowledge is what allows the move beyond a theatricality understood, by Shannon Jackson for instance, as mere 'masquerade' unattached to any claims to an outside reality (2003). So how can theatricality allow truth claims?

Let us take an example from a source hardly considered documentary. Reacting to his father's ghost's request to be remembered, Hamlet says 'Remember thee! / Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe. Remember thee!' (1.5.95-97). As is commonly pointed out, the 'distracted globe' stands for Hamlet's head, and for the world, but also refers to the very venue where the play was first performed – the Globe Theatre (Edwards 2023). The metatheatrical reference points to the 'distracted Globe', the actual distracted spectators who are not part of the fictional universe of the play. That last level of interpretation is

[4] I investigate this historical understanding of documentary theatre in Chapter 1.

an example of well-established theatrical self-referentiality. But as such, it is also a way of making an uncontroversial claim about reality: that there is a venue called The Globe and the speaker declares it 'distracted'. While spectators could argue about whether the distraction claim is true, it makes no sense to debate that the Globe is a clear designate, or that someone asserts it is distracted. Shakespeare's plays are full of instances showing theatricality does not exclude the possibility of real-life references or truth claims. To the contrary, the rift in the everyday which, as Josette Féral asserts, theatricality opens up (2002), allows *both* the possibility of staying within the fictional framework and the inclusion of claims outside of that framework. Similarly, documentary theatre uses its theatrical conventions to assert truth claims about the world, making it possible for audiences to engage with the content as reflecting real events or experiences, despite the constructed nature of the performance.

Although some scholars focus on how theatre may obfuscate or altogether question the difference between the two levels – Hans-Thies Lehmann writes about the '*indecidability* whether one is dealing with reality or fiction' (2006: 101), which Patrick Duggan calls 'mimetic shimmering' (2017: 73) – it would be a mistake to conclude that performances which, indeed, blur or erase the border 'between representation and reality' (Duggan 2017: 74) redefine the entirety of our experience of reality when in the theatre. This is not just a hypothetical worry. For instance, in her review of Jenn Stephenson's *Insecurity: Perils and Products of Theatres of the Real* (2019), Meg Mumford notices that occasionally

> it is suggested that the insecurity that characterizes the case studies is a by-product of all theatres of the real in the age of post-reality, whereas many performances within the field continue not to be informed by post-structuralist doubt about the boundary between actual and fictional. (2021: 322)

Stephenson's hasty generalisation echoes Kosofsky Sedgwick's description of how paranoid criticism slips from 'not everything is what it seems' to a disorienting 'nothing is what it seems'. Meanwhile, Hamlet's 'distracted globe' can refer both to what is real and what is represented without it being *indecidable*: each of these referents is clear and unambiguous. Documentary theatre may use this rift in much the same way, however, bringing to the fore claims concerning the non-fictional realm, while in *Hamlet*, such claims do not extend beyond an occasionally

adopted figure. As in the example of *Broken Telephone*, when making explicit truth claims, documentary theatre reconfigures theatricality and, rather than suspending ontological questions, engages with their openness. Openness, however, need not imply undecidability. Theatricality does not impose a fixed stance on reality but instead creates a space where the spectators can negotiate their own positions – whether by suspending disbelief, reaffirming a belief, or reconsidering it entirely – and *situate their knowledge*. Having established documentary theatre as a site for the negotiation of situated knowledge in relation to truth claims, I turn to situating my own research.

Why Look for Truth in Polish Theatre?

Poland has had a complex and uneasy relation with the concept of 'truth'. Renowned Polish historian Henryk Samsonowicz purports this is not a land where a concern with truth and objectivity has ever been preponderant (2010). In his short text, Samsonowicz provides several examples of how distant Polish thought has been, through the ages, from Western standards of objectivity, such as a doctoral degree obtained in the Enlightenment era for discrediting Copernicus' theory, or a nineteenth century history schoolbook that traced the Polish kings generation by generation back to the times of the biblical deluge (Samsonowicz 2010: 35). Yet, looking elsewhere, we do find different Polish 'legacies of truth'. I assert three historically rooted perspectives frame how truth is perceived in contemporary Poland: a political understanding of truth as an agonistic, ethical ideal, a sociological interest in autobiographical truth, and finally, a philosophical perspective, where truth is associated with impartiality and objectivity. These viewpoints are also concomitant with the three documentary performances I use as my study cases.

The legacy of truth most pervasive in the Polish public sphere today is what historian and acting director of the Museum of Polish History Marcin Napiórkowski calls an ethical framing of truth. It is connected to the Polish obsession with truth in the late twentieth-century opposition to Communism. The anti-Communist opposition demanded *truth* about historical events such as the 1944 Warsaw Uprising or the 1940 Katyń massacre. The lies spread by the Communist propaganda came to be seen as not just a symbol of but the key to the oppression of the Polish people (Napiórkowski 2010: 211). In this reading, truth is a *sine qua non* of freedom –

often considered a core value of Polish identity (Samsonowicz 2010, Davies 1984). Such truth is not a question of logic. Rather, it is an ethical ideal, one 'which is admired, fought for – a truth which is experienced' (Napiórkowski 2010: 212). It stems from a memory discourse focusing on meanings rather than facts. The Warsaw Uprising is thus not seen as an event to be analysed and then potentially judged, but first as a symbol of bravery and self-sacrifice, regardless of, or perhaps rather beyond, the historical findings (2010: 213). Built on an agonistic rebuttal of previously accepted versions of events, this legacy still plays a vital role in the Polish public sphere. One example were the fierce discussions around 'lustracja' (lustration) – the process of examining the past affiliations of public figures with Communist authorities.[5] From the early 1990s to the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Polish lustration occupied a central place in the public debate and revolved around 'truth-telling' (Szczerbiak 2018: 12), whether that truth was interpreted as liberating or as harmful or corrupted (Łoś 1995). The ceaseless calls for truth regarding the 2010 Smoleńsk air disaster are another example of the enduring central position of truth as an identitarian, not just epistemic, quality: it was by seeking truth that Poles were to prove their worth.

During the interwar period (1918-39), an alternative approach to truth emerged – one that sought to integrate personal accounts within a scientific framework. It was developed by two distinct groups of Polish sociologists; one led by Florian Znaniecki and the other by Ludwik Krzywicki. In both cases, autobiography served as a central resource in sociological research primarily focused on the working classes. Znaniecki was a pioneer in qualitative research, who began developing his biographic method in Chicago in collaboration with sociologist William Isaac Thomas, with whom he established an approach to sociology combining unprecedented empirical rigour with empathy (Faris, 1948).[6] Znaniecki eventually resorted to personal diary

[5] Politics and European Studies scholar Aleks Szczerbiak calls lustration a 'truth-revelation procedure'. Its main target in Poland were people who had been secret collaborators of the Communist secret services. As Szczerbiak explains, lustration in Poland evolved from the indulgent, 'forgiving' attitude of the 1990 Tadeusz Mazowiecki government to the progressive passing of laws vetting a significant number of officials and providing limited, controlled access to secret service archives (2018: 11-41). See also: Antonyuk 2023.

[6] Coincidentally, W.I. Thomas was co-author, together with Dorothy Swaine Thomas, of the 'Thomas Theorem': 'if men [*sic*] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (1928: 572). Opposing the 'behaviorist' view which saw no value in analysing subjective impressions, Thomas and

competitions to gather empirical data. The Instytut Gospodarstwa Domowego – 'Institute of the Household' – directed by Krzywicki took this idea to another level, combining a country-wide diary contest (which amassed nearly 800 entries) with quantitative data which formed the scientific foundation of the research and corroborated the picture painted by the autobiographies. Social history scholar Morgane Labbé points out that – while distant from contemporary standards of sociological enquiry where the requirements of objectivity are associated with a detached, impersonal perspective – the approach of the Polish scholars of the 1920s and 30s combined statistical data collection with a valuing of empathy and social engagement as paramount aspects of their work (2024: 152). The understanding of truth was not limited to a social analysis but included the raising of social awareness. As I describe in Chapter 1, the combination of claims to objectivity with a strong social engagement was echoed in the early works of Polish documentary theatre from that period.

Yet another type of a Polish legacy of truth is philosophical. The Warsaw-Lviv philosophical school was initiated at the turn of the twentieth century by philosopher Kazimierz Twardowski and endured until its activities were interrupted by the outbreak of World War Two. The Warsaw-Lviv School played a fundamental role in the definition of Polish scholarship, developed around a discourse of truth and truthfulness. Its most famous member, Alfred Tarski, was the author of a formal definition of truth still taught around the world and considered a cornerstone in formal logic (Feferman Burdman and Feferman, 2004). Limiting the scope of his inquiry to formal languages, Tarski proposed an alternative to the then-prevailing proof theoretic definition of truth, that is, one which would claim truth can be derived internally, based on the rules of the system. Instead, he offered what he called 'partial definitions of truth' which were semantic, namely, they saw truth as a correspondence with facts (Etchemendy 1988: 54-55). Tarski's example of such a partial definition was the sentence: *'snow is white' if and only if snow is white* (Tarski 1969: 64). But beyond the more focused analytical concept, the entire group of intellectuals Tarski was part of based their differing research on the conviction that thinking should aspire to objectivity and impartiality – both classical attributes of truth.

Thomas advocated for a consideration of 'subjective records', as those led to – and could explain or even predict – objective outcomes (1928: 571-572). This argumentation buttresses the approach I offer in this thesis.

The three performance case studies I analyse broadly correspond to these three legacies. Thus, Michał Zadara's *Odpowiedzialność* (*Responsibility*, 2022) presents facts in an agonistic process, contradicting the official political discourse on the illegal border crossings between Poland and Belarus.[7] Echoing the proposals of Polish inter-war sociologists, *JaWa* (2023) by the artistic duo Turkowski&Nowacka uses an intimate, autobiographical discourse as a legitimate resource of truthfulness. Finally, my own *Monolog wewnętrzny* (*Inner Monologue*, 2024), though it could be seen as investigating the relation between autobiographical discourse and the distant 'view from nowhere' of contemporary science, ultimately provides the performance with a frame that aspires to objectivity.[8]

Thesis Structure and Methodology

My initial proposal for this thesis had been to analyse several Polish study cases, juxtaposing them to a European – mainly West-European – context. At the time, I had no notion of a Polish history of documentary theatre. That may come as a surprise, as, before embarking on this academic voyage, for two decades I have been a theatre practitioner focusing on documentary performance, and have worked mainly in Poland. Yet, my set of references was predominantly international, and I had but a vague idea of the history of documentary theatre. When conducting studies for this thesis, I discovered this omission was not just mine, as that history has largely been forgotten. It seemed as though, in Poland, with each iteration of documentary theatre, audiences, critics, scholars, and artists themselves exclaimed 'Eureka!', as if the area that is often defined as dealing primarily with the past had no past itself. Documentary theatre was seen as a recent echo of the Russian (Suchorabski 2019) or British (Majewski 2006) verbatim currents, and hailed as 'innovative' and creating 'a new quality' (Zimnica-Kuzioła 2018: 242). The phenomenon is not uniquely Polish: with a few notable exceptions, it is difficult to conceive of

[7] What differentiates *Responsibility* from most Polish work on memory, both within and outside of the field of arts, is the legalistic framework Zadara proposes, only occasionally present in the Polish ethical truth discourse.

[8] My father, Andrzej Ziemilski, was a sociologist born in Lviv and a student of Stanisław Ossowski, one of the Lviv-Warsaw School's main protagonists. Fittingly, this legacy was passed on to me through countless discussions and arguments rather than naturalised opinions.

documentary theatre practice in terms of lineage or tradition. Derek Paget explains this phenomenon he calls 'the broken tradition of documentary theatre': naturalism or fiction have an easier way of building a legacy than does documentary theatre. The latter, by its fundamental responsiveness to circumstances, remains local – both in geography and time (2009). This does not explain, nevertheless, why my references were nearly all non-Polish. Although it would extend beyond the scope of this study to investigate whether I had been the victim of Western cultural imperialism, unable – or, by assuming the role of the subaltern, unwilling – to find local resources and opting for the easier choice of a proposed 'universal', paradigmatic Centre, this thesis allows me to correct the bias. Still, rather than assert Polish documentary theatre's 'universality', I chose to embrace its specificity, all the while reclaiming its importance for the broad area of theatre studies.

In order to better establish the roots and context of the case studies that follow, Chapter 1 provides a historical account of documentary theatre in Poland. In this overview, I describe how different periods shaped the presentation and reception of truth claims on the stage. I begin by outlining a fundamental paradigm shift in which the documentary vein in Polish theatre took shape. Following theatre scholar Dariusz Kosiński's insight, I argue that, since the early years of the twentieth century, the stage, previously seen as a haven for contemplating moral ideals, transformed into a space for revealing what had remained hidden (2023: 82-83). Three periods of Poland's recent history – the interwar years, 1945-1989, and 1989 to today – broadly correspond to three paradigms of documentary theatre. The first paradigm, associated with Leon Schiller's version of *Zeittheater*, which he called *faktomontaże* (fact-montages), treated reality as a weapon: facts were presented on stage to provoke action. After World War II, in a country controlled by the Communist regime, documentary theatre became a space of negotiating engagement with and autonomy from the political, social, and aesthetic regimes of the times. By the late 1960s, artists used the stage to tackle challenging topics and break through taboos imposed by censorship, while the fine arts explored incorporating reality directly into artworks. After 1989, social issues gradually returned as a *topos* of documentary theatre. Additionally, starting around 2005, important political and social events provoked a surge of interest in relating facts from the stage, while the growing influence of other artistic forms enabled a renegotiation of how theatricality engages with the relating of facts. By analysing the

shifting dynamics of this process, I investigate how the discourse of factuality and truth entered dialogue with evolving approaches to theatricality.

In Chapter 2, which examines Michał Zadara's *Odpowiedzialność* (*Responsibility,* 2022), I propose interpreting the performance as an instance of 'veridical representation' (Plantinga 2005: 111-112) – a truthful representation of facts. This interpretation directly challenges the widely held belief that in theatre no such representation is possible (Stephenson 2019, Garde and Mumford 2013). I further demonstrate how truth claims can be present – and acknowledged – even when performers do not appear to act as themselves and when theatricality incorporates such elements as character creation and fictionalised events. I begin by outlining the political and historical context which shaped *Responsibility*'s aesthetics and the character of its truth claims. I then discuss how Oliver Frljić's *Klątwa* (*The Curse*, 2017) heightened awareness of theatre's capacity for factual representation, laying the groundwork for *Responsibility*. After introducing Zadara's production, I engage with Marie-Laure Ryan's taxonomic classification of factuality across different media (2020: 91). By weighing Zadara's performance against Ryan's framework, I demonstrate how *Responsibility* fulfils all the criteria of factuality. Finally, I argue that *Responsibility* achieves not only what Ryan terms 'weak factuality', but also 'strong factuality' (2022: 83), typically associated with works like biographies or historiographies. My central claim is that 'theatrical factuality' – the representation of facts on stage – endures the critique of realist representation as inherently impossible. Its claims are recognised by audiences as veridical and can be verified.

Responsibility uses several traditional theatrical conventions – characters, period costumes – in its mode of building an autonomous space. As I show in Chapter 3, at the opposite end of the spectrum lies *JaWa* (2024) by the Turkowski&Nowacka artistic duo, where the very rift that theatricality is said to introduce (e.g. Féral 2002) is questioned by rejecting the distinction between the everyday and the performative event. It exemplifies a documentary performance that achieves truthful representation by rebuffing a heterotopic approach, which reconfigures hegemonic norms (Foucault 1986) and the associated epistemic autonomy (Topinka 2010). Heterotopias are valuable for describing spaces of exception, where hegemonic rules are suspended to allow alternative theatrical worlds that reconfigure the prevailing episteme. Yet, as I demonstrate, heterotopicity can be voluntarily dispensed with. In such cases, 'assertions of

veridical representation' (Plantinga 2005: 113) are treated as they would be outside the theatre context. The limits of heterotopic interpretation align with the boundaries of theatre's epistemic autonomy. To explore this, I compare *JaWa* to a documentary performance that functions heterotopically, Anna Karasińska's *Easy Things* (2021). While both share many traits of contemporary Polish engaged theatre, they differ in their relation to, or isolation from, the offstage world. Where *Easy Things'* truth claims are, for the most part, embedded within a heterotopic proposal, *JaWa* proposes an extension of the non-theatrical space, along with its episteme, into the theatre. However, in my close reading of the performances, I identify exceptions in each: moments or scenes that challenge any overly simplified or homogenous interpretation of their heterotopic status.

Chapter 4 shows how explicitly autobiographical performances can explore veridical representation framing the stage as a site for trust, listening, and solidarity. I argue that in explicitly autobiographical performances, theatrical factuality relies on social conventions of trust in truthfulness and an objectifying context which may dispense with the need for proof or reality effects. To support my claim, I analyse *Monolog wewnętrzny* (*Inner Monologue*, 2024), an autobiographical performance I created in the frame of this PhD, as a documentary laboratory exploring different modes of theatrical factuality. *Inner Monologue* contains three types of truth claims: claims stemming from empirical scientific research, an autobiographical narrative, and an investigation into the discrete ontologies of invisible disability and of gut bacteria. Each of these had a different way of setting up accountability. The empirical claims were accompanied by a set of bibliographic references, shown during and accessible after the performance. The autobiographical layer, as an example of 'auto-teatr' (Krakowska 2016), relied on personal accountability and a trust in truthfulness (understood as an effort to convey one's truth, differentiated from essentialist claims to truth [Maftei 2013]). Finally, with invisible disability, the question of trust extends to a sphere that is impossible to corroborate in any direct way. Here, theatre as *theatron* – the place to see – ultimately transforms into a place to listen-in, be-with and 'stand in solidarity' (Conquergood 2002).

What concerns me in this thesis are the circumstances that allow audiences to believe that what they are witnessing is a reliable presentation of facts. This issue is sometimes conflated with the discussion regarding the relation between reality and fiction in theatre – yet they are not

the same. The latter question revolves around the ontological status of theatre: its specificity, the identity of an actor on the stage, as that of the props, of space and time. The main protagonists are here the theatrical illusion and its other – the reality of the stage. While the topic extends to at least the nineteenth century,[9] there have recently been a number of important publications that cover this area. Carol Martin's *Theatre of the Real* (2013) attempted to create a single category from the plethora of ways in which the different aspects of the real play a role in contemporary performance. The umbrella term 'theatre of the real' allows Martin to broaden the spectrum beyond a 'documentary theatre' often narrowly understood as synonymous with verbatim practices and other approaches that subordinate theatre-making to the authority of documentation. *Theatre of the Real* thus combines the documentary topics and goals with an inquiry into how reality is 'recycled' (2013: 5) or, indeed, staged. The importance is given as much to the documenting as to the structures and circumstances (e.g. historical, personal, material) that condition and frame its truth claims.

Marvin Carlson's interest in *Shattering Hamlet's Mirror: Theatre and Reality* (2016) could also be described as a 'theatre of the real', though in this instance the phrase highlights how, throughout history, theatre has been annexing reality. Carlson focuses less on theatre whose approach is documentary, and more on the way theatre appropriates a range of real elements. *Shattering Hamlet's Mirror* traces the history of the transformation of theatre between a space of mimesis and what Bert O'States calls a 'progressing colonization of the real world' (cited in Carlson 2016: 14). The real elements that have become part of the theatrical landscape are categorised as actors' bodies, objects, surroundings, spectators, and – words. Notably, Carlson treats words in a similar way to the other categories of 'real material' (17), focusing on a history of verbatim theatre and eliding any judgement concerning their semiotic specificity and the status of truth claims.

Both Martin and Carlson see theatre as occupying a unique position, separate from 'reality' – a word they often place in quotation marks to highlight its constructed nature. Judging by the quotation marks, theatre could be said to possess more reality than reality itself. In *Real Theatre: Essays in Experience* (2019), Paul Rae seeks to resolve this paradox by rejecting the

[9] See: Pleśniarowicz 2020.

dualism altogether and reclaiming theatre and reality as one. Theatre, Rae argues, is no different from any other sphere of life. It has no special aura which would remove it from the common experience of the world. Drawing on J.L. Austin's insistence that language is part of 'the ordinary', Rae contends that any rash classification of theatre as 'not real' fails to pay heed to the concrete – 'ordinary' – reality it inherently inhabits (2009: 14-15).

On the Polish scene, in 2006, Piotr Duda published *Teatr realności. O iluzji i realności w teatrze współczesnym* (*Theatre of Realness. On Illusion and Realness in Contemporary Theatre*), which looked at how theatre creators of the second half of the twentieth century questioned the idea that, in theatre, achieving truth requires illusion. Instead, the artists Duda describes – among them Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor or Eimuntas Nekrošius – proposed to 'arrive at truth via reality' (2006: 8). The meaning of the Polish word 'realność' contained in the title lies somewhere between 'realness', 'reality' and 'real'. Each of these translations brings about its own caveats: 'theatre of the real' is associated with Martin's approach, while 'theatre of reality' in English has an anthropological connotation where reality is interpreted through the lens of theatre and performance.[10] Duda, in contrast, focused on the stage itself. The Polish scholar analysed works where the reality-realness of the objects and events present on the stage aimed to overcome the mimetic gap. Performance art, and theatre of the real, were part of this movement, but as Duda's chosen examples indicate, the inclusion of realness as an aesthetic strategy had a much broader scope.

Although this line of inquiry deals with an important epistemological determinant of how documentary theatre functions, a significant distinction needs to be made between what theatre *is*, and the status of what it *presents*. Focusing on the latter not only allows the elucidation of the former, but above all, points how, particularly in times of a seemingly all-encompassing scepticism, theatre can be perceived as a space for gaining knowledge about the world. The amalgamation of the truth theatre conveys with the reality of its elements makes it seem like the former is dependent on the latter, namely, that the structure of (some predefined, universal)

[10] This last usage can be traced back to the work of Erving Goffman, whose 1956 *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* analysed social interaction through the metaphor of theatre (2021). The Polish translation of the title makes this connection explicit: *Człowiek w teatrze życia codziennego* (*The Human in the Theatre of Everyday Life*).

theatrical experience determines the possibilities – and impossibilities – of what can be understood as truth. For instance, Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests that in some performances 'a new understanding of aesthetic experience' surges from the collapse of the distinction between reality – the spectators' phenomenal experience of the material environment – and fiction (2008: 95). Fischer-Lichte concludes that by providing a liminal experience that destabilises the way we relate to the world 'these performances transferred the spectator between all fixed rules, norms and orders' (2008: 95). Such interpretations imply an epistemic instability that renders any stage access to truth purely illusory. The a priori understanding, among many scholars, of what theatre can and cannot do led Richard Schechner to complain about 'the absence of performance in performance theory' (2000: 6). As Paul Rae's *Real Theatre* underscores, theatre is first and foremost the *experience* of theatre, which only then provides us with material for generalisations (2019). This is far from a truism when confronted with claims that theatre cannot convey truth because it is fundamentally, structurally embedded in illusion. If, following Maaike Bleeker, we consider theatricality as the outcome of the process of spectatorship (2007: 7), the question extends beyond theatre as an art form, to any spaces of theatricality. In this model, as *per* Bleeker, with the appearance of theatricality 'the distinction between reality and fiction suddenly ceases to be self-evident' (2007: 7-8), implying there is an *essence* to theatricality which *a priori* impedes arriving at truth.

To overcome such an essentialist fallacy, I propose to steer away from ontological debates, and focus on the particular events that exemplify the documentary theatre at the heart of my deliberations. In this, I want to follow Richard Schechner's appeal to propose 'new theories […] generated from performance rather than "applied to" performance'. Schechner asks for such theories to remain 'closely tied to observation and historical and archival research' (2000: 7). While my first chapter connects the current practices to a historical legacy of documentary theatre and performance, the three subsequent chapters are close readings of the performances, searching for explanations of the way they function via inductive reasoning rather than using them as examples to justify a theoretical construct. This leads me to use different conceptual frameworks for each of the case studies. Whereas Chapter 2 uses the semiotic, narratological analysis of factuality with a case which contradicts assumptions regarding theatre's truth-telling potential, Chapter 3 revisits the concept of heterotopia developed by Michel Foucault in the context of documentary performance's claims to truth. Meanwhile, Chapter 4 starts from a

performance-research vantage point to see how disability studies provide useful matrices to look at the possibility of truthfulness and sharing one's truth. What all these have in common is an evaluation of existing theories' power of explanation of particular performance events.

The analysis of case studies initially prompted me to expand the time-scale and undertake archival work, allowing me to contextualize these performances within broader historical, cultural, and socio-political frameworks. This expanded perspective enriched my understanding of how truth claims evolve over time and in response to changing societal conditions. Re-examining the case studies guided my shift from scholarly analysis to practice-research. This dynamic – the back-and-forth from practice to theory – offers a different way of interrogating truth claims, as it allows for a more embodied and experiential engagement with the material, bridging theoretical concepts with real-world applications and highlighting the tensions between theory and lived experience. I focus on what documentary theatre *does* in specific instances before theorising what it *is* (Schechner 2000, Rae 2019). In the final chapter, thinking about what it *does* led me to what documentary theatre *could be doing*, hence the move to creating a performance. The analysis of the performance in Chapter 4, in turn, spurred revisions to certain segments of the performance itself: practice and theory inform each other. This methodological approach ultimately highlighted performance as a positioned way of thinking rather than an illustration of thoughts from elsewhere.

Positioning the Research: Contributions to Theatre Epistemologies and Cultural Memory

This research contributes both to theatre studies and to Polish cultural studies, offering new insights into the intersection of truth, representation, and performance in the context of contemporary Polish documentary theatre. By examining how truth claims are articulated and received in this specific cultural and historical context, this thesis sheds light on broader questions of epistemology and cultural memory. By developing a structured history of documentary theatre in Poland, I hope to limit the damage of the breaks in documentary tradition Derek Paget laments. Moving from a historical overview to close readings of case studies to an analysis of my own work allows me to gain a range of analytical positions which, in turn, illustrate the rich complexity of the documentary experience in a theatrical setting.

On a more pragmatic level, this thesis highlights how performance research offers insights into the practical challenges of documentary theatre, blending theory with artistic practice to produce new knowledge. Understanding truth claims within documentary theatre is necessary to do justice to the fundamental experience of learning something about the world that such theatre provides. This exploration is not just an academic exercise, but a means of engaging critically with how performances shape and challenge our apprehension of reality, offering audiences a space to confront complex, often overlooked truths. At its simplest, 'Now you know!' – the title of this thesis – marks the completion of a knowledge transfer. Someone has just been informed or shown something, and the phrase underlines that the information is now in their possession. Its full semiotic scope is context-dependent – it could, for instance, have ironic, triumphant, or even accusatory undertones ('We've tried to warn you. Now you know!'), while at the same time remaining assertive – it draws attention to the advent of knowledge, and in doing so, claims truth. This research critically engages with such moments as significant sites within the broader spectrum of epistemic negotiation. This thesis argues that, notwithstanding the constructed character of theatrical representation, documentary theatre can provide the space for the epistemic negotiation of truth claims.

Yet, there is also a broader perspective to bear in mind: trust in the possibility of truth is essential to protecting – or regaining – what AI governance and ethics researcher Elizabeth Seger calls 'epistemic security' (2023). As Seger describes, an 'epistemically secure society is one in which the processes by which information is produced, distributed, accessed and appraised to inform beliefs and guide decision making are robust to adverse influence' (2023: 19). Seger's intervention was published in 2023. If anything, the time between its publication and the moment I am writing these words has only reinforced the urgency of her claim, as the world faces an eruption of 'epistemic threats' undermining 'reliable decision-guiding information' (2023: 34). A more precise understanding of how truth claims are formulated, sustained, and received – especially as part of collective meaning-making – can contribute to restoring this fragile sense of epistemic security. Such security, among others, is foundational to the functioning of the public agora that is the field of theatre studies.

CHAPTER 1

A HISTORY OF POLISH DOCUMENTARY THEATRE

> There is probably a need for documentary art in Poland, along with a fairly visible inability to create it.
>
> Andrzej Wirth (1964)

> The documentary theatre form is always already there, but its fate – seemingly – is to be perennially out of sight until it is needed.
>
> Derek Paget (2009: 234)

Polish Theatre Studies scholar Joanna Krakowska points out that if we are to adopt a narrow definition of documentary theatre as 'a documented account of events or situations which happened in reality, adapted to being shown on the stage or in front of the camera', we can trace the form as far back as Stanisław Wyspiański and his *Wesele* (*The Wedding,* 1901), arguably the most famous work in Polish theatre history. Indeed, the play's first act is a representation of a wedding which took place in real life a mere two months before the premiere (Krakowska 2017). The staging caused a scandal in the artistic milieu, as many known personalities recognised themselves in unflattering depictions in the play.

Such a framing of documentary theatre's history is more than a provocation. Its roots lie in historical transformations of the partitioned Polish lands.[11] The beginning of the twentieth century saw dynamic changes in the social and political situation of Poles. Particularly the Russian Partition, where Warsaw lay, saw what some considered the first signs of a Polish 'awakening' (Bieńka 2003: 26-32). Hundreds of workers' strikes (in the first 5 years of the century, Warsaw alone saw over 1400) led to a significant broadening of civil rights: 'Freedom of conscience, speech, meetings and unions, as well as personal inviolability resulted in the disclosure of all Polish underground activity and a significant expansion of its circles' (Bieńka

[11] Poland was partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austro-Hungary three times: in 1772, 1793 and 1795, when it disappeared from the maps until 1918.

2003: 27). Although theatres were excluded from the abolition of preventive censorship, the lifting of the monopoly of state theatres on performances in closed rooms led to an eruption of private venues, which introduced avant-garde plays and new, daring ideas (2003: 29).

All these tectonic changes led to the advent of a new theatrical paradigm: what used to be an idealised space presenting how the world should look was becoming one of disclosing what is otherwise hidden. Dariusz Kosiński describes how angry spectators complained about 'bringing to the stage something that in off-stage life is hidden as belonging to the intimate sphere, protected behind the façade of a moral code' (2023: 82). This breakthrough of the so-called 'Young Poland' ('Młoda Polska') movement of the turn of the twentieth century meant that the stage would become a space of exception, where what is usually unseen becomes visible (Kosiński 2023: 83). From there, only a small step was necessary to arrive at documentary theatre, which can be seen as the most direct attempt at recovery of such aspects of reality that have been hitherto silenced or lost. What Katarzyna Fazan, Michal Kobialka and Bryce Lease (2021: 1) describe as the 'irresolvable tension' between *recovery as imperative* and *the impossibility of recovery* (as it undoes the very historical subject it summons) is at the core of documentary theatre's endeavour.

Krakowska is careful to point out that the beginnings of what we usually refer to as documentary theatre are rooted in a specific aesthetics, one where 'the individuality of the character needed to be sacrificed to play with stereotypes' and, above all, 'every element of the performance needed to work for a specific goal' (2017). Such a disciplined and engaged theatre corresponds to the interwar period when director Leon Schiller defined the path of Polish documentary theatre. The process of revealing what has been hidden or censored continued until 1939, but this was disrupted by Stalinism, which brought a return to the idealised illusion. Theatre as a space for showing what, in the everyday, remains hidden, returned with the political changes of the late 1950s and 'ended up exploding with a redoubled force in the 1990s' (Kosiński 2023: 83).

These three periods – the interwar years, 1958-88 and 1989 to today – broadly correspond to the three paradigms of documentary theatre I will be describing. The first one, associated with Leon Schiller's version of *Zeittheater* he called *faktomontaże* (*fact-montages*) sees reality as a weapon to be used, where facts are presented on the stage to provoke action.

After World War II, particularly since the late 1950s, artists used the stage to analyse complex, often difficult topics and overcome the taboos related to custom or political censorship. In a parallel development, visual artists explored incorporating reality directly in art works. After 1989, social issues progressively returned as a core ingredient of documentary work. Several important political events occurring since 2005 played an important role in the intensification of documentary performance practices, and the increasing influence of choreography and visual art allowed for a renegotiation of how theatricality plays with the recovery of facts. By scrutinising the changing dynamics of this process, I investigate how the discourse of factuality and truth has been entering a dialogue with different ways of understanding and using theatricality.

Facts Will Change the World: 1920-39

Since its inception, Polish documentary theatre has been nearly synonymous with a political, engaged theatre. After 123 years of being under Prussian, Russian and Austro-Hungarian reign, in 1918 Poland regained sovereignty. The first years of Polish independence were marked by a fierce struggle between an ethnonationalist vision of a country defined by Polish ethnicity, and different versions of a multi-ethnic, tolerant and liberal state.

In the 1920s, the already famous Polish director Leon Schiller travelled to Moscow and Berlin to look for inspiration. Schiller was a fiercely political director devoted to the socialist (and later – communist) cause. He believed the neighbouring countries at the forefront of the fight for a better world, both politically and aesthetically. He admired Vsevolod Meyerhold and Soviet constructivism on the one hand, Erwin Piscator's large-scale stagings of social events on the other. He shared their enthusiasm for an art that brings political change, emancipating the proletariat and showing the way to a more just world. Around 1928, Schiller began developing his own version of Zeittheater ('timely theatre') to 'fight the bourgeois theatre' for the 'victory of the working classes' (cited in Krakowska 2017), calling the performances 'faktomontaże' – 'fact-montages'. They combined dynamic action full of cuts and dramatic, 'naturalistic' acting inspired by cinema and realist prose, with songs, film and overhead projections. They had large casts and were overall impressive in scale, with monumental sets reminiscent of Meyerhold. Their role was not just to convey facts, but to impress and provoke change (Kuligowska-Korzeniewska 2015: 13-29).

Schiller was soon followed by other artists, with mixed success. For example, in 1929, when actress Maria Strońska took over as artistic director of Warsaw's Ateneum theatre, for a short while, she steered it away from light-hearted farces and vaudevilles, aiming to focus on a socially (though not politically) engaged theatre that would still be entertaining. In Strońska's own words, it was to be a 'vibrant cultural outpost without a political banner' (quoted in: Michalczyk 2022). Topics related to class struggles and injustice were welcome, but without the political overtones, let alone open accusations, characteristic of Schiller's work. The venue's focus was to be on contemporary German dramaturgy, and Strońska inaugurated her mandate with *Sprawa Jakubowskiego* (dir. Janusz Strachocki), a play by Eleonora Kalkowska, a German-Polish playwright living in Germany. The play, composed of 22 tableaus reminiscent of film scenes, was a true-life story opposing a Polish man wrongly accused of murder and a cruel (German) justice system. The Warsaw staging showed a specific characteristic of documentary theatre: as the plays did not concern an abstract, fictional or fictionalised setting, but a concrete, contemporary place in Germany, the reception was deeply influenced by the audiences' relation to that specific frame of reference. In the Polish context, the production was unintentionally tapping into Polish nationalist feelings. The writer and critic Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński wrote after the premiere:

> as a work directly giving voice to life, Kalkowska's play is closely related to the moment and the place. You have to listen to it carefully, you still have to remember that this is a play written in German and staged in Berlin. (Boy-Żeleński cited in Michalczyk 2021: 217)

Boy-Żeleński's perspective was hermeneutic, asking spectators to overcome their own context in a search for the original, correct one. Meanwhile, as Eitzen Dirk wrote about documentary film, 'documentary must be seen, in the last analysis, not as a kind of text but as a kind of "reading"' (1995: 92). Documentary work is local not just in that it is embedded in a specific time and place, but in that how the spectators interpret its truth claims is filtered through their own positionality. What Boy-Żeleński was asking of the public was that they become a different public.

Strońska managed to maintain the programme line for merely half of the first season. The eight-hundred-seat venue, open seven nights a week, was not able to draw enough audiences. The ideal of a theatre for the proletariat, which was promoted by the owners –

the Railwaymen's Trade Union and Workers' University Society – as well as by the city authorities, quickly ceded to the reality of attracting mainly middle-class audiences. Compounding matters was the 1929 Great Crisis which also affected Poland, hitting soon after the beginning of the ambitious endeavour. As Barbara Michalczyk notes, the new repertory – consisting of comedies and other lighter dramatic forms – attempted to 'avoid confronting spectators with the world which surrounded them' (2022). Strońska resigned half-way into her first term. On a larger scale, the first wave of documentary theatre lasted just a few years. After 1933, even Leon Schiller moved away from his fact-montages (although after World War II he dreamed of turning them into an essential part of the theatrical landscape). Eugeniusz Świerczewski's review of Schiller's penultimate fact-montage of Soviet playwright Sergei Tretyakov's documentary play *Rychi Kitai* (*Roar China,* translated to Polish as *Krzyczcie Chiny!* Lwów, 1932) suggested that the form had run dry:

> It can and should be categorically stated that reportages are beginning to enter the twilight period, that the photographic staging of facts 'from the life of the collective' is clearly beginning to wither, that especially reportages with a clearly political bias will soon be forgotten, having temporarily fulfilled their agitation and propaganda role similar to a newspaper editorial or a speech at a political rally. (Świerczewski cited in Kuligowska-Korzeniewska 2015: 135)

As a political event, the fact-montages still had a powerful effect. For instance, several times police officers arrested spectators at the door as part of an anti-Communist campaign, which further spread the rumour of scandal and Soviet indoctrination. Schiller himself confirmed the rumour in 1947, proudly declaring: 'it is not surprising the perpetrators of the national pacification of 1930 [*sic*] decided to eliminate all and any attempts to revolutionise theatre and art in general, correctly seeing in them a succumbing to Soviet influences' (cited in Kuligowska Korzeniewska 2015: 21). Besides the accusations of being a political threat, since his first fact-montages, Schiller was blamed for manipulating facts. After the 1933 Warsaw premiere of *Roar China,* writer and critic Antoni Słonimski, who had just returned from a trip to Russia where he saw what Communism meant in practice, declared that 'the crude hoax called the "chain of facts" has a definite demagogic goal' (cited in Gierat-Bieroń 2004: 106-107). Słonimski, who

admired Schiller's directing skills, considered it appalling that he would use a documentary form to promote a vile and violent system.

Although his fact-montage period was brief, Leon Schiller's influence on Polish documentary theatre remains pivotal, re-emerging at key moments rather than unfolding through a continuous tradition. Zeittheater is credited with the appearance on Polish stages of an openly engaged, usually political theatre. For instance, Magdalena Grenda (2021) shows how independent theatre groups such as the Poznań-based Scena Robocza directly apply Zeittheater's ideas, motivations and approaches. Scholars often consider it self-evident that Schiller is the one universal reference, and his spirit is present in every documentary performance ever made in Poland. A case in question is *Faktomontaże Leona Schillera* (*Leon Schiller's Fact-montages,* Kuligowska-Korzeniewska 2015) focusing on historical accounts of the first performances of documentary theatre, which includes an entire section about contemporary political and documentary theatre in Poland. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, the editor of the book, considered the jump from Schiller to contemporary Poland a self-explanatory choice. One reason the entire period between Schiller's pre-war endeavours and today is omitted is that, as theatre scholar Grzegorz Niziołek argues (2021), Polish theatre has hardly ever been political. If we understand the political as 'linked with the category of the modern nation state and vital antagonisms within it' (2021: 281), which, on their part, redefine the status and relations of the diverse groups it contains, then Polish theatre after World War II moved from the political to the national, dealing with the society *en masse*, as a nation, a unified group where structural conflicts and tensions are substituted either by ethical concerns or by an outside Other – be it Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, or the imposed totalitarian system. Seen from that perspective, Polish mainstream theatre is only now delving into the political and acknowledging the diverse, often antagonistic social forces at play.

A Theatre that Reveals What is Hidden: 1945-89

The entire period after the war was marked by the changing ties to Soviet Russia. Compared to other East and Central European countries, Poland had a great deal of autonomy, and the harm done by Stalinism was, in the words of historian of Marxism Leszek Kołakowski, 'less irrevocable' (1978: 174). Still, in the first few years it became clear that there would be no return

to the freedom of before the war. It took until about 1949 for Stalinism to become the reigning regime in Poland (Kołakowski 1978: 172). By then, theatre artists had to choose their paths under great pressure. On the one hand, it did not take long for memories of World War II to be transferred to the stage. As soon as September 1945, four months after the end of the war, Helena Buczyńska directed her own play *Obcym wstęp wzbroniony* (*No Entry for Strangers*) at the Teatr Mały, the first city theatre created among the rubble of downtown Warsaw. Buczyńska herself called the production a 'reportaż' – a journalistic type of reportage, as it showed Warsaw life under occupation (Wójcicki 1945). The actors were said to be often 'playing themselves' and reviewers underscored the realism of the stage portrayals (Gniazdowski 1945, Wójcicki 1945).[12] However, the play was, by today's terms, a completely fictionalised account with characters who bore a similarity to real-life people, including the actors themselves. Formally, the play stood a long way from Schiller's pre-war endeavours. In a similar case, in 1948 Jan Kreczmar directed *Dom pod Oświęcimiem* (*A House on the Outskirts of Auschwitz*) written by Tadeusz Hołuj who was himself an Auschwitz prisoner (Obarska 2019). In all such instances, attempts took the form of fiction, only inspired by real events; it took another ten years for theatre to go back to a documentary approach, which had been associated with direct political engagement.

The documentary form was seen as a bigger threat than the topics themselves. Even Leon Schiller, celebrated by the Communists and enthusiastic about the advent of a socialist state, did not get an opportunity to stage 'fact-montages' (Kuligowska-Korzeniewska 2015: 26-28). There is no record of any explicitly documentary performances between 1945 and 1958. Openly political theatre was too dangerous, and even rejected as propaganda (Fik 2000: 195). What came closest was the Stalinist doctrine of socialist realism, which encouraged a direct rooting of art in life. Some recent scholarship has aimed to recover its forgotten legacy, pointing to such achievements as a critique of the Romanticist theatrical tradition and individualistic ideals or the introduction of the Stanislavski acting method (Sosnowska 2017, Krakowska 2016: 159-243). Yet, in terms of documentary proposals, social realism never explored them in-depth, focusing on superficial, often merely visual reproductions of the outside world. A good example

[12] *Zakazane piosenki* (*Forbidden Songs*), a film directed two years later by Leonard Buczkowski, had a similar concept, mixing a fictional account with documentary footage from a destroyed Warsaw, including actual street singers still performing war-time songs.

of that attitude was Teatr Nowy, a state venue set up in 1949 as a collective theatre by actor-director Kazimierz Dejmek in Łódź, the most working-class city in Poland. That same year, the theatre collectively staged Czech author's Vaška Káňa's *Brygada szlifierza Karhana* (*Grinder Karhan's Work Brigade*), a play about raising enthusiasm for new modes of production. Although the play was a naïve form of propaganda (one commentator wrote that 'dialogue is lively and realistic, but the psychology is severely trimmed to serve one purpose' [Viney 1953: 493]), the collective implemented the new realist ideas by visiting real factories to observe, and then replicate, the real-life behaviour of line workers. The Teatr Nowy's second production had a similar understanding of how reality could be brought to the stage. An enthusiastic reviewer remarked:

> The performers empathised well with both the ideological content of the play and the living atmosphere of the recreated environment. The reality was reconstructed on the basis of conscientious studies, which can be verified on the photographic material, original photos from the life of Donbas, exhibited in the theatre hall. (Woyna-Gwiaździński 1950)

What remained of the documentary thirst for reality was either mimetic reproductions of real settings and behaviours, or the introduction of real objects as props and setting (including a real locomotive in *Trzeba było iskry* [*It Needed a Spark*], dir. Stanisław Milski, Olsztyn, 1951), as well as asking 'real workers' to review the 'veracity' of the performances (Fik 2000).

If we look at the history of documentary theatre as a history of *contemporary* documentary theatre, the search for sources needs to acknowledge a broader landscape, outside of public theatres. Indeed, two of the most interesting artists exploring new ways of transferring the surrounding reality directly to the stage at that time were a writer – Miron Białoszewski, and a painter – Tadeusz Kantor. Białoszewski first started doing theatre during the war, but his most radical work developed at the theatre he set up in 1955 with his friends in a Warsaw flat on Tarczyńska street (aptly called *Teatr na Tarczyńskiej – The Theatre on Tarczyńska street*). He was

inspired by the avant-garde artists from the Formist movement (1917-22)[13] who had brought an anarchist energy to art, refusing mimesis and looking for formal ways of exploring the voice. Białoszewski picked up where they left off, and explored in his performances what was, in the words of Anna R. Burzyńska, 'the universally despised, quotidian audio sphere: murmurs, noises, creaks, echoes; unrefined, ugly and comic sounds' (2021: 229-230). This was, on one hand, sound as a concrete form, devoid of a search for melody, or any other sort of goal external to the thing itself. On the other, it was one of the first times that theatricality, which Josette Féral describes as establishing 'a relationship that differs from the quotidian' (2002: 105), was not used as synonymous with mimetic substitute, but rather, as a tool to engage what was already there.

The other artist exploring the relationship of the outside world to the theatrical was Tadeusz Kantor. Already in his 1944 staging of Stanisław Wyspiański's *Powrót Odysa* (*The Return of Odysseus,* Krakow), he was fascinated by the juxtaposition of theatrical props and settings with real-life objects and contexts. The performance took place in a private apartment, where everyday objects, ready-mades, props, masks, were all completely entangled. Although much has been written and said about that *Return of Odysseus,* also by Kantor himself, from the documentation of the performance available today it is difficult to discern the setting from the stage. According to one critic, the play was 'staged in a room partly blown apart by the war' (Jan Kłossowicz cited in Cioffi 1999: 43), while another asserts that 'Kantor, throwing plaster at the paper attached to the walls, created the impression of an interior destroyed by the war' (Flader-Rzeszowska, n.d.). If, as Cioffi points out, Kantor was already then interested in 'how outside reality (in this case, the war) "intrudes" on the world created by the artist' (1999: 44), the two contradictory descriptions of his staging are a token of his achievement. This initial gesture of mixing up the quotidian with the theatrical evolved through the decades into Kantor's famous Theatre of Death. As Burzyńska put it, 'Kantor […] annexed realness for his art' (2007: 51). The raw object, however, never retained any sort of integrity in his theatre work, while remaining much more present in his sculptures, paintings and happenings. Burzyńska explains this attitude to matter describing the entire avant-garde movement:

[13] Formism (in Polish: formizm), also known as the Formist movement and previously referred to as Polish Expressionism, advocated a break from realism or naturalism and emphasised the primacy of form over content (see Geron 2012).

> As a result of the crisis of representation, the very matter of a work of art and its specific attributes – colour, texture, weight, sound and the body of the performer – replaced mimetic representation and the transmission of meanings that had been central to Aristotelian poetics and aesthetics. (2021: 226)

This was easier to do in visual arts and short concerts or performances. Replacing mimetic representation in public theatres, however, was a Sisyphean work. This was by no means a linear evolution. By 1945, the war was over, and Kantor's restaging of *The Return of Odysseus* was a failure. Theatre historian Katarzyna Flader-Rzeszowska interprets this as due to 'a different set of conditions and circumstances' (Flader-Rzeszowska, n.d.). The country was recovering from the trauma of war – as another theatre historian put it, 'after moments of tragedy and despair, the audience desired a consolatory relation with its own cultural tradition' (Marczak-Oborski 1985: 198). Looking at the repertory of theatres immediately following the war, there was a marked return of classics, along with a progressive appearance of socialist realism (Mościcki 2016, Marczak-Oborski 1968). The radical shift in perspective described by Burzyńska was put in standby.

But the political situation kept evolving. After the death of Stalin in 1953, Kruschchev came to power and the USSR progressively relaxed the control exerted over its satellite countries. 1956 brought a 'thaw' in Polish politics, with a more democratic, even anti-Stalinist outlook. Some theatres started to stage more daring, experimental playwrights (like Sartre, Beckett or the theatre of the absurd; Krakowska 2016: 552) and generally to risk staging plays using political allusions to and negotiations with the new reality. Others opted for a more formal theatre, seemingly or actually leaving political engagement on the side. A theatre conveying the events of the political and social world began reappearing around 1958. That year, Kazimierz Dejmek and Aleksander Ford created *Rzecz o barykadzie* (*About the Barricade*), as a commemoration of 40 years of the Polish Communist Party. The script contained fragments of authentic prison letters, as well as many poetic texts and archival film footage. This multilayered stage composition owed its aesthetic to the 1920s fact-based theatre (Piscator, Meyerhold; Kraczek 1976: 20). The reviewer in *Teatr* magazine (Wróblewski 1959: 4) underlined that the 'authenticity' of bringing back documents from the past caused great emotions in the audience. If we are to believe the report – keeping in mind that all media were state-owned and often

replaced truth with propaganda – the 'authenticity' in question was shaped by an ideological framing that aligned with the perspectives of the spectators, and would likely not seem 'authentic' today. Not only did the play contain many lyrical – 'inauthentic' – passages, but the tribunal, though based on actual documents from the past, was fictional: it functioned as a form of tribunal theatre where the proletariat was being accused by a zealous prosecutor. Stage reproductions of factual court cases only started appearing several years later. In Poland, the tribunal theatre format was thus first a fictionalised way of presenting authentic documents interwoven with fictional components – Laureen Nussbaum calls this 'semidocumentary theater' (1981: 241) – and only afterwards became the stage reconstruction of a real-life court case. Clearly at its source even the tribunal theatre did not propose 'nothing but the truth', allowing the spectators to be the judges of where the productions' truth claims lay.

This interplay between fiction and documentary was not unique to Poland. As Molly Flynn describes, in Soviet Russia, mock trials emerged shortly after the 1917 Revolution, preceding the infamous show trials by several years. These early fictional tribunals provided a kind of blueprint for later, scripted real-life trials, which in turn fed back into theatrical representations (2022: 84–85). In Poland, a different dynamic was at play: Stalinism appeared after World War II, as did show trials, which influenced perceptions of what a political trial looked like. This informed the shape of documentary performances such as *About the Barricade*. Both cases, however, suggest that from the outset, the boundary between documentary and fiction remained porous, with tribunal theatre functioning not as a transparent, homogenous vehicle of truth but as a site where truth claims were negotiated and shaped.[14]

The theme of *About the Barricade* had one crucial quality: it was uncontroversial to the intended audience. In this case, the first audience were the Communist authorities who decided on any show's, and artist's, future. Soon after, another uncontroversial topic appeared on the Polish stages. The disdain and fury over Nazi war crimes were a topic which united Poles long

[14] This is a recurring question in documentary theatre studies. For instance, Amanda Stuart Fisher argues that the tribunal theatre's supposed 'objective rendering' of actual court cases was also rejected by the German documentary theatre movement of the 1960's often credited with the introduction of precisely such verbatim strategies. Instead, Fisher points out to the 'authorial role of the playwright' which characterises the documentary works of that time (2020: 55-58). The German documentary theatre of that era had a significant influence on Polish artists and is described below.

after the war. A number of plays about the subject had frequently been shown on Polish stages (besides the ones mentioned above, other notable examples include Tadeusz Hołuj's *Dom pod Oświęcimiem* [*The House Near Oświęcim*], 1948 and Leon Kruczkowski's *Niemcy* [*The Germans*], 1949) and it broadened to documentary forms in 1958, when Polish audiences saw the Novy Sad Serbian National Theatre's *Himmelkomando* performed in several Polish cities. It was a documentary play about Auschwitz. Its Polish premiere took place a year after on the site of Auschwitz itself. Few voices questioned the choice of the setting to present a dramatized version of an actual conversation between two prisoners about the camp's extermination process (Kraczek 1976: 29). From then on, for about a decade the Nazi atrocities became the most common topic of Polish documentary theatre. Sometimes Poles would stage new German documentary plays, but just as often they proposed their own stage writing, usually made by student theatres.

In a country whose public theatre institutions feared any movement which would provoke the authorities, student theatres became a beacon of hope. Starting around 1953-54, Bim-Bom, STS, Pstrąg, and a dozen other groups popped up, proposing light-hearted sketches. Yet, as the political atmosphere evolved and the grip of the Communist regime softened, this form of entertainment was showing an increasingly political edge. Very quickly students realised they could use songs and a cabaret style to address social issues around them. Most student theatres began by mocking their academic environment, but soon many were making sketches about life under Communism. In a political atmosphere of (at times mitigated) hope, they quickly gained a following. As Cathleen M. Cioffi explains, such an evolution was possible as Communism in Poland was not a fixed, monolithic system of terror, and censors often preferred to pretend there was no double-entendre in the verified texts (1999: 12-13).[15] Audiences appreciated that student theatres had a capacity for instantly reacting to the reality around them – portraying the social phenomena as they were changing. Thinly veiled allusions presented a reflection of current events, which public theatre had neither the production speed or political

[15] The case was different just a few years before, in Stalinist times, when, in the words of theatre historian Tomasz Mościcki, censors 'were particularly wary of the first post-war amateur and variety theatres – as memory was still fresh of how, before the war, such entertainment had effectively taken jabs at the authorities' (2016: 248).

position to match. Public theatres began to take notice by the end of the 1950s, inviting some of the authors and productions considered politically safe to move to a professional context.

At first it may seem the documentary theatre of the early 1960s went back to the ideas of Erwin Piscator and Leon Schiller. After such a long period of being silenced, many artists wanted to disturb or to provoke a strong affective response. The aim was to create a spectator who needed to react. But times were different, and the regime was still strong. Artists did not risk openly political topics and, instead, focused on the politically safe stagings of documents and ongoing trials regarding the Nazi crimes. What set them further apart from Piscator and Schiller's theatre was a shift away from a broader, more abstract political discourse, which in the late 1940s had still been frequently – and sometimes proudly – described as propaganda (Koenig 1966: 62).[16] Facts were now rather seen as a critical tool for thinking about the world. Where Schiller had used the discourse of truth to fight for progress, artists now began employing it to ask questions to re-evaluate the past or to scrutinise the present.

The change arrived from Germany, where philosophers like Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer encouraged espousing critical thought, and documentary playwrights and directors started treating 'theatre as a forensic activity' (Zilliacus 1972: 224). Laureen Nussbaum sums up this zeitgeist paraphrasing the 1968 assertion of Peter Weiss, one of the main figures of the German 1960s documentary theatre movement:

> Documentary theater […] takes a stand against a dramatic art that clings to the concept of a hopeless and absurd world. Documentary theater opts for an alternative position, claiming that reality, even though it is made to appear impenetrable, can be explained in all its complexity. (Nussbaum 1981: 239)[17]

The optimistic vision of the stage as a neutral, though engaged, space of deliberation regarding reality, was reminiscent of the theory of a public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) where social differences

[16] In Polish there are two words for propaganda: *propaganda* and *agitacja.* Both were used in relation to Zeittheater. Between 1944 and 1947, Poland even had a Ministry of Information and Propaganda.

[17] In 2004, playwright Steve Waters echoed this in an essay about British non fiction theatre, stating it 'proves the stage is one of the few public places where complex stories may be told' (2004).

are bracketed to search for truth, which Jürgen Habermas was developing about the same time.[18] Bryce Lease points out (2016: 20) that Nancy Fraser designated (2011) the *Öffentlichkeit* as a *theatre*. On Polish ground, Joanna Krakowska also evokes Habermas when she describes public theatre as 'a unique forum where an exchange of opinions, knowledge and emotions take place' (2016: 15). Indeed, the documentary theatre of the 1960s seems to have stemmed from Habermasian grounds. However, as Lease and Fraser notice, such an idea of a public sphere disregards the fundamental positionality of whomever defines that sphere. This serious limitation goes beyond the class divisions within one given society. Staying with the theatrical analogy, the local character of theatre culture, its limited audience and cultural context point to the idea that there can be no single public sphere, but many – what Habermas himself, in a late, self-critical essay that acknowledges the shortcomings of his public sphere theory, describes as 'the relative structural autonomy and internal history of cultural systems of interpretation' (2011: 443). In this case, particularly in relation to the documentary plays about World War II atrocities, the truth arrived at by the German theatre forensics had a radically different meaning in Poland.

In the German (theatre) public sphere, from the end of the 1950s on, the reappraisal of responsibility for the crimes of the last war by a new generation of artists resembled a never-ending examination of conscience (Nussbaum 1981: 238-239). Yet, what in Germany was a confrontation of publics with their own past, in Poland became a view on the distant Other, Nazi Germany. At times this meant creating a simple *Us vs. Them* dichotomy: an early example was the pre-war case of *Sprawa Jakubowskiego* I refer to earlier. Yet, at their best Polish artists – possibly because of a uniquely strong humanist, rationalist tradition (Kołakowski 1978: 172) – used this opportunity to ask questions about moral responsibility and the relation of the individual to the collective. For some contemporaries, the questions were very modest and less ambitious than those of the predecessors. Jerzy Koenig wrote in 1966:

> We have regressed from what the revolutionary theatre of the twenties was. [...] Probably there was no other choice: our theatre has less to say about the society surrounding the

[18] Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*) appeared in 1962.

> contemporary human, preferring partial truth, but one verified by an authentic document, to a risky interpretation of the world. (1966: 63)

The partiality of truth was also expressed in an increasing focus on individual, lived experience. This extended far beyond the traumatic experiences of survivors of war atrocities, to even include documentary portrayals of the perpetrators. Thus, a worried reviewer wrote in 1960 that a documentary performance about the Nazi Auschwitz commander Rudolf Höss focused too much on his 'human side', while neglecting to acknowledge that 'fascism was the only Ariadna's thread in the labyrinth of the SS men and their ilk' (Jaszcz 1960) – in other words, that the behaviour of the Nazi can, and should, be understood solely as the product of Nazi (and fascist) ideology. The anonymous reviewer's complaint signals that the reality transferred to the stage was becoming less political and more individual, often psychological.

The paradoxical combination of an admittedly partial grasp on reality with an optimistic view regarding the possibility of a neutral description of facts brought about serious challenges. This was particularly poignant when dealing with a recent past. By the early 1960s, the interplay between documentary theatre and reality gained a new dimension, as the real-life protagonist of a play protested against his own portrayal. In 1963, the German playwright Heinar Kipphardt published the play *In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer* (*In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*) based on the court case against the 'father of the atomic bomb', accused by American authorities of being a Communist agent. The case was the epitome of the McCarthyist witch hunt. The play was staged at the Munich Kammerspiel (dir. Gerhard Klingenberg, 1964), then at Piscator's Freie Volksbühne (Berlin, dir. Erwin Piscator, 1964). But Oppenheimer himself protested, considering the play full of half-truths, or, as he called them, 'improvisations which were contrary to history and to the nature of the people involved' (*Time* 1964). The French director Jean Vilar reacted by writing his own tribunal play he wanted to source solely from the court files (premiering in December 1964). Kipphardt accused Vilar of plagiarism. Vilar first claimed his only source had been the court protocols, but ended up admitting he also used Kipphardt's play. The unstable, speculative nature of documentary theatre was here exposed in various ways. What appeared most blatantly was that even a model which seemed strictly copy-paste, as was the case with a reproduction of a court case (which later evolved into a fully-fledged form, tribunal theatre; Reinelt 2009: 12-14), was not immune to manipulation. That

manipulation was inscribed in every staging did not, however, take away the presumption, on the part of audiences, that an attempt of relating a true state of things was taking place. The seemingly ultimate reference to the truth value of legal files was also debatable. At the same time, a consensus about the state of affairs was possible, and the delimitation of what was made up versus what was reproduced directly from original sources pointed to the success of the deliberational theory of truth Habermas proposed.

Meanwhile, as early as January 1965, Poland got its own version of an Oppenheimer tribunal play: Tadeusz Malak and Ryszard Smożewski adapted Czech journalist Jaroslav Putik's book *Sumienie* (*Conscience*), an account of the Oppenheimer trial published in 1960, to stage it at the Teatrzyk Dziennikarza i Aktora in Kielce (*Czy można wyskoczyć z pędzącego pociągu*, translatable as *Is It Possible to Jump Out of a Speeding Train,* dir. Ryszard Smożewski and Jerzy Wasiuczyński, 1965). The differences between the German and French plays and the Polish one were telling: the Polish version was based on a literary adaptation; it focused on specific characters and simplified the case 'for the sake of theatre'. A mistrust in the capacity of the audiences to take in a complex message translated into simplistic stage situations. Marian Kraczek (1976: 78-79) recalled that the real-life protagonists were here derided, e.g., nuclear physicist Edward Teller was turned into a 'clown who bows endlessly'.[19] Similar issues arose when, a year later, Kipphardt's play (translated by Andrzej Wirth) appeared in Poland in three different stagings (Warsaw – dir. Władysław Hańcza, Krakow – dir. Władysław Krzemiński, Sopot – dir. Piotr Paradowski). In Warsaw and Sopot, the focus on acting seemed to have obscured the documentary character of the play. A reviewer described how Marian Wyrzykowski, playing the title role in Warsaw, 'did not allow us to forget for a second that we are watching the great artist Marian Wyrzykowski, and not the nuclear physicist Julius Robert Oppenheimer' (Kellner 1966). Kraczek (1976: 82-83) described the Krakow version as 'the most documentary' – the director eliminated the inner monologues of the characters which Kipphardt

[19] The distrust in the dramaturgical potential of actual quotes is still prevalent among Polish directors today. For instance, in her MA Thesis about directing truth in documentary theatre, director Daria Kopiec thus describes actors working on autobiographical material in her *M-2* (2019) staged at the Nowy Teatr im. Witkacego in the city of Słupsk: 'To ultimately gain distance from their experiences, they embodied the universal figures of HE and SHE – characters shaped by their personal confessions but rewritten in a way that allowed the audience to see themselves in them and the actors to avoid feeling as if they were merely playing themselves' (2020: 23).

wrote, and instead of a stage reconstruction of a tribunal, he put all the actors in one row. But still, Krzemiński could not resist the temptation of introducing his own commentaries, spoken out by the commission chairman.[20] Contrary to what happened in other European venues, none of the Polish stagings was received with enthusiasm. Irena Kellner (1966) considered it too distant from Polish reality, where nuclear weapons were an abstract context and not, as in West Germany, a hot topic. Kraczek (1976: 84) believed it was partly due to a lack of energy in the stagings. Some blamed it on the literary character of the play itself, which, although full of stage directions concerning projections of films and photos, was, as Kellner put it, 'much better in reading' (1966: 6). Yet, as Grzegorz Niziołek argues, these changes

> demanded new cognitive tools, a change in artistic language and an affective openness to a somewhat wider field of social and identity experiences. Also, a greater readiness to enter into conflict with communal ideas, kept by theatre in the field of unconsciousness with unprecedented enthusiasm. (2013: 3-4)

In other words, the conservative Polish theatrical public sphere was unable to keep up with a rapidly changing world.

Arguably the most famous example of documentary theatre, Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* depicting the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, premiered in Warsaw less than a year after the German premiere (*Dochodzenie*, dir. Erwin Axer, Warsaw, 1966). It proved to have a long-lasting effect on how theatre's role and responsibility were to be understood. While keeping the original texts of the interrogations intact, Weiss adjusted them formally by changing their rhythm or adding repetition. There was little space for staging ideas, and Axer added only a few elements, like sunglasses which the actors playing the accused Nazis wore and which 'thinly emphasised the spectacle's theatricality' (Kraczek 1976: 95). The play was a huge success, although some reviewers questioned whether it can still be called 'theatre', considering it a novelty, a short-lived gimmick that was now fading away and becoming predictable (Greń 1968: 257).

[20] Jerzy Grotowski, whose documentary work is described below, resisted the temptation and limited his fact-montages to arranging documentary materials.

Soon after this historical turn, a different type of documentary theatre making appeared. Avoiding any political issues, be they as uncontentious as the horrors of the Nazi regime or the glory of Communism, some directors turned towards a smaller scale, exploring moral topics in social plays and, to a lesser degree, local stories. To what extent was such theatre an opportunistic attempt to please the Communist authorities? An emblematic moment of such documentary theatre of the early 1960s was 'Estrady publicystyczne' (roughly translatable to 'Journalist stagings'), a little-known side project of Jerzy Grotowski's Teatr 13 Rzędów, the ensemble he created in Opole at the beginning of his career. In *Grotowski polityczny,* an archival work on Grotowski's political life, Agnieszka Wójtowicz (2022: 179-186) points out that, besides the experimental activity well recognised in the field, in 1961 Grotowski introduced an entire parallel programme, the 'Estrady publicystyczne', consisting of short, usually thirty- to forty-minute-long performances in the spirit of Zeittheater. The artists referred to the performances as 'faktomontaże' ('fact-montages'), embracing the legacy of the pre-war Leon Schiller. This part of the theatre's work is usually considered an offer of compromise to calm down the Communist authorities alarmed by Grotowski's avant-garde, elitist stance. In his youth, Grotowski was an ardent communist and member of the PZPR – the unified, monopolist Communist party. Progressively moving away from politics, he was nonetheless actively seeking the authorities' support for his work. As the work proved too experimental for most (Wójtowicz 2022: 179-181), and the authorities were wary of any novelties, the risk of being shut down was real. Looking for an urgent (and, as it turned out, effective) solution, the director proposed a series of documentary theatre works focused on current social issues. Unsurprisingly, 'current' at first meant World War II, but as the Estrady travelled around Silesian towns, the proposals adjusted to the audiences, focusing more on local histories. For instance, *Pamiętnik Śląski* (*Silesian Memoir*, Jerzy Falkowski, dir. Zygmunt Molik, 1961) based on the war memoirs of Arka Bożek, was performed at Markowice, the village Bożek came from. Although the later Estrady seem indeed to have been more of a formal obligation than an exploration of the genre, Ludwik Flaszen's programme notes to the first double premiere[21] could serve as a motto for the entire epoch:

[21] *Turyści* and *Gliniane gołębie*, both directed by Grotowski himself, were shown one after another.

> We are expanding our current experiment of searching for new forms of contemporary theatre with an experiment in ad hoc social involvement. We want to react directly to the problems of the day, to the modernity that is reviewed every morning in the columns of fresh newspapers. Content that has been trivialised by speeches and newspapers should come to life. We want to extract true restlessness [*niepokój*] from beneath the clichéd phraseology. That is why we have decided to speak the language of document and document only. We offer viewers and listeners half an hour of restlessness [*niepokój*]. For the memory's sake. And to help them understand their place in the modern world.
> (Flaszen 1961, cited in Wójtowicz 2022: 182)

Theatricality, or what Josette Féral describes as a 'tacit contract between spectator and theater that guarantees that what one witnesses is representation, inscribed in a time and space different from the quotidian' (2002: 104), is being used not to produce a different world, but to take a closer, 'restless' look at what has been there all along.

Starting in 1961, also tribunal plays were employed to move beyond strictly political – or historical – territory. At the avant-garde student theatre STS, Agnieszka Osiecka and Andrzej Jarecki's *Oskarżeni* (*The Accused*, Warszawa, 1961, dir. Jerzy Markuszewski) used authentic protocols of provincial courts to build a fictional tribunal where the accused was a person living outside of the frame of society, refusing to obey the rules of a fundamentally unethical world. The performance was an example of a move beyond political issues (and Osiecka, who went on to have a big career as a songwriter, was later occasionally accused of not being politically engaged enough [Siedlecka 2008]). It focused on a social reality where ethical issues do not overlap with political ones. Put another way, in the performance, ethics was not a question of political choices, but a matter of everyday life. In a country with a non-democratic, authoritarian regime, many critics saw such a gesture as escapist. To their dismay, the documentary form gained the power of moving audiences *away* from the political realm. A split appeared between the 'engaged' artists and the 'popular' ones. As it was politically safe, *Oskarżeni* was later staged in several professional theatres (Kalisz 1962, Częstochowa 1963, Kołobrzeg 1964). The process was typical of the times: the students experimented and tried out different formats and approaches, and the successful (and safe) attempts were then transferred to professional theatres.

These productions were called 'fact-montages', and just as some of Schiller's ones they tended to organise the facts in such a way that they correspond to a usually fictional situation,

like a tribunal case, or a narrative (in the instance of material from diaries). But more rigorously documentary enquiries also found a place – Ryszard Smożewski's 'Teatrzyk Dziennikarza I Aktora' ('The Actor's and Journalist's Small Theatre' – Smożewski was a journalist in a regime newspaper) in the city of Kielce was based on documentary research in the Polish province. It was the first Polish theatre devoted to documentary forms. Following the Zeittheater tradition, Smożewski's theatre also used theatrical elements such as songs or professional acting, and moved between particular stories and more general social archetypes. The everyday life of Poles ('the monotonous ritual of life invariably divided between the church and the pub' – Kraczek, 1976: 56) was not interesting as such, but as a metaphor of a social reality. Smożewski's plays typically had a storyline revolving around the main protagonist – a reporter (the author's alter ego) arriving in a small town or village to enquire about an interesting case. Smożewski's originality consisted in his meticulous reporting: the plays were the fruit of his own research and could be treated as journalism. This focus on first-hand experience of facts sets it apart from previous documentary theatre, particularly that from the 1920s. Whether the form was closer to verbatim (as was the case of the documentary performance *Śladami Anny Frank* [*In Anna Frank's Footsteps,* 1957] whose text was a transcription of interviews, as well as fragments of diaries) or to a newspaper article, the immediate experience was key. It was not, however, a lived experience of those on the stage. It was staged by professional or student actors who embodied the real people. And, of course, it avoided any stance regarding the political situation.

Theatre scholar Marta Fik described the interdependence of politics and culture in Poland as 'supernatural, unknown in any country with a normally functioning culture' (1991: X). Metaphysics aside, the remark underscored the paradigmatic power of political discourse about culture in the Polish landscape. There were a few cases where this paradigm was applied directly to documentary theatre. In 1981, when yet another short-lived moment of political hope appeared, Izabella Cywińska directed *Oskarżony: Poznań pięćdziesiąt sześć* (*Accused: Poznań fifty-six*), using archival materials to tell the story of the Poznań strikes and workers' protests in 1956 which ended with the military police shooting at the striking crowd and killing fifty-seven people. The production would end up costing her freedom – when the political situation changed a few months after the premiere, Cywińska was arrested and imprisoned for several months. But in the vast majority of cases, during the 1945-89 period, Polish theatre artists found a convenient strategy for dealing with urgent issues by developing a 'coded theatre' (Cioffi 1999: 94): staging

classic or modern plays and filling them with allusions to contemporary politics. In 1985, Marta Fik complained that having been 'brought up out of necessity in the system of so-called allusions, the audience and actors are not able to free themselves from them' (cited in Krakowska 2016: 702). The allusions, metaphors and allegories became more overt whenever the political climate gave more leeway, but also, because the surges of democratic initiatives brought an irresistible enthusiasm and inspiration. This was particularly poignant between 1979 and 1981, during a temporary loosening of censorship and rise of political hope. 'During that period, we all cared more about the events in our country than about what we did as cinema makers', said the famous film and theatre director Andrzej Wajda. 'We asked ourselves the question what art is able to keep up with what was happening' (Fryc 2016). Theatre artists often felt this as a pressure. Zbigniew Hübner, then director of the Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw, admitted in 1981: 'the atmosphere is quite difficult at the moment. People want theatre not to be an indifferent place. They expect it to speak directly about things or matters that have so far been hidden. However, it is not easy to cope with this, because moods keep changing' (cited in Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, 2016). It may come as a surprise that, instead of opting for Zeittheater and more documentary sources, urgent issues were addressed by putting on classic works of literature. This was not caused by a distance necessary to understand, transpose and edit raw events, as many of the tribunal plays of the 1960s were staged directly after or even during the trials they presented. Rather, whenever the political events put lives, and the organisation of social structures, at risk, theatre moved to safer, less radical forms. As Paweł Sztarbowski put it, 'representations of real life were missing' (2011: 74).

The tradition of smuggling political messages through literature went back to the nineteenth century when Poland was still partitioned and the Polish language eliminated from the public sphere. When the 1980 strikes at the Gdańsk Lenin Shipyard began, actors joined the striking workers, proposing spontaneous performances of Polish poetry. One of them declared:

> Ladies and gentlemen, 150 years ago Cyprian Kamil Norwid said: 'We don't have a parliament, we don't have the press, but we have masterpieces of literature.' And that's why we actors have come here to talk to you through our poets. (cited in Elerowska and Majkowski 1981: 19)

‘Talking through literature’, especially classic literature, became a paradigm of building a community via the stage. It was seen as a form of engagement which also provided resistance to the ‘intrusive immediacy’ (Chojka 1998: 300). The set design was where the contemporary references were more explicit. When in 1980, Wajda prepared the staging of *Sprawa Dantona* (*The Danton Case* Teatr Wybrzeże dir. Maciej Karpiński), a 1929 play by Stanisława Przybyszewska about the French Revolution, the set contained images from recent political events in the city (Chojka 1998), among them a huge photo of Lech Wałęsa, who was at the time the leader of the Solidarność workers’ union and head of the pro-democratic movement. The photos were a literal transposition of the surrounding reality on the stage. At the same time, they were not the explicit topic of the play. Barbara Świąder-Puchowska recalls that ‘the actors came out to bow in private clothes and with Solidarność pins’ (Świąder-Puchowska, 2021: 81). Yet, they did not perform in them. Although according to some commentators the audience applauded the Solidarność pins more than the content of the show itself (Chojka 1998: 307), it seemed unthinkable that ‘keeping up with what is happening’ could mean putting it on the stage.[22] Although a casual glance could have given the impression that the gap between a fictional performance and a documentary one vanished. For instance, the last performance of the student theatre group Jedynka (*Powrót do raju* [*Back to Paradise*], 1981) contained the following scene:

> A hopscotch form was drawn on the stage. One of the Guardian Angels ‘played’ the game using the hero’s ID document. The squares were important years from the biography, not just of individuals: 1956 – year of birth, 1968 – elementary school, 1970 – high school, 1976 – university… (Błażejewski 2000: 106)

But what appears to be a fragment of devised biographical theatre is actually a political allegory: the years do not correspond to any particular biography. They are, instead, the years of anti-regime protests. While one could argue that they constitute a ‘collective biography’, the notion of ‘biography’ here remains metaphorical, never fully assuming a literal function. The pressure to

[22] The idea of inspiring a popular movement by asking serious questions on the stage using literary masterpieces proved naive. After a short outburst of interest during the strikes, audiences moved to venues with an easier repertoire, and Maciej Prus, the director of the Teatr Wybrzeże, resigned after less than two years with a sense of failure (Chojka 1998: 307).

participate in the cause seems to not have allowed the possibility of transferring an actual biography to the stage.

Such a transfer of reality to the stage was not altogether absent from Polish stages. Anna R. Burzyńska describes how, in the late 1970s, director, playwright and performer Helmut Kajzer experimented with the inclusion of everyday rituals, quotes from conversations and street happenings in his theatre plays and stage productions (2007). Kajzer conducted a series of workshops and happenings across Europe, where he had participants try formal experiments with everyday actions (Burzyńska 2007: 55-56). The actions, such as eating a meal, opening the door, or making an exhibition of one's clothes in the public space, were akin to what some members of the Fluxus group had been doing in the United States, and which one of the Fluxus originators artist and thinker Allan Kaprow later called 'the blurring of art and life' (1993). Contrary to the American artists, however, Kajzer – having a theatre background – went on to use some of the actions (or their recollections) in the script for the theatre performance *Włosy błazna* (*The Hair of the Fool,* 1979). Similarly to Kantor's theatre performances, the fragments of reality integrated in the theatre underwent significant transformation. Burzyńska quotes a passage from *The Hair of the Fool* (considered by her a 'post-dramatic *landscape play'* – 2007: 61), oscillating between poetic and descriptive registers, which both explains and exemplifies this dynamic:

> This play is an inscription of things that have occurred (have been played out) have lasted a moment and will never again return and plan those events which will be repeated according to those patterns in the future and now you can read them out loud or softly dramatize imagine lay things out on whatever part of the stage you choose even on your body behind the curtains of your eyelids and lips on the surface of your skin. Everything I have herein described or inscribed has really happened and was really thought and spoken. (Kajzar 1984: 97; cited in and translated by Burzyńska 2007: 56)

Having read the above, it should come as no surprise that in the play Kajzar describes himself as an 'author of [the] fiction' (1984: 103). While the possibility of an opening to the everyday is present in his oeuvre, his understanding of artistic freedom as implying a radical transformation of all material on the stage was far from any ambition to accurately represent real events.

That idea, however, was present in Polish theatre – albeit one with very different roots. Akademia Ruchu ('Academy of Movement'), established in 1973 and directed by Wojciech Krukowski, closed the gap between performance art (stemming from a visual arts background) and theatrical performance. Kantor had worked in both fields, yet his engagement with the artificiality, or superficiality, of his artistic worlds made it impossible to work with the *hic et nunc* (with the notable exception of his own presence on the stage). Kajzar brought theatre closer to the 'blurring of art and life', but it was Akademia Ruchu who transferred this blurring onto the stage. While it was their street performances that brought them recognition, their theatrical works were instrumental in rethinking how reality can be transferred to and presented on the stage.

Akademia Ruchu was a child of performance studies, of the artistic experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, of performance art and conceptualism. Their specificity lay in moving freely between seeing the outside world as a stage and vice versa, understanding the stage as a frame for the outside world. An example of their street work made this connection quite literally: *Teatr uliczny* (*Street Theatre*, Wrocław, 1978) consisted of a white six by eight metre rectangle painted on a promenade, with the inscription 'Street Theatre'. Tomasz Plata (2015: 10-11) describes how the intervention caused passers-by to turn to 'theatrical gestures' once on the space, but also underlined the theatricality of those who did not treat the sign as a command or invitation. In their early stage work, Akademia's attention to the details of everyday life was accompanied by a careful transfer to the stage, worthy of the most meticulous documentary film processes. This was not just in contrast to the dramatic traditions of political engagement, but no less importantly, to what had been a dismissal of small narratives and the everyday as not worthy of the 'great causes of theatre'. The theatre's director, Wojciech Krukowski, describes this process in an interview from the mid-1980s:

> Everyday life in our performances is contained in gestures, behaviours – transferred from reality without 'acting', with the greatest possible naturalness. It is similarly expressed in the frequent use of real-time behaviours in performances and actions, not subjected to stage shortcuts. But the everyday life cited in the ventures of A.R. [Akademia Ruchu] is also subjected to dynamizing treatments – through rhythm changes, repetitions. There is a constant interpenetration of life and art in the endeavours of A.R. […] Art goes out into the street, penetrates the space of everyday life, creating a special context for its

> interpretation (through the 'distancing effect'). And vice versa – elements of everyday life are transferred to the festive space of the stage. We treat both of these realities equally. (Bertoni and Gentilli 2003, cited in Plata 2015: 15)

Akademia Ruchu proposed an antidote to the infatuating power of narratives in Polish theatre. Weronika Szczawińska (2015) emphasises that the combination of everyday movements and props with highly disciplined choreography enabled Akademia to create a theatre that engaged in dialogue with the surrounding social world without relying on the traditional codes of Polish theatre – memory, romantic myths, and national identity. Plata (2015: 15) points out that both on an aesthetic and ideological level, Akademia's roots lay in the east-European constructivism of the 1930s and 40s, which combined social engagement with a clean, disciplined aesthetics. Plata remarks that theatre in Poland had never followed that path, choosing a politics of allusion or confrontation instead of the 'concrete, analytical' engagement Akademia developed. Writing in 2015, Szczawińska titled her article 'A future that has already happened', bewailing the lack of heirs to Akademia's aesthetics and way of working. Since then, the landscape has changed, and many of their strategies and aesthetic ideas have been applied in documentary work of such directors as Małgorzata Wdowik, Michał Buszewicz, or Szczawińska herself.

But the 'festival of freedom' did not last. On December 13, 1981, martial law was introduced. All the opposition leaders were arrested. Any oppositional activities or aspirations were thwarted and prohibited. As was often the case in Polish history, the prohibitions did not mean theatre vanished – it continued in informal settings. During the martial law (which lasted until 1983), the two most important types of theatre venues were churches and, to a smaller extent, apartments. Churches were a safe haven for independent theatre artists wanting to share work below the radar of censorship (Krakowska-Narożniak, Miszczuk and Fik, 2000). Though, yet again, the underground theatre focused primarily on poetry, with recitals of romanticist, patriotic and religious poems.

If there was a change after 1983, it was towards apathy. The mid-eighties were a time of political despair. Once again, theatres moved away from political topics, as there seemed to be no hope there. Searching for hope, abstract, formal shows as well as playful street theatre prevailed. The Open Theatre Festivals in Wrocław were a breath of fresh air, joining Polish and international 'alternative' theatres. But this movement, important as it may have been for the

rekindling of optimism or just pure joy, was concerned with artistic freedom rather than with any attempt at dealing with truth claims or fact. There did not seem to be any facts worthy of staging. And once the 1989 peaceful revolution unexpectedly arrived, reality by itself was too spectacular to be contained in a black box.

In Search of a Different Political: 1989-2005

In the 1990s, the turn to personal stories was, according to Krystyna Duniec and Joanna Krakowska, the result of a public political discourse based on consensus and a vilification of alternatives to the mainstream vision of the public sphere (Duniec and Krakowska-Narożniak 2009: 213-214). Public theatre turned away from political issues. Some went as far as to call for a dismantling of 'alternative', non-public theatres, as their political edge stopped making sense after 1989 (Dziaczko 2021: 189-190). In the words of Bryce Lease, 'independence made such a dramatic shift in the cultural landscape that it took several years for the professional theatres to develop an appropriate language to address the new reality' (2016: 30-31).

Although the fall of Communism in 1989 did not bring about any notable works of documentary theatre, it brought about a paradigm change which translated to the relation of theatre to the outside world. Poland was now part of the wide world, and as the products of liberal markets started flowing in, Poles used material means to feel connected. What could, from today's perspective, easily be seen merely as consumerism was, at the time, understood as a revelation of a previously inaccessible, *authentic* world. The truth of that world was that it existed in all colours, shapes and sizes, and was making itself available. This trust in the authenticity of the material world was reflected on the stage.

The most talked about theatre production of 1990 was *Tamara*, a performance acquired from the US, which premiered at Warsaw's Teatr Studio (dir. Maciej Wojtyszko). *Tamara* was immersive theatre *avant la lettre*: the show, lasting several hours, was spread across the venue, where spectators roamed freely and decided which of the many parallel scenes to watch. It seemed impossible to grasp any fundamental essence. Years later, the director confirmed this in an interview, focusing almost exclusively on the logistic and experiential aspects, while summarizing the plot thus:

> What was particularly important in this performance, and what probably had some metaphysical charge, was this parallelism of action. Tamara is a sequence of such typical scenes relating to the fact that a fascist cannot get along with a communist, an artist with an artist…(Chełkowska-Wolczyńska and Wojtyszko, 2020)

Joanna Krakowska points out the show was a tribute to the advent of capitalism: it made no 'sense', provided neither 'story' nor cause. Instead, it kept the audience's interest by bestowing them with a superficial freedom,[23] as well as an opulence symbolised by a dinner catered by the Holiday Inn hotel, itself a late 80s symbol of capitalism (Krakowska 2019: 43-47). What pervaded was a material 'closeness', but one imbued with the aura of 'authenticity': all the objects, props, surroundings, looked and felt real. Krakowska points out this attachment to the apparent truth of the objects was reminiscent of socialist realism, with its obsession with 'realism and authenticity' (2019: 45). It had its predecessors in several conventional theatre productions in the 1980s (for instance, *Kolacja na cztery ręce* [*Handel's Ghosts*] by Paul Barz*,* dir. Maciej Englert, Warsaw, 1986) which used real food on the stage – and left a lasting impression on audiences.[24] The attachment to the truth of materiality would also reappear in later attempts at developing a documentary aesthetics.

While theatre often used documentary material as a source, it scarcely reconsidered the form of the event: the material was transformed, usually by a playwright, into a conventional play, usually with characters, and directed according to the same basic principles of a conventional production. Hans-Thies Lehmann explains the issue in one of his last interventions:

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[23] In his *Beyond Immersive Theatre,* Adam Alston (2016) describes a similar process in contemporary immersive projects.

[24] A critic wrote: 'The starting point for [the director] is the concrete – known facts from [Bach's and Haendel's] lives and their music. An example of the use of this method were the decorations (by Elżbieta Pawłowska) faithfully imitating the equipment from the Bach Museum in Leipzig – including the intricately painted harpsichord. Handel [*sic*] throws real chicken bones under the table, Bach eats real soup (supposedly cooked by a theatre worker), even drinks champagne (in this case, not real). Of course, this is not a reference to the idea of, say, the Meiningen theatre – which was about total fidelity, a perfect illusion; today's spectator knows from beginning to end that they are in the theatre, and they receive the literalness of what they see on stage with sensual satisfaction […]' (Lotus 1986).

> Understandable as the desire to "thematize" social and political issues may be, we must not forget that the truly social dimension of art is the form, as the young Georg Lukács observed. As long as the forms of conventionalized ways of spectating are not interrupted, the conventional mode of reception in theatre (and film) tends to reduce to insignificance even the most daring documentation and political criticism. (2022: 35)

Theatres developed their relation to reality also through a reconsideration of spectatorship. Contemporary documentary theatre was shaped as much by an engagement with fact-based approaches as by a search for new theatrical forms – especially those exploring the relationship with audiences. Independent and student theatres in particular kept reimagining what a theatre performance is and what position it proposes to spectators. After the fall of Communism, independent groups often looked for excess as a means of challenging the boundaries of convention. One such famous case was *I Love You* by the Poznań-based group Porywacze Ciał (premiering in 1993), consisting of Katarzyna Pawłowska and Maciej Adamczyk, both graduates of puppetry. The on-stage violence between two masked characters became real, actual physical violence and expanded to the audience, as the male performer chased the female and violently kicked her, and spectators were asked to take sides between a violent man and his victim and intervene, only to end up being attacked with raw eggs. The fourth wall came crashing to reveal a highly unsettling challenge to what is acceptable within the framework of theatre. As the authors of the dictionary of Polish theatre after 1997 (*Wątroba: słownik polskiego teatru po 1997 roku*) point out, 'the roots of Pawłowska and Adamczyk's work lie deeply in the countercultural experience, in the need for authenticity, truth and painful experience in the theatre' (*Wątroba*: 132). Associating truth with both on-stage authenticity and pain was a common trait of much Polish theatre in the 1990s and bore consequences on how truth was to be seen in theatre in a documentary setting.

It took a decade for social issues to reappear on the stage. It is difficult to judge the level of influence of macro-political – and geopolitical – events on cultural activity, but it could be argued that Poland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1999 provided a sense of fundamental, existential security which allowed artists to look more carefully at the social reality around them. The early 2000s brought this change through plays of, among

others, Dorota Masłowska or Paweł Demirski. This phenomenon is described by Aneta Głowacka (2021): '[These writers] opened up theatre to new topics and heroes, among which there were persons ignored by the state: inhabitants of small cities and post-Communist villages, the unemployed or economic migrants'. Yet, when commenting on this phenomenon, in a manner representative of much Polish politically engaged theatre, Głowacka conflates the appearance of such *protagonists* with the actual political representation of such discriminated groups: 'Theatre showed its left-wing face, giving voice to those excluded from the public debate'. The question is what sort of 'voice' was given to those that are claimed to have been represented. Masłowska and Demirski, while sometimes using overheard conversations and documentary materials, admittedly wrote fiction. Their artistic methods consisted in creating fictional characters, without any veridical claims regarding real persons, claims that could hypothetically be proven wrong. The situation was not unlike that of Wyspiański's *Wesele* – while the real-life referents could, at times, be traced, the characters' words were fundamentally fictional. The represented 'excluded' were not just absent from the stage, but they were not acknowledged in the process or any documentation concerning the shows, remaining a phantasmagorical source unable to corroborate any of what was being presented in their name. In that sense, it followed a path with a long history in Polish theatre: Joanna Krakowska decries that 'all too often Polish theatre has historically usurped the role of the political subject by claiming to be speaking for the totality of society or the nation, while overlooking its own highly privileged position' (2021: 275). The positioning of the author as the ultimate source of knowledge not only limited the documentary scope of the proposals but failed to address its own privilege.

Political Shifts and the Yearning for Truth: 2006-25

Around 2005, the changes on the political scene redefined the causes, and character, of Polish documentary theatre. The right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party won general elections and radically transformed the public sphere. PiS introduced the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Institute for National Remembrance (the literal translation is Institute of National Memory) whose monopoly on interpreting history symbolised a policy of a single, unchallengeable vision of the past – and the present. The new authorities also picked up the somewhat forgotten medium

of television theatre, where plays were staged for the television camera. In the 1980s television theatre was immensely popular and included many productions with documentary background either criticising the official regime's views when the political atmosphere allowed it (e.g. Hanna Krall's *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem* [*Shielding the Flame*], dir. Andrzej Brzozowski, 1981), or, particularly after the introduction of the martial law (1981), supporting the Communist discourse (eg. Ryszard Frelek's *Jałta 1945* [*Yalta 1945*], 1985). PiS remembered the potential of that phenomenon and in 2006, a new series called 'Scena Faktu' ('Stage of Fact') appeared on public TV.[25] The productions focused on historical memory and typically revisited various episodes from Polish twentieth-century history, such as the persecution of the so-called 'indomitable soldiers', soldiers who refused to give in to the Communist authorities after the war, choosing a guerrilla life instead. Particularly during the first two years, the productions of the Scena Faktu were mostly one-sided narratives confronting innocent patriots and evil Communists from a schematic right-wing perspective. In several cases, 'we are dealing not with a document but with hagiography: these are the lives of contemporary saints', as critic Roman Pawłowski wryly explained (2008). Pawłowski acknowledged, however, that in some sense the format worked – the productions were among the most popular TV shows[26] and provoked an impressive response on all sides of the political spectrum.

The actions of the authorities met an instant response. Piotr Dobrowolski explains that 'the opening of a new chapter linking culture and historical policy of the state provoked this reaction of the artists and influenced the broadening of the perspectives they adopted' (2017: 54). In 2006, the Poznań-based Teatr Ósmego Dnia (Theatre of the Eighth Day) premiered *The Files*, a show about secret documents related to the members of the group extracted from the Polish Secret Service archives of the Communist era. The discovery of a large box containing the documentation of years of spying on the company's members led to the onstage attempt to understand the absurd logic of the Communist surveillance. The actors present, describe and ridicule the tragicomical world orchestrated and performed by the secret collaborators of the

[25] It lasted until 2011. Today, documentary TV theatre is regularly produced and broadcast.

[26] Examples include: *Śmierć rotmistrza Pileckiego* (*Death of Captain Pilecki*), dir. Ryszard Bugajski, 2006; *Inka 1946*, dir. Wojciech Tomczyk, 2006; *Słowo honoru* (*Word of Honour*), dir. Krzysztof Zaleski, 2006.

regime, showing how this world became a senseless fiction. Carol Martin (2010: 10) writes that 'whereas typically the archive is an authenticator of truth, in *The Files* the archive of the secret police functions as the institutionalization of lies'. Yet, the scenic gesture, with its critique of the officially documented version of facts and attempt to explain what *really* happened, constitutes a clear claim to truth. The fiction of the documents is presented from the perspective of a veridical discourse.

The Files were an alternative to documentary forms as stage representations of absent agents, where questions of legitimacy remain problematic. About the same time, another alternative was proposed – to give the stage to those whose stories or words are to be shared, be they professional or non-professional actors. This was the case of Jan Klata's *Transfer!* (Wrocław, 2006), a co-production of the Teatr Współczesny in Wrocław and Hebbel-Am-Ufer in Berlin. *Transfer!* staged the inhabitants of the city of Wrocław, a now-Polish city which was German before 1939. Both the Germans who used to live in Breslau (as was the city's German denomination) and Poles who moved there after the war, were banished from their homes during or immediately after World War II. In the performance, both groups tell their war stories, and the stories of people they knew. The testimonies are intertwined by scenes acted by professional actors, in the roles of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill as they decide on the fate of Europe. The mimetic reproduction serves as a counterpoint, but also as a theatrical framing of the entire piece. It is also evocative of the fictional add-ons employed in the 1960s.

Transfer! was hailed as the beginning of a new era in Polish theatre. Critics appreciated how it introduced important topics through private stories and managed to frame non-actors in a theatrical setting. And, though Klata himself did not follow the documentary path, the thirst for a more direct connection to the surrounding world and its narratives was made clear. On a formal level, direct address and the blurring of representation (of fictional or fictionalised characters) with presentation (of real persons) were now established as legitimate theatre. Writing about it fifteen years later, Aneta Głowacka appreciated that 'theatre was treated as a place of social debate, where sensitive topics are moved into the sphere of visibility, provoked, undermined dogmas and reinterpreted the obvious' (2021: 18). Others were less convinced: critic Jacek Sieradzki (2006) argued that the dramaturgical structure put the non-actors in the role of victims, impeding any critical reflection on their choices and positions. The addition of a stereotypical

representation of Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt transformed a historical account into a simplistic dichotomy of good, simple people versus evil, corrupt politicians. Moreover, since the 'good, simple people' on the stage represented their own national group of either Poles or Germans, other identities, such as Jews or Ukrainians, were only referred to as the Other, 'devoid of their own voice' (Dobrowolski 2017: 57).

Echoing the theatre of the 1920s and 30s, this was also a theatre of extraordinary causes. This paradigm persisted on Polish stages until at least the early twenty-first century. What happened on the stage aspired to represent people by exemplifying the great narratives (Lyotard's *grands récits*) of the times. Such was Piscator's theatre, and Schiller's, but as Roman Pawłowski points out (2015: 356), such was also Klata's *Transfer!* or Paweł Demirski's play *Kiedy przyjdą podpalić dom, to się nie zdziw* (*When They Come To Burn Down The House, Don't Be Surprised,* dir. Romuald Wilczy-Pokojski, Gdańsk, 2006). The unceasing pressure to participate in social debates veered theatre artists away from particular, specific, small narratives, let alone less discursive performances. Personal stories were used to represent a larger picture. Commenting on this specificity of Polish theatre, my own *Mała narracja (Small Narration,* 2010*)* was an autobiographical documentary performance that dealt with the tension between the small narratives and the larger historical and political frameworks and metanarratives.[27]

On April 10, 2010, the plane carrying the Polish Presidential couple along with nearly one hundred political, military and social leaders crashed by the Russian town of Smolensk, killing everyone on board. This biggest air catastrophe in Polish history initiated an era of increasing tensions and radicalisation of the political scene still present today. The repercussions were felt in all areas of cultural life, and the engaged Polish theatre was no exception. Aneta Głowacka points out that the search for theatrical forms of engagement was accompanied by a growing frustration with a simple staging of political critique. Illustrating one's political position by creating stage characters whose 'good' or 'bad' standpoint was easy to decipher progressively lost its appeal. The search for other ways of engaging theatre in current social debates eventually led such artists as the Jolanta Janiczak / Wiktor Rubin duo or Michał Stankiewicz to reconsider the relation with the audience. The impact of some of these attempts at audience interaction or

[27] A production of Warsaw's Teatr Studio, the show toured internationally for ten years, was translated as a play to several languages and later developed as an art installation. I write more about it in Chapter 4.

participation was opposite to the declarations, suggesting 'that theatre does not have that much of an influence on reality, and a spectator engaged in stage activity does not necessarily become an engaged citizen' (Głowacka 2021: 23). One possible issue with the tactic which attempted to activate the spectators was the lack of reflection concerning the modes and conditions of engagement. What this approach did bring about was a complexification of the idea of theatricality. The introduction of performative aspects, understood as reaching beyond mimetic referentiality and including the non-symbolic as part of the aesthetic experience, meant theatre that from the 1970s on had been based on a model which began from the outside world, moved to fiction created by a playwright, then to the director helping the actors turn the fiction into roles, and at last, the event, stopped being paradigmatic. Marta Górnicka's *Chór Kobiet* (*The Chorus of Women*, 2011), Agnieszka Błońska's *Grubasy* (*Fatties, 2011*), or the series *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje* (*Wielkopolska:* Revolutions, 2011-14) curated by Agata Siwiak all participated in this change. Performance did not need to be mimetic (Górnicka's pieces were based on a choir) and it did not need to have actors representing others – people could represent themselves on the stage (Błońska's *Grubasy*, my own *Small Narration*, Siwiak's entire series).

In parallel, practices from other fields were increasingly using the documentary performance without the baggage and burden of Polish theatre tradition. Around 2010, choreographers such as Edyta Kozak (*Dancing For You Longer than One Minute*, 2009), Rafał Urbacki (*Mt 9,7:On wstał i poszedł do domu* [*Mt 9,7:And he rose and went home*], 2012), or Magdalena Przybysz (*Mój Poland Drive* [*My Poland Drive*], 2012) began creating autobiographical work inspired by the so-called 'non dance' (or 'conceptual dance') movement which began in France, often explicitly combining choreography with spoken documentary narratives (Mrozek, 2013). By refusing what Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to as 'the seemingly naïve production of a closed aesthetic fiction presented for contemplation' (2022: 37), those artists brought the choreographic world into a discursive realm hereto reserved to theatre. The performances were occasionally presented at theatre venues and festivals and broadened the possibilities of documentary representation.

Visual artists – such as Katarzyna Kozyra, Anna Baumgart, Julita Wójcik – have been using theatrical tools to present documentary or semi-documentary material since the late

1990s,[28] but it was not until 2011 that a visual artist fully embraced the form of a theatre performance. *Msza* (*Mass*, 2011) by Artur Żmijewski*,* a visual artist known for his controversial videos documenting his ethically ambiguous endeavours, premiered at the central and prestigious Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw, and proved theatre's mimetic potential in a documentary context was far from exhausted. The performance was a precise reconstruction of a Catholic mass on the stage. The priest was played by an actor, another actor interpreted the altar server. The confrontation of a Polish audience with the ritual they knew viscerally and yet, for a large number of the spectators, had stopped attending, was a troubling experience. Performed only twice, the performance was typical of Żmijewski's work: a brutal, uncompromising intrusion of one world into another. Most reactions to the performance were negative (for an overview see: '*Msza* Żmijewskiego' 2011) as it did not satisfy the theatre audiences for being too predictable, nor the visual arts audience for being too theatrical. But seen from today's perspective, it was a fascinating case of using theatricality as a documentary tool. As Tracy C. Davis shows in her seminal essay 'Theatricality and Civil Society', theatricality's 'inauthenticity' can be a virtue, 'recognizing the gap between signifier and signified, truth and effect' (Davis 2003: 142).[29] Żmijewski made use of this by creating a realist, mimetic representation. In other circumstances this could be seen as a reality effect – an attempt to convince the audience of the realness of what was happening. In *Mass,* to the contrary, it produced a strong distancing effect. It was impossible to forget this was all make-believe. Fundamental for this operation was the decision to foreground the impressive, large theatre stage of Dramatyczny as the setting. A few elements mimicked those from a church space: an altar, a small rug, a red carpet, some candles, a cross – but the main setting was the huge, wooden stage, reminding the audience of where they were. The mass was now, more than ever, a show at a *theatron,* a place for seeing – or more precisely, for *looking on*.

[28] The increasing cross-contamination of theatre with other art forms in twenty-first century Poland is of crucial importance to a fuller comprehension of Polish documentary theatre, and warrants a separate study.

[29] Admittedly, this potential of theatricality is not limited to the theatre. Howard Pickett, for example, considers theatricality as key in how moral behaviour relies on action not based on authenticity, but rather on what he calls 'virtuous hypocrisy', which dissociates from a truth of the self: 'To be other than I am […] is a fundamental ethical impulse' (2017: 2).

Crucially, Żmijewski's performance was documentary in that it presented a real-life process on the stage. The rendition needed to be trustworthy: if it were a fictionalised account or free variation on the theme of a mass, the clarity of the proposal would vanish. Indeed, the acknowledgement of the truth claim ('This is what a Catholic mass looks like') produced a powerful somatic reaction: the Polish spectators, both professional and not, all found it eerie that they could not resist knee-jerk, embodied reactions. Even if they seemed passive (only a few spectators actually executed the mass script, replying, kneeling, etc.), their replies, the prayers, the gestures – the ritual – were present in their bodies, playing out in their heads. Just as Davis describes (2003), theatricality provided a perspective that positioned the players in their roles, disrupting their seemingly uncontroversial identity and allowing for a critical view of one's own spectatorial position. The reliability, or truthfulness, of the reproduction of the Catholic mass was an essential aspect of its theatrical impact.

By 2011, the ever-growing interest in documentary theatre inspired the first edition of the Sopot Non-Fiction festival and artist residency, still active today. Municipal theatres across the country were increasingly open to documentary forms. But this institutional interest was not just due to the proliferation of such projects – it was also the consequence of a change in the public sphere. The corruption of the public debate and the limiting of the possibilities to present dissenting opinions meant that artists looked for other available media. Most theatres in Poland are under municipal or regional authorities, and cities like Warsaw having liberal local authorities, the stage was available for veridical representation contesting the new political discourse emanating from the government. At the same time, Polish directors brought up in a tradition of a politically engaged theatre had an acute awareness that facts are always political.[30]

2015 was yet another defining year for Polish theatre. In October, the nationalist right-wing PiS party regained power after winning the parliamentary elections. November saw the first attempt of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage at intervening in the repertoire of public theatres. Several weeks before the premiere of *Śmierć i dziewczyna* (*Death and the Maiden*, dir.

[30] When Steff Nellis writes (2021), in the UK context, that, as opposed to a previous generation of artists who believed they could have a non-engaged, outside position, today's tribunal plays 'do not shy away from unfolding a politically outspoken orientation as they aim to respond to, and sometimes intervene in, our socio-cultural reality' – the difference to the Polish theatre makers I describe is striking.

Ewelina Marciniak, Teatr Polski in Wrocław, 2015), discussions arose in the media concerning scenes of explicit sex that were to be performed in the show by pornographic film actors brought in specially for the occasion from Czechia (Rudzki, 2021: 55). The right-wing media were appalled. The day before the premiere, the marshal of the Dolnośląskie province received a letter from the Ministry, asking that he 'immediately order the suspension of preparations for the premiere in the announced form, violating the generally accepted principles of social coexistence' ('Komunikat MKiDN w sprawie spektaklu *Śmierć i dziewczyna*', 2015). According to Piotr Rudzki, who at the time was the literary director of the Teatr Polski where the premiere took place, this unsuccessful censorship attempt constituted the 'founding gesture' of the new government's practices of reorganising the public sphere through culture, so as to 'bring up new citizens and thus secure [political] power for many years' (Rudzki, 2021: 56).

Such events seemed to consolidate the homogeneity of Polish theatre. Its value was measured, particularly by the liberal media, festivals and reviewers, by its engagement. And the measure of its engagement was to be its provocative, now openly and sharply political stance (liberal, left-wing). A fragment of an interview conducted with Rudzki around the time of the *Śmierć i dziewczyna* controversy illustrates this conflation:

> We already lived through times of a single imposed creative method – socialist realism. The art of theatre is not supposed to pat you on the shoulder, but to provoke thinking and provide – as Witkacy put it – 'a metaphysical experience'. And in the words of Aristotle – a catharsis, purification.
>
> There is a long tradition of critical art [in Poland]. Let us recall, for example, Stefan Żeromski[31] with his postulate of "tearing Polish wounds", puncturing the balloon of national megalomania, so that Poles would be more critical, self-aware citizens. Citizens! After all, this is why public theatre was created in the First Polish Republic 250 years ago. (Oczak-Stach 2015)

Pluralism, seen from this angle, is not so much associated with diversity, as it is understood as a multifold, painful critique of the existing state of affairs. 'Metaphysical experience' is to be

[31] Stefan Żeromski (1864-1925) – Polish novelist and playwright known for his social engagement.

synonymous with catharsis and provocation. From such descriptions it seems 'tearing Polish wounds' is grounded in the very roots of Polish public theatre and constitutive of a healthy democratic country.

Others saw this attitude as short-sighted and antagonising. Some artists, myself included, looked for different means of engaging with the surrounding reality. Understanding politics as 'dividing the visible' (Rancière 2006), such projects reconfigured that visible. For instance, 2016 saw two premieres of documentary productions about and with members of the Deaf community (my own *One Gesture*, Warsaw, and *Nie mów nikomu*, dir. Adam Ziajski, Poznań). Both won numerous awards and were widely shown in Poland and abroad. As I write, there have been multiple other documentary (and non-documentary) performances with Deaf actors, several MA theses about theatre and deafness, and the new issue of the rather conservative *Teatr* magazine is devoted to the topic. Documentary theatre can finally be political in different ways.

The crisis of representation was also a crisis of truth. Between 2014 and 2017 several scandals erupted in the world of reportage – journalistic storytelling. Some of the most renowned journalists (Jacek Hugo-Bader and Witold Szabłowski) were proven to have made up parts of their reports. The famous 'Polish school of reportage' was derided as the 'Polish school of fabrication' (Leszczyński 2017). The theatre artists and scholars seemed unphased by the public debate that followed. Marta Bryś wrote in *Dialog* magazine:

> It is […] difficult to imagine that a similar accusation [of fabricating reality] could be brought against theatre, as was the case with the scandal surrounding the 'Polish school of fabrication', because the reality generated by theatre is unquestionable, and the viewers are its direct witnesses or even participants. (2017)

Bryś thus conflated the reality of the theatrical event with the truth value of its claims. Importantly, however, the statement – which elided epistemic questions regarding the content of the performance – was preceded by a meticulous analysis of the truth claims in several performances based on non-fiction texts, and their possible interpretation as factual. The article was characteristic of the developments of documentary theatre – and its reception – in the last decade. Beyond numerous declarations of truth's obviousness or inaccessibility (even Bryś's

article title, ‘Fakty na niby’, can be translated as ‘Mock facts’ or ‘Pseudo-facts’), the actual witnessing and reacting to documentary performance still relied upon the judgement of the credibility of truth claims. While some directors, such as Marcin Wierzchowski in his *Los Endemoniados/Biesy* (*Los Endemoniados/Demons*, 2022), occasionally experimented with fictional narratives simulating documentary theatre, the effectiveness of those experiments depended on the stability of the conviction that actual truth claims were being made.[32]

Conclusion

In this historical overview of Polish documentary theatre, I have shown the sources of contemporary iterations of the genre. During the interwar period (1920-39) Leon Schiller was the single figure responsible for the establishment and development of a Polish documentary theatre. His monumental performances – ‘fact-montages’ – addressed political issues by representing real events with broad strokes. That first period established documentary theatre as a weapon to be used in political struggles – a type of engagement which would return regularly to Polish stages. Between the end of World War II and the political changes of 1989, after a first few years with little to no documentary performances, Polish documentary theatre shifted from a focus on the war atrocities, and, to a lesser extent, on Communist propaganda, to a critical voice of dissent. Within this period, some approaches offered alternative ways of using the documentary: an appreciation of individual and small-scale stories, and an avoidance of political engagement, usually substituted by social issues related to morality. While the first decade after 1989 saw documentary strategies limited to experiments with the inclusion of real objects and events in theatrical performances, a politically engaged theatre progressively returned to the stages. Documentary approaches attempting to convey an outside reality as directly as possible began appearing. Major events of the twenty-first century (accession to NATO and to the EU, political turmoil, the Smolensk catastrophe) were accompanied by changes in documentary practices. The way truth claims were presented was informed by the ever-changing approach to reality.

[32] For an analysis of the interplay between documentary, performativity and fiction, see: Gade and Jersley, 2005.

The history of documentary theatre in Poland shows, above all, that there is no single, unquestionable reality generated by theatre. I will demonstrate in the case studies in the following chapters that there is a distinction to be made between the realities generated by theatre and its capacity for including external realities in its perimeters, and for making truth claims about the world.

CHAPTER 2

A SPACE FOR FACTS: MICHAŁ ZADARA'S *RESPONSIBILITY* AS VERIDICAL REPRESENTATION

> But couldn't those people at the Belarusian border just go to the border crossing? And if someone crosses the border in the forest, isn't it the duty of the border guard to stop that person? Can you just cross the border in the middle of the forest like that?
>
> These are all very complicated things... If we could answer these questions in two words, we wouldn't have to make a performance about it.
>
> *Odpowiedzialność,* Michał Zadara *et al.* (2022)

I propose a reading of Michał Zadara's *Odpowiedzialność* (*Responsibility*, 2022) as 'veridical representation' (Plantinga 2005: 111-112) – a truthful representation of facts. This reading is directly opposed to the commonly shared conviction that in theatre no such representation is possible (Ryan 2020, Stephenson 2019, Garde and Mumford 2013). In order to achieve my goal, I first explain the political and historical context which shaped *Responsibility*'s aesthetics and the character of its truth claims. I then describe how *Klątwa* (*The Curse,* 2017), a performance directed by Oliver Frljić, used the ontological ambiguity of theatre as a representation system (Borowski and Sugiera 2007) to provoke an ontologically unambiguous (though ethically ambiguous) social crisis in Poland. *The Curse* brought about an awareness of the factual power of theatre. Since it was produced by the same venue as *Responsibility*, examining how it operated helps to contextualise Michał Zadara's artistic choices and their impact. After introducing *Responsibility*, I approach Marie Laure Ryan's analysis of factuality in different media. Ryan (2020: 91) classifies theatre among media which cannot produce 'precisely identifiable truth claims' (e.g. music). Yet, comparing this analysis to Zadara's performance, I show how *Responsibility* fulfils all the criteria of factuality. Finally, I pick up on Ryan's taxonomy of epistemological categories in representational texts and show how *Responsibility* not only succeeds in what Ryan calls 'weak factuality', which she associates with genres such as autobiography, travel writing, or certain documentary films, but can also be seen as presenting 'strong factuality' (2022: 83), reserved, according to Ryan, to publications such as biography or

historiography. My main argument is that what I call 'theatrical factuality', the representation of facts on stage, withstands the critique of realist representation as uncertain and ultimately impossible, for its claims are recognised by audiences as veridical and are verifiable. Importantly, as I show, theatrical factuality does not exclude fictional aspects of theatre, and has been evolving along with the historical trajectory of documentary theatre.

'Stating issues openly': Michał Zadara's Path to *Responsibility*

Theatre director Michał Zadara was born in Warsaw in 1976. At the age of three, he moved with his parents to Austria, and a few years later, to West Germany. He graduated in Theatre and Political Science from Swarthmore College in Philadelphia. Zadara only moved back to Poland in 1999 to study directing at the Theatre Academy in Kraków. He arrived as an outsider, with a different set of references, interests and tools. At the time, Polish theatre was undergoing a generational transfer of power: in 1998, Krystian Lupa directed *Lunatycy* at Kraków's Stary Teatr, and a year later his student Grzegorz Jarzyna took over what was soon to become Poland's most talked about theatre, Teatr Rozmaitości (rebranded by him as TR Warszawa), where he directed *Magnetyzm serca* (*Magnetism of the Heart*, 1999)[33], a modern take on a classic nineteenth-century Polish play. Soon after, Jarzyna invited another of Lupa's pupils, Krzysztof Warlikowski, to stage *Hamlet*. Lupa and his disciples set the tone for the whole period with a kind of psychological postdramatic theatre – both using multilayered textual strategies and nonetheless indebted to Stanislavskian psychological realism. On the one hand, the productions dismantled traditional dramatic forms and dramaturgical structures and introduced an intertextual playfulness, all characteristic of postdramatic theatre. On the other, they kept the 'fourth wall', preventing actors from direct address, as well as the mimetic, psychological acting. Meanwhile, Zadara proposed a text-oriented approach, inscribing himself in a German tradition of a less affective, distanced, self-reflexive theatre. In addition to Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, Zadara's primary reference-point was Peter Handke's *Sprechstücke*, or 'speak-ins', where speech becomes the spectacle, declaratively abandoning representation, character and plot (see Marranca 1976: 52-62). Reflecting that sensibility, Zadara's directing debut was Handke's *Offending the Audience*

[33] Directed under the pseudonym Sylwia Torsh.

(*Obrażanie publiczności*, 2005, premiered at the Scena Fundacji Starego Teatru). While the core of his subsequent performances lay in discourse, Zadara soon started developing a more mimetic, spectacular theatre, developing a career as a prolific artist who staged a great variety of texts for theatre, from young playwrights to historic Polish and foreign plays. He had an exegetic approach to text, which led him to rediscoveries of long-forgotten, usually Polish, classics. He quickly integrated into the local theatre milieu, even directing large shows in mainstream theatres across the country before the conclusion of his studies. In 2007, Zadara received the prestigious Paszport Polityki award for 'an impressive artistic activity and for productions which bring back faith in theatre being a space of artistic freedom' ('Paszporty "Polityki" 2007' 2008), and quickly established himself as one of the most important directors in Polish theatre. In his work, he appeared simultaneously preoccupied with Polish themes – tapping into a popular interest in (or fixation on) the country's history, culture and identity – while filtering it through the lens of an outsider's sensitivity. Theatre critic Tomasz Plata wrote: 'Zadara undoubtedly looks at Poland partly with the eye of a repatriate finding his roots, and partly, of a neophyte delighted with his new world' (2009). Indeed, nearly twenty years after the 1989 transformation brought about changes which turned Poland into a different country, it now had a well-functioning democratic election process and freedom of speech and enterprise. In 2008, Poland entered the Schengen area, allowing for free circulation across Europe. Since Zadara's departure in 1979, Poland's GDP per capita doubled from $7000 to $14000. On the other hand, it was suffering from some of the ills of modern capitalism. For instance, between 1979 and 2007 Poland had the highest rise in social disparities among the OECD countries (Wójcik-Żołądek 2013: 4). But if most Poles accepted the economic inequalities directly after the 1989 fall of communism, by 2008, 91% of Poles considered them unacceptable – probably because of disillusionment with the promises of the free market (2013: 2).

Theatre reflected these changes. In the second half of the 1990s, Polish theatre directors were looking to the West for inspiration, staging the likes of Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill, playwrights whose confrontational style and themes of violence and pathology were embraced with enthusiasm. In 2003, the theatre critic Roman Pawłowski published, together with Henryk Sułek, an anthology of new Polish plays called *Pokolenie Porno* (*Porn Generation;* 2003) – and the 'Porn Generation' became the Polish counterpart of the British *in-yer-face*. While it shared some of the characteristics of the British movement, such as an often-scandalising attitude, its

specificities were due to its different roots. Theatre scholar Ewa Wąchocka describes this period as a paradigm shift, where the role and place of theatre in society changed, moving away 'from national classics, identified with romanticism, and [turning] towards the present times [*współczesność*], understood in the most literal and concrete way' (2010: 226). An increasingly important aspect of the Porn Generation theatre were thus social issues. Zadara was not part of that group of artists – but he was part of the zeitgeist, developing work about social issues of the time. While his staging of Handke can be seen as participating in the confrontational current, soon after, Zadara started collaborating with socially engaged Polish playwright Paweł Demirski. Starting in 2005, together they proposed a number of productions that combined witty, linguistically ingenious dialogue with a focus on social issues such as consumerism and unemployment (*From Poland with Love*, 2005), the roots of social and economic injustice (*Wałęsa. Historia wesoła, a ogromnie przez to smutna* [*Wałęsa. An Amusing Story, Therefore a Sad One*]*,* 2005), or antisemitism (*Tykocin*, 2008). However, the following decade saw Zadara move further away from contemporary texts about contemporary life. Instead, he focused more on bringing new life to classical texts (among them, Racine, Aeschylus, Friedrich Schiller, but also F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, and from the Polish repertoire, Mikołaj Rej, Adam Mickiewicz, Stanisław Wyspiański, but also the comedy classic Aleksander Fredro). In these productions, he brought back texts often seen as antiquated as topical essays on contemporary morality. When in 2018 Zadara worked on *Sprawiedliwość* (*Justice*) at Teatr Powszechny, he explained his perspective: 'Theatre has always dealt with the idea of justice and demands this justice' (*'Sprawiedliwość' – rozmowa z reżyserem Michałem Zadarą* 2023).

Justice was a predecessor of *Responsibility* in terms of formal construction and documentary approach. Although Zadara had created documentary shows several times before – for instance his *Chopin bez fortepianu* (*Chopin Without Piano,* 2013) or *Awantura warszawska* (*The Warsaw Brawl,* 2011), previous productions used acting, sound and light in a rich, multi-layered way akin to that of his staging of traditional play texts. In *Justice,* the director stripped nearly all of that away, leaving a simple set composed of a few tables and chairs, some papers and files. The core of the performance was the delivery of a text. The production was one of several initiatives across Poland commemorating the 1968 expulsion of over ten thousand Jews from the country. The antisemitic wave that lay the groundwork for the expulsions, instigated by the Communist authorities across Poland, had until recently been all but passed over in silence,

and never duly memorialised.[34] The fiftieth anniversary of the events was an opportunity for several theatres to bring to light many aspects of this troubling past and its aftermath.

Zadara's treatment differed from the storytelling and verbatim strategies proposed by other artists commemorating 1968, eg. Anna Smolar's *Kilka obcych słów po polsku* (*A Few Foreign Words In Polish*) or Magdalena Umer's *Zapiski z wygnania* (*Notes From Exile*). Instead of focusing on singular biographic narratives, *Justice* had the form of a quasi-legal presentation of evidence to try and bring to justice (any of the) perpetrators of the 1968 antisemitic events. The goal was to prepare an actual judiciary case against such perpetrators. In interviews, Zadara underlined that the theatre production was the result of a long research project conducted with lawyers and historians. The pragmatic and scholarly contexts reframed the theatrical endeavour. While, traditionally, suspension of disbelief provides for the appearance of fiction, in this case, it allowed another construction – a legal one. Theatre was used as a laboratory of justice: if theatre allows a rethinking of the world, a reimagining of how things could be, this imagination can be pragmatic and focused on finding alternatives to the world we live in. It breaks the status quo by temporarily suspending the consequences of action. Steff Nellis follows Francesca Laura Cavallo in calling similar theatrical interventions 'pre-enactments', borrowing a legal term for laws still under discussion before they are passed (2021). Nellis analyses performances that build tribunals on stage ('tribunal theatre'), pointing out that staging legal procedures which have not yet happened on the one hand extends the judiciary discourse, while on the other allows for its critique. Indeed, in that sense, *Justice* was reminiscent of other theatrical projects, such as Milo Rau's *Congo Tribunal* (2017) first conducted in Bukavu (Congo) and later brought to Europe, which used the stage to create a tribunal and judge the crimes committed during the Congo War, as well as to critique an inept legal system. The actors in the performance were actual

[34] The events usually referred to as 'March 68' had their origin in the Six-Day War in Israel in 1968. The Eastern Block sided with and supported the Arab states, condemning Israel. Following those events, the nationalist, antisemitic Polish minister of foreign affairs Mieczysław Moczar instigated an anti-Jewish campaign, aiming (successfully) to eliminate the Jewish fraction of Polish Communist authorities. Slogans about a 'Zionist threat' translated into a growing antisemitic movement. Hundreds of Jews, as well as dissenting non-Jewish intellectuals, lost their jobs in state institutions ranging from parliament to universities, hospitals and news outlets. Over the next two years, more than ten-thousand Jews (and non-Jewish intellectuals) were encouraged to leave and did so, having no prospects for a decent life in Poland. When leaving, they were forced to rescind their Polish nationality (Marcinkowska 2019).

participants in the events, and real judges were acting as judges. All of them acted in a play, with a fixed script, but which attempted to represent their real stories, judgements and opinions. Theatre served as a substitute for a disappointing reality, and as a provocation, or a call to action.

Zadara did not follow the tribunal theatre format. He chose not to create a spectacle of justice. Where Rau used actual persons involved in the political situation in Congo to construct a theatrical tribunal, Zadara proposed a nearly empty stage with a traditional cast of actors relaying the findings of a group of specialists and activists. *Justice* was somewhere between tribunal theatre and what Amanda Stuart Fisher calls 'testimonial' verbatim theatre, where 'the construction of the play emerges from specially commissioned interviews that are sought out and undertaken by the writer, director or actors in order to tell a person's story or examine a particular issue' (Fisher 2020: 13). While the disciplined, legalistic tone of the discourse puts it closer to tribunal theatre, the refusal to propose a theatrical representation of justice makes for a less spectacular event: the spectators get to discover the legal intricacies of the case, but the live event does not propose itself as a moment of change. Zadara walks in the footsteps of Erwin Piscator. If in the 1920s Piscator was still convinced theatre can be a powerful political weapon able to alter the world directly, by 1965, he came to the conclusion that change cannot be simply introduced into the world from the stage:

> Political theatre seems to me to be a suitable tool for evaluating the political and social conditions of one's time. [...] Immanent in this image is the tendency to change. Based on evidence, the present is supposed to be altered. *Whether this is successful is no longer within the capabilities of theatre*. (Piscator cited in Thamer, Turnheim and Pesl, 2015: 77, italics mine)

In the 1960s, such ideas inspired the German documentary theatre of Peter Weiss, Heinar Kipphardt, and Rolf Hochhuth, and its legacy is present in Zadara's documentary projects at Powszechny. Weiss's *Die Ermittung. Oratorium in 11 Gesängen* (*The Investigation. An Oratorio in 11 Cantos*, 1965)*,* famously directed by Piscator, was similarly exploring how individual and collective responsibility combine at the origins of evil (Fisher 2020: 24). The play presented transcripts of fragments of hearings concerning the Auschwitz concentration camp, the so-called Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. Upon Piscator's invitation, *The Investigation* had parallel premieres,

by different directors, in 15 West and East German theatres. The approaches were quite diverse. The most contentious question concerned the very idea of putting such a topic on stage, as 'theatrical presentation would profane Auschwitz' (Arjomand 2016: 60). Most directors tried minimalizing the theatrical conventions, for instance, eliminating intermissions, and even avoiding calling what they staged 'theatre'. Piscator was the only one who broke rank, claiming theatre has a unique power to emphasise individual responsibility and judgement. This did not, however, mean it was to be a night like any other: he did hang signs which asked audiences not to applaud (Arjomand 2016: 61-62).

Where the German documentary approach differed from Zadara's was that its plays reproduced the structure of a tribunal, with prosecutors, defendants and witnesses. As Piscator said, 'The freedom of the spectator with respect to the facts is not restricted: he can define his own moral responsibility unhindered; he can make himself a witness or even a defendant; he can become a juror, who wants to reach his judgment' (cited in Arjomand 2016: 61). Zadara, on the other hand, was not reproducing a court case, or even fantasising one, as Rau did. The legal case had not yet been made (as was the case with *The Investigation*), nor was it impossible to make (Rau's tribunal could not happen in contemporary Congo), it was just, for now, inconceivable. Before being enacted in reality, however, it had to be thought through – and the stage was the perfect place to do it. That is why Zadara's is a theatre of evidence, where actors are not the agents of change, as they were in Rau's proposal with real-world ambitions. They are, instead, 'agents of truth': when entering the space, the spectators see it as a text on a TV screen: 'Everything in this show is true'. The audience is given fact after fact, drowned in facts as by a zealous prosecutor – but nobody here pretends to be one, there is no pretence other than having the audience acknowledge the assertions. Facts are being presented by actors who do not try to convince us of their authenticity as stage personas, for instance corroborating their own identity or as much as telling us who they are. Although the premiere version of *Justice* contained a suggestion that the creators would proceed to report to authorities the suspicion of committing a crime, the ending was subsequently altered, to include an explanation of why that did not come about: in an unjust judiciary system justice would not have been served. Whatever the reasons – the transfer from theatre to action in the outside world did not happen. *Justice* represents a 'pre-enactment' in the sense of a legal procedure necessary for the enactment of the law. Consequently, the stage appears as a literal transposition of the research room, containing what

can be assumed to be material generated during the rehearsal/research process. Large sheets of paper filled with keywords are taped on the stage walls. While claiming truth, the actors appear as quasi-characters, with small elements of a 'role', when acting surprised, lost or in disagreement with each other. They also wear costumes which look slightly outdated. Zadara himself admits to combining a documentary interest with a fictional world on stage, reminiscent of Hollywood films about journalist investigations mainly from the 1970s, such as *All The President's Men*, *The Post*, or *Spotlight* (Zadara, 2023).

Having the 1970s as a reference seemed fitting at a venue whose institutional aim of a politically engaged theatre had its roots in that very period. Created in 1944, Teatr Powszechny was redefined and redesigned several times, but its current character can be traced to 1975, when it was reopened after a five-year renovation. The new Powszechny's vocation was to combine two paradoxical functions: entertainment and political engagement. Its first director, Zygmunt Hübner, whose name the theatre currently bears[35], understood theatre as a space of constant negotiation between a mainstream, attractive distraction, on the one hand, and a social mission on the other. In a country where censorship was an official institution of the Communist state, such a social mission implied constant negotiation between what *could* and what *should* be said. Hübner and his milieu consequently developed a theatre devoted to social change, playing games to outsmart the censors. As I describe in Chapter 1, with the collapse of communism in 1989, political theatre lost its main topic – the critique of the political regime and the contemplation of the individual's role and responsibility within such a system – and Teatr Powszechny, along with many other public theatres in Poland, stopped having a specific purpose. The many changes in the venue's character (with, for instance, an episode of staging popular plays with leading roles played by film stars) brought about the gradual loss of a loyal, stable audience.

When in 2014 Paweł Łysak took over Powszechny as artistic director, he set a clear new agenda, which asserted a radically engaged, political theatre, and reclaimed the legacy of Zygmunt Hübner's original concept for Powszechny. The theatre's motto 'Teatr, który się wtrąca' – 'A theatre that gets in the way' – is a quote from Hübner:

[35] The full name is The Zygmunt Hübner Powszechny Theatre.

> I am for a theatre that gets in the way, […] a theatre that gets in the way of politics, of social life and of the most intimate human affairs. For a theatre that has its own opinions about these issues, states them openly and attempts to defend them – from the stage, of course. (Hübner 2000: 23)

Stating issues openly has, since 2014, become a Powszechny specialty. Most of the shows produced at the venue can be described in a short statement defining their 'issue', connected to urgent matters of contemporary Poland. Here are a few recent examples: Agnieszka Błońska's *Orlando. Biografie* (2022) is about the identities of the LGBTQ+ community, Roza Sarkisian's *Radio Mariia* (2022) concerns the role of the Catholic Church in Polish society, Weronika Szczawińska's *Grzyby* (2023) is an ecological performance about mushrooms, Jakub Skrzywanek's *Opowieści niemoralne* (2022) is about contemporary sexuality. All of those are shows which take a clear (usually political) stance, participating in public debates happening in Warsaw at the time. In a recent article for the HowlRound internet site, theatre director Howard Shalwitz marvelled at how all the shows at the renowned Divine Comedy (Boska Komedia) festival in Krakow 'reflected the immediate political and social realities of Poland' (Shalwitz 2023). Powszechny has become the golden standard for such an approach to theatre production. The consistency of this line of programming has built Powszechny a loyal audience who share a set of references, and more generally, a discourse. Extending the tradition of a Polish humanism with its roots in the ideas of Enlightenment (Kizwalter 2020: 56-70), this discourse validates the claims of oppressed minorities, is fiercely critical of hegemonic power structures (be them institutions such as the Catholic Church or hegemonic discourses like heteronormativity) and is more broadly progressive politically. While publicly identifying with the popular critique of Enlightenment espoused in the West (Sztarbowski 2021), the artistic management of Powszechny has developed a type of social engagement and educational mission which at times seem taken straight out of Polish Enlightenment. Besides questions of equal rights, tolerance, and a critique of privileged groups, such is certainly the conviction that theatre, and particularly public theatre, is quintessential for social progress (Płaza 1981: 36-38): 'We should talk about Poland, about our issues and […] theatre is a good platform for that', declared director Paweł Łysak (2014) at the start of his tenure. It was thus a logical place for Zadara to arrive with the proposal to stage *Justice*.

The Curse

'Everything in this show is true'; *Justice*'s (and, by extension, *Responsibility*'s) claim to truth can be seen as an echo of, or a reply to, a memorable line from the most discussed (and, for many, most infamous) theatre performance in contemporary Polish theatre – Oliver Frljić's *Klątwa* (*The Curse*), which premiered at Teatr Powszechny in 2017: 'Everything that happens on the stage is fiction'. Frljić's performance is arguably among the most written-about productions in the history of Polish theatre (eg. Łuksza 2017, Luter 2017, Füllner 2020, Stokfiszewski 2022; for a summary of the debate: Adamiecka-Sitek 2020). A critique of the power of the Polish Catholic Church, whose most controversial scenes concerned child abuse scandals, *The Curse* had serious consequences on a local and national level: it radicalised and polarised the public sphere, tarnished the Catholic Church's image, brought about regular and violent protests at the entrance to Teatr Powszechny and a deliberate contamination of the stage with a toxic substance after one of the shows (leading to a staff member being hospitalised), and resulted in several of the actors receiving death threats. It caused an uproar on the political right and constituted Teatr Powszechny as, to some, the ultimate political theatre which confronts the most difficult issues head-on, and to others, the annoying venue which aims at controversy and conflict (Adamiecka-Sitek 2020). *The Curse* was a passionate, sometimes raging, at other times, self-ironic performance which presented its documentary theme mainly in a series of monologues, ranging from (what was presented as) the autobiographical to the clearly fictional. The title 'curse' referred to a play by the Polish Romantic playwright Stanisław Wyspiański, whose fragments were also included in the production. But Wyspiański was not so much staged as used as an excuse to access difficult social issues while claiming to be making fiction. As the show progressed, the ambiguity of such a statement settled in. Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford point out that in documentary theatre not only do fiction and reality mix, but fiction may give the impression of giving better access to truth than fact (2013). In a space where everything is 'fiction', some very difficult truths can be told.[36] Yet Frljić did not stop there. Being quite aware of the anti-theatrical bias, which holds that theatricality is an enemy of truth (Barish 1985), he

[36] Although Agata Adamiecka notices that, instead of positing a documentary mirror to Polish society, Frljić focused on triggering an affective reaction (2020). Her article also serves as an excellent introduction to the production and its aftermath.

used this to his advantage, making statements in the production that he would never get away with off the stage.[37] The most notorious such case was when an actress described a 'hypothetical' scenario where money would be collected to hire a hitman who would kill the right-wing politician Jarosław Kaczyński. Thriving on the insistence that there is only room for fiction in theatre, Frljić attributed full responsibility for the association of stage events with facts to the spectators.[38] Still, not everyone agreed. The following years saw an escalation of violence in the public sphere. When two years later the president of Gdańsk Paweł Adamowicz was assassinated by a right-wing fanatic, the critic and director of the *Teatr* review Jacek Kopciński accused *The Curse* of crossing an ethical boundary and allowing the idea of assassination of a public figure to be seriously considered and socially conceivable, as 'the power of the "spoken out" is, in theatre, equal to the power of the "performed" [*uczynionego*]' (2019).

The legal responsibility for the words spoken on the stage is a concern shared by other documentary theatre-makers. Meg Mumford (2013: 152-158) gives the example of how the Australian company version 1.0 protect themselves from legal trouble in their documentary performance *CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident)* (2004). As the text, which is a direct quote from a tribunal transcript, is being delivered in a way that does not attempt neutrality ('the female performer […] reads [the text] in a very deep and slow voice off a beer coaster while turning the coaster in circles to decipher the tiny writing'), a commentary reminiscent of the Brechtian V-effect is being projected using an overhead projector:

> WE KNOW THAT YOU KNOW WE ARE NOT REALLY THE SENATORS/
> WHO TOOK PART IN THE CMI SENATE INQUIRY/

[37] Frljić's understanding of engagement is very different from Hübner's legacy, who wrote, in his 1983 short text 'Prayer':

> Lord, let me find understanding and tolerance in myself, so that I accept the fact that the arguments of the next generations do not have to be false just because I do not share them. So that I recognize the right of others. Give me hearing fine enough to hear the lie of my own words. Give me sight strong enough to see myself as others see me (Hübner 1983).

[38] This was, notably, the line of defence of the show's authors when they were accused of sacrilege and offending religious feelings.

STEPHEN IS A LOT SHORTER THAN SENATOR COOK AND DEBORAH WHO
PLAYS SENATOR FAULKNER IS ACTUALLY A/
WOMAN/
WE FOUND THAT OUT AFTER THE AUDITION.

Mumford explains that, among the above text's different functions, 'We are also put in contact with the company's legal reality: it is in their interests to declare their artifice in order to avoid being penalised for a misleading treatment of Senate Committee evidence' (Garde and Mumford 2013: 156). The projected text protects the creators from an oversimplified association of representation with identification in a mimetic verbatim staging. In the Polish context, however, Frljić's ostensible pointing to the fictionality of representation (declaring the actors are not the characters they are playing) was not enough to protect the show from being treated as presenting veridical statements. The outrage of significant (and outspoken) parts of the Polish population, including people who did actually see the show, indicated that scenes and statements considered offensive or libellous were not neutralised by the discursive insistence on fictionality.

A common explanation for such a stubborn persistence of non-fictionality is that documentary performances present the audience with what Mumford and Garde call 'ontologically unstable phenomena' (2013: 152). The spectators cannot be sure how what is being shown connects to an outside world. Typically, this is interpreted as a dismantling of realist ambitions whose aim was to suggest a faithful representation of reality (Borowski and Sugiera 2007: xxiv). Yet Frljić plays on that instability to effectively dismantle not just the sense of reality, which theatre audiences are accustomed to, but more importantly, the sense of *fiction* of the representation. A strategy he uses frequently is to create self-referential monologues which put in doubt their own fictionality, creating a sort of developed version of the liar paradox ('Everything I say is a lie'), only inverted: if a known liar – the actor – begins to prove that her 'lies' are part of a truth, how can we still consider them a (universal, unequivocal) liar? On multiple occasions in the performance, the actors/characters tell the audience that a part of their monologue was written for them, or that they had to convince the director to allow them to say something. Some of their claims are not easily classifiable as fact or fiction. For instance, Barbara Wysocka delivers a powerful monologue about having parts of that very monologue cut out, and then proceeds to explain what those parts were about: it was (and effectively is) a

scathing critique of the director's arrogance. Although it is possible that this was a fictional story, it seems likely that the actor had a genuine problem with the director's attitude and was given a chance to declare it on the stage – especially since her arguments make sense. The theatrical apparatus is challenged to the point where it cannot protect what is being said on stage as fiction. Another actor, Michał Czachor, says he was given a monologue to interpret, which he was happy to do because he wanted a big role, but the condition of saying the monologue was that he would copulate with a photo of the director. Is this a joke? Are we to believe this as a truth claim? Czachor goes on to perform the copulation. It is thus possible that the conversation with the director actually happened. The recurring text about everything on stage being fiction does not allow us to overcome the 'ontologically unstable phenomena'. The 'liminality' of the experience, to use Erika Fischer-Lichte's term (2008), is unstable to the extent of not being able to protect the audience from what seems to *not* be fiction.

After *The Curse,* it became clear that theatre, in contemporary Poland, is important and dangerous – also for its creators. The ontological instability does not just mean ambiguity or uncertainty. To the contrary: what happens on the stage does not stay on the stage. That is why a year later, at the beginning of *Justice*, and identically, at the beginning of *Responsibility* a few years after, in their first words, one of the actors says (or rather, reads): 'Good evening, during the show, the actors read all their texts from prompters. Also now. The actors do not speak a memorised text, as every word uttered in this performance carries legal responsibility'. This responsibility is far from fiction. While there have been no cases of convictions for statements made by actors on stage, there are very widely discussed precedents in other artistic areas. In 2003, visual artist Dorota Nieznalska was convicted of offending religious feelings for an installation involving an image of male genitalia on a cross. She suffered consequences both on a personal level (she was sentenced to six months' probation) and in terms of her career (her works stopped being shown in public art institutions; Sienkiewicz 2011).[39] Some years later, in 2015, the film-maker Andrzej Żuławski was convicted of unfairly portraying a famous actress, his ex-girlfriend, in a semi-fictional memoir which contained a character that could be interpreted as the actress (albeit the name and background differed). Although all theatre artists who have been put to trial have so far been acquitted, the audiences of the Teatr Powszechny have been witness to

[39] Nieznalska's legal battle lasted until 2010, when she was ultimately acquitted.

several such publicised legal battles resulting from *The Curse*. Through this experience, they have developed a unique understanding, and expectation, of the power of truth claims in art. Zadara used this horizon of expectations, first in *Justice*, then in *Responsibility*.

There is another important lesson that Zadara takes away from the *Curse*. While the production undeniably provoked a monumental scandal, it is debatable whether the changes it brought about in Poland were for the better. One reason may have been that, as S.E. Wilmer put it, while 'some theatre artists have used documentary theatre to question concepts like truth and authenticity, this […] approach has not been so helpful for artists advancing a political agenda' (2018 : 75). Affirmative initiatives require affirmative means. This is analogous to what some climate scientists describe as the problem of critical minds who have difficulty acknowledging truths about the climate changes, opting for distrust and scepticism instead.[40] That is why Zadara avoids the path of the self-reflexive documentary theatre of Oliver Frljić: he refuses to play ironic games or stretch the limits of fiction or fact (Zadara 2018). Contrary to Frljić's exercises in ambiguous statements, Zadara is also frank about the epistemic claims of his production: his claim to truth is unequivocal. He thus openly rejects not just one of Ryan's main premises regarding theatre – that it cannot leave the territory of fiction, but also the often-repeated idea that theatre cannot provide access to a reality other than its own (Borowski and Sugiera 2008: xvi-xvii; Stephenson 2019). Instead of 'declaring the artifice' of mimesis, he refrains from it altogether, while acknowledging that without the quotation marks of saying somebody else's lines, the one who makes the statements may be held accountable.

Responsibility

In *Responsibility*, Michał Zadara tackles the topic of the horrific situation at the Polish-Belorussian border (still ongoing in 2025), a terrain filled with dense forests and swamps, where thousands of refugees in transit from countries such as Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan are refused entry and are pushed back into Belarussian territory. Most arrive by foot, sometimes in freezing temperatures, exhausted after wandering through the wetlands for days. The Polish authorities

[40] I describe this more in depth in the Introduction.

not only push the refugees back, but refuse to assist them in any way and prohibit assistance from Polish NGOs. The Polish border patrol effectively condemns the refugees to mistreatment from the Belarussian soldiers on the other side, occasionally also beating them, and in many cases their lack of assistance results in death from injuries and exhaustion (Klimowicz 2025; Baranowska and Czarnota, 2024). What is more, in September 2021, the government, asserting this situation as an attempt (on the part of the Belorussian regime, which they claim lures the refugees towards the Polish border) of disrupting the stability of the Polish state, declared a state of emergency in the region adjacent to the Belarussian border, refusing access to journalists and non-residents (Fiłończuk *et al.*, 2024). The state of emergency was introduced on questionable grounds. Patryk Wachowiec from the Civil Development Forum – FOR Foundation writes that 'there are serious doubts as to the real motives behind the state of emergency' (2021). According to Wachowiec, the measure is much more severe than those applied in the broader and more significant crisis that was the Covid-19 pandemic. Following other commentators, he also questions the legal ramifications of the radical limitations of freedom of information, as well as the choice of a state of emergency instead of martial law (2021). What is more, the state of emergency was later extended indefinitely through the introduction of a new law, deemed unconstitutional by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and several other institutions (Chołodowski 2021).

Zadara presents the Belarussian border crisis by combining different narrative strategies. The concise synopsis, penned by the director, on the English version of the Powszechny website[41] gives a good overview of what *Responsibility* is:

> RESPONSIBILITY documents the ongoing humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarussian border.
> RESPONSIBILITY asks: has there been an unlawful violation of human rights on the Polish-Belarusian border, and if so, who is legally responsible.
> RESPONSIBILITY's three threads:
> 1) the fate of the refugees,

[41] The text has since been replaced (as of December 2023) by a translation of a different description which appears on the Polish version of the site.

2) an analysis of the legal responsibility for their suffering,

3) fragments of J. S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion.

(*Responsibility* 2023)

On a narrative level, *Responsibility* tells the story of Issa Jerjos, a 24-year-old Syrian IT student. Issa flees civil war and hunger by moving to Lebanon, and subsequently, to Iraq. At this point, we are introduced to the second protagonist, Zainab Almshakheel, an Iraqi teenager. Their stories are then told in parallel. They are both lured into an illegal migration scheme created by the Belarussian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. The refugees are being told that the easiest way to get into the European Union is via the Belarussian-Polish border. In exchange for significant amounts of money, the Belarussian companies offer to transport the refugees to Minsk, and from there, to drop them off near the Polish border, which they only need to cross by foot to ask for legal asylum in the EU. What they are not told is that to get to the border they will have to walk for several days through a dense forest without any guidance. Provided they manage to get that far, they will be met by hostile border guards who have been instructed to push them back across the border regardless of their medical condition or asylum status (according to international law, asylum seekers should not be removed from the host country's territory until their case is assessed; Włodarczyk 2021). Issa and Zainab travel to Minsk one day apart. Their stories will have different endings. Zainab with her family is, after multiple pushbacks from Polish territory, finally taken care of by activists. They manage to provide her the necessary support, both medical and legal. Issa, meanwhile, ends up in a Polish hospital, but is then transported back to the Belarussian forest. He makes it back to Poland, gets more ill, but stays in hiding for fear of being pushed back yet again. He dies.

The above stories are quickly intercepted by what will be the core of the performance: an investigation into the political and criminal responsibility for the pushbacks and the introduction and extension of the state of emergency and its tragic consequences. The investigation is, for the most part, a legal one. The quest is to show, first, why the actions at the Polish-Belarussian border are illegal, second, who bears the legal responsibility. The actors describe what is happening, then proceed to analyse the legal status of the events, as well as trying to identify the persons who are to be held accountable. The premise is similar to that of *Justice*: since the juridical system does not allow for effective action, the theatre stage provides

an opportunity to address the pressing issue on one's own terms. Thus, the rehearsal time was nearly all spent on legal research and a journalist-style investigation. The way Zadara went about organising the development of the piece confirms the legalistic approach. Although the research was conducted primarily by Zadara's students at Warsaw's National Theatre Academy (they are credited as co-authors of the script)[42], they were supported by a team of activists and lawyers. The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and the refugee support activist organisation Salam Lab (part of the Grupa Granica which works directly at the Polish-Belarussian border) are both coproducers of the performance, while legal support was provided by as many as five lawyers: Jacek Dubois, Marta Górczyńska, Rafał Kozerski, Maciej Nowicki and Mikołaj Pietrzak. This impressive team sets the material background for the devising of the project: its creators are, to a large extent, directly involved in real-life situations which the show addresses. Their co-responsibility for the script projects the idea of political engagement and legal competence, providing the audience with the assurance that, on a textual level, what is being said is binding.

However, while the script was created in a devised, collective process, the final authorship of the production lies with the director. And directors sometimes radically alter, eliminate, or substitute the text of the play they are staging.[43] Zadara is careful to distance himself from this custom. What we see on stage is a retelling of the investigation findings, provided to us by three actors. More specifically, the actors read a script out loud which states the facts they found related to the case. Point by point, situation by situation, we discover the intricacies of Polish and international law and its relation to the recent events. The conclusion is unequivocal: what has been happening on the Polish-Belarussian border is a crime, and the person ultimately responsible for that crime is the Minister of Interior Mariusz Kamiński, as well as the Commander-in-Chief of the Border Guard Tomasz Praga, but also the individual guards who have enacted an unconstitutional law.

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[42] 'Script – Michał Zadara, Małgorzata Andruszkiewicz, Agata Andrzejewska, Zofia Królak, Milena Kuchnia, Aleksandra Łukomska, Aleksandra Majewska, Filip Płuciennik, Barbara Rojek, Julia Rygielska, Maja Sanak, Hanna Stacewicz, Michał Stańczak, Gabriela Tokarska, Katarzyna Trzeciak, in cooperation with representatives of academics' lawyers' and theatre communities' ('Responsibility' 2023).

[43] This was the case of Grotowski's staging of Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wyzwolenie*, for example, or, in contemporary times, this is how Krzysztof Garbaczewski approaches the classical texts he 'stages'.

Responsibility's form is similar to *Justice,* but even more minimal. This is obvious since the moment we enter the space: the two large, nondescript, rehearsal-room desks from that show are still here (which is all the more poignant as the premiere of *Justice* took place on the same stage), yet this time the mimetic, stylized prop-based rendering of documentation has been all but replaced by forms of immaterial documentation. The piles of papers or the sheets filled with notes covering the walls, symbolizing an investigative process, have been replaced by a simple video projector standing between the two desks.[44] It displays video documentation of the refugees and their testimony, as well as legal documentation. *Justice* also had video projections, but using the venue's standard projector suspended on one of the trusses and invisible to the spectators. Putting the projector centre stage, on a support between the two main tables, underlines its importance, while at the same time marking the transparency of the event. By *transparency*, here, I mean the understanding – or even, to be more precise, the conditions of understanding – of the mechanisms that underlie the spectacle's effective work, its phenomenal presence. The artist achieves this by exposing the device which in *Justice* had produced another kind of *transparency* – what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grutin refer to as the transparent immediacy of the experience (1999: 21-24), its seeming disappearance which produced the sensation of there being no medium, only the directly accessible content (the projected image was 'simply there'). The non-appearance of the projector could be seen as part of the invisible conventions which, according to Borowski and Sugiera, participate in the production of credibility which they find fundamentally, and problematically, manipulative (2007: xxiv). When the usually hidden element is exposed, it strips away some of the transparency of the experience in favour of its material opacity. Bolter and Grutin call this *hypermediacy*. On a psychological level, hypermediacy works by using the acknowledgement of the medium to insist on 'an experience of the real' (1991: 71). Because the medium is real, the experience may be understood as more 'authentic'. What is obtained this way is akin to what Roland Barthes famously called the 'reality effect' (1989: 141-48): 'the result of a form of citation that confers the status of

[44] The only stage element similar in its mimetic character to the office mess of *Justice* is a small pin board with neatly arranged post-its which could be an echo of the illustration-like props from the previous show, or, more probably, a schematic plan of *Responsibility,* scene by scene. Next to it is a coffee table filled with cups, tea boxes and an electric kettle. These two elements share an ambiguity: they would have been pragmatic, functional objects, were it not the context of the stage.

legitimacy upon the artwork with the concomitant sense that what is represented is real or has a relationship with what is real' (Martin 2013: 5).

The projector becomes a 'form of citation' by turning into a stage prop. But the concept of 'reality effect' comes with its caveats. Although Barthes himself sees in the reality effect an attempt to 'challenge, in a radical fashion, the age-old aesthetic of "representation"' (1989: 148), he does not consider it a genuine, effective way of reaching reality, calling it a 'referential illusion' and pointing to its ambiguous status: 'for just when these details [which create the "reality effect"] are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do – without saying so – is *signify* it' (1989: 148; emphasis in original). In this case, it is not just a question of semiotics, but also of a hermeneutical reading of the situation: there was no pragmatic reason to move the equipment from where it was. As a matter of fact, moving it was meant to signify transparency, but did not necessarily provide it. The 'hidden' projector of *Justice* is not a *coup de théâtre* in a venue which has it fixed permanently. Moving it to the stage, on the other hand, is. It creates the spectacle of transparency: it quite literally *stages* it. But another way of seeing this is that the spectacle of a stripped-down staging of the devised text allows for the documentary aspect of the performance to persist: truth claims are discretely supported by theatrical devices, not overwhelmed by them, which helps spectators to not treat them as fiction. And if they do not, it is because, while leaving the territory of fiction, *Responsibility* does not operate the way post-dramatic works have, 'erupting' with reality to surprise spectators who expect fiction, which creates the confusion Fischer-Lichte calls 'liminality' and Frljić enjoys so much. Instead, it acts as what Christopher Balme calls a postfictional performance (2023), taking the 'real' as its foundational framing. I argue that, by doing that, *Responsibility* 'produces factuality' – to use Marie-Laure Ryan's taxonomy of factual narratives.

Theatrical Factuality

Many scholars seem weary of theatre's truth claims. Jenn Stephenson considers the insecurity regarding facts a crucial quality of documentary theatre (2019), and Carol Martin claims artists create 'ways to understand personal, social, and political phenomena' by questioning 'documentary certainty' (2013: 176). In the words of Janelle Reinelt, 'over-determined by anti-theatricalism's distrust of mimesis, it is easy to see why documentary claims are almost always

met with both excitement and suspicion' (2009: 8). Another such case is Marie-Laure Ryan, who provides an insightful analysis of epistemological discourse in narratives which can be applied to factuality in documentary theatre, all the while dismissing the possibility of theatre being a place for facts in the first place. In her 'Fact, Fiction and Media', Ryan argues that theatre cannot enter 'a factual pact between author and user on the basis of which users expect true, reliable and verifiable information'. Cinema can propose such a pact, as can non-fiction prose, oral narratives of personal experience, travel writing, photography, video, and in some cases also drawing and painting. Theatre, however, is not one of them. Instead, it belongs to a group that includes computer games and graphic narratives which, though they can be 'based on a true story', cannot claim veridical representation, that is, a reliable account of reality. The reason, according to Ryan, is that theatre is 'always acted' (2020: 82-86).

Ryan accepts the possibility of a live non-fictional performance ('represented by storytelling jams'), though it requires the performers to speak their own texts that represent their own experience and beliefs. Such a performance, she says, 'could fall into what I have called "weak factuality", but the performers would no longer be actors, and the performance would no longer be theatre'. Ryan is aware that this strict judgement stems from a conservative definition of theatre ('a live performance by actors who pretend to be characters'), and could be modified if we redefine theatre as, for instance, 'any kind of public performance taking place on stage' (2020: 87-90). What I want to claim, however, is that even if we keep the conservative definition, theatre can have not only *weak* factuality but *strong* factuality.

Ryan (2020: 83) proposes four epistemological categories corresponding to representational texts ('texts that represent states of affairs'):

1. strong factuality – where claims need support or proof (e.g. biography, historiography);
2. weak factuality – where such support is not necessary (e.g. autobiography, travel writing);
3. weak fictionality – where the fictional world is very close to the real world (e.g. nonfiction novels);

4. strong fictionality – when the fictional world can be clearly distinguished from the real world.

These categories are not exclusive, and Zadara's *Responsibility* contains three of the four. To begin with the last category, *Responsibility* contains elements such as mimetic scenes (eg. of interaction between characters), which set it in a clearly fictional discourse, one of strong fictionality. In contrast, the one category missing is that of weak fictionality. The actors take great care in not guessing or imagining what happened to the refugees. For instance, they provide hard data regarding living conditions in Lebanon (75% of people living below the poverty line, 1,5 million refugees, 400% inflation), but make it a point not to draw conclusions about what made Issa Jerjos move to Iraq: 'We do not know exactly why Issa Jerjos leaves Lebanon. What we do know is that Lebanon is not able to provide Syrian refugees a stable life'. The open admission of limited knowledge is, by the same token, a claim to have *some* knowledge. Thus, *Responsibility* proposes truth claims regarding reality and provides support for the claims, in a way analogous to a legal proceeding, which is an indication of strong factuality.

Factuality, according to Samuli Björninen, is 'an appeal to something that has the authority to inform opinion' (2019). The actors appeal to what Björninen calls *institutional authority* when they refer to the Polish constitution and other legal regulations. When they tell stories of the refugees, as well as when they describe the political activities which led to the tragic events at the border, the actors appeal to *referential authority*. Björninen names two other types of authority: *experiential authority* – where the personal experience is being appealed to, and *speculative authority,* where an alternative, invented scenario is being proposed. Zadara steers away from the latter, as it would weaken the matter-of-factness of the narrative. As for the former, it corresponds to Ryan's *weak factuality*, and is present in the performance, albeit only in a mediatised form, on video. An example is the video where Zainab Almshakheel tells the story of her life in Iraq. The appeal itself is a personal, experiential one. What is notable is that the medium of video serves as a legitimising device, suggesting a direct connection to the outside world with its claims to truth. No such first-person account will be given by the actors on stage. The reasons behind this have to do with circumscribing the classic problem of the actor's ambiguous identity on stage, and more broadly, moving beyond the paradigm of theatre as unable to leave the space of indeterminacy. As Domietta Torlasco put it, 'Cinematographic and

phonographic recordings can repeat themselves accurately and indefinitely, bringing about the recurrence of the past of which they are the indexical trace' (2013: 92). The power of this certainty is transferred to a video which claims experiential authority. Meanwhile, as such, weak factuality is a blurry zone where any proposed truth claim is detached from proof or other forms of reference. In a stage discourse of strong factuality it could be seen as a weakness, a groundless claim made by an actor – 'words, words, words'. To avoid this impression, Zadara goes as far as to leave out any accounts where the performers' positionality would be included.

Several reviewers of *Responsibility* consider that the performance's factuality was made possible by the total abandonment of characters and acting: '*Responsibility* (…) does not go for any make-believe' (Bocheńska 2022), or 'the actors are reduced to lecturers reading a text off prompters' (Mrozek 2022). But upon a careful inspection, the characters – and acting – are far from gone. One actor 'arrives late'. Another 'looks for a document', or 'asks another actor questions'. I put these actions in quotation marks, as the actors, here, are acting. They move from strong factuality, where, for instance, they describe the life of a real person, to strong fictionality, typical of a traditional theatre production. What is more, once scripted, the roles can be interpreted by different actors; as a matter of fact, one of the roles has an alternate actor (on some of the nights Mateusz Janicki is Piotr Głowacki's alternate). If the actors change, then the 'natural' behaviour is merely a naturalistic reproduction of a role, without what Philippe Lejeune calls the 'magnetic force' of a real name activating the belief of the first-person narrative (cited in Allamand 2018: 53).[45] How can the words the actors are saying, in first-person discourse, be then taken at face value? In one of his famous 1955 lectures on speech acts, J.L. Austin says of theatre: 'Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use' (2018: 22; italics in original). The words spoken by the actors seem to convey the meaning we habitually associate them with, yet cannot be taken at face value, or, as Austin has it, they 'cannot be understood as promising'. When an actor on stage says they love someone, they do not really mean it – they are acting. Meanwhile, regarding *Responsibility*, none of the reviewers or spectators I spoke to had any doubt about the veracity claims in what was being said, whether they noticed the theatricality or not (and whether they appreciated such a format or not). There is a quality about the performance which allows

[45] I will address the functioning of the first-person account in Chapter 4.

spectators to see it as making truth claims all the while belonging in some respects to strong fictionality. We can learn about the world, acknowledge claims regarding the law and the current political situation in Poland, all the while accepting certain *parasitic*, fictional elements.

An interesting recent proposal in German narratology introduces the distinction between the *factive* – relating to true information – and the *factual*, relating to the non-fiction genre or mode of representation (Rajewsky 2020). In the case of *Responsibility*, once the work is established as factual, it may contain elements which are not factive (fictive elements). This situation corresponds to how Ryan, following Plantinga, describes documentary films:

> neither pure indexical records, since they contain other elements, nor are they pure assertions, since assertion is a linguistic act with narrowly defined propositional content; instead, they should be regarded as assemblages of documents that are proposed as 'veridical,' that is, non-deceptive. (Ryan 2020 : 85)

How was this factuality achieved? There seems to be a paradox here. Acting, having a stage role, is used to convey truth as a dry presentation of fact after fact. It could appear much more logical to attempt being closer to the audience, more believable, informal. The go-to method of many documentary performances is the reality effect (Barthes 1989). The argument is that the audience needs to have a feeling that what is happening on the stage is real (Borowski and Sugiera 2007: xvi). But the reality effect is a trap, leading to a naturalist spiral: the better the reality effect, the more obvious the virtuosity of the actors or of the director, and the more distant reality becomes.

A key aspect of *Responsibility* is that nobody on the stage is trying to convince us of the reality of what is being said. There are some common 'proofs' of reality – mainly the projections of photos and short videos of refugees – but the text is presented mostly as a long series of facts given in direct address, indeed reminiscent of court trials. But besides the legalistic and fact-searching undertones of the entire show, a more obvious and palpable signifier of factuality is the presence of the actor Maja Ostaszewska. Ostaszewska is one of the biggest stars of Polish cinema and theatre, who acted in some of the most important box office hits of the last 20 years. But her stage and film roles are not the only context she is known for. At the same time, she is the most recognisable face of the activist movement trying to help the refugees at the Polish-Belorussian border. She speaks publicly about her volunteering work at the border, she co-

organises manifestations and was one of the most outspoken critics of Poland's right-wing political authorities. Her engagement with issues related to the refugee crisis is a factive framing of theatrical factuality – a real-life framing which allows spectators to consider what is happening on stage as a reliable attempt to tell the truth.

Let us for a minute imagine what Ostaszewska says on the stage turns out to be a fictionalised account, combining fragments of documented stories into a fictional character. A few fictional events are added for additional suspense or drama: a plot twist, a last message to the world, or a dramatic chase scene. This could be made, as was the case in the past, 'for the sake of a better theatre experience' (I describe such productions in Chapter 1). It would be justified by the belief that, as Ryan asserts, 'When a man-made picture is created as an aesthetic object, it requires an aesthetic attitude from the spectator, and this attitude cancels the importance of the distinction between fact and fiction' (2020: 92). If that is not the case, it is because, as I argue, 'aesthetic attitude' does not work like an on-off switch abruptly overriding questions of fact and fiction. As theatrical factuality is introduced, audiences acknowledge actual truth claims are being proposed on the stage. The stakes of this situation can be high. In the case of the claims Maja Ostaszewska is making, the spectators are utterly aware that if she 'could not be understood as promising', she would never be trusted again as an activist and politically engaged figure.

Gustaw Holoubek, an iconic Polish actor of the twentieth century, describes how, before World War II, there was an 'unwritten code of conduct' that required actors to limit their social appearances. They were to maintain an aura of mystery: 'they were not allowed to appear too often in public places, to frequent regular restaurants or cafés, to blend in with the crowd, to become commonplace [*pospolitować się*]' (2007: 425). The uncertainty about who they really were, as human beings rather than characters, was, claims Holoubek, key to how actors were perceived. All this changed with the introduction of television. Now, the actor became a frequent guest in every household. The mystery was substituted by a psychological sensation of acquaintance. The actor, the TV personality and the human became difficult, if not impossible, to separate. Actors had to learn how to live with this new status – and how to embrace the responsibility that came with it (2007: 425). Who one was offstage became relevant, and as the media's presence developed exponentially – increasingly so. Maja Ostaszewska is one of the actors who has been using this often-troublesome framing to push for causes such as human

rights and social engagement. The presence of that backstory in her roles has had a powerful impact on how they are being interpreted by audiences (and on how she is being cast). When turning to documentary theatre, this relation becomes all the more obvious.

Amanda Stuart Fisher describes how ‘contemporary verbatim theatre tends to use personal narrative to authenticate a particular truth process or to validate the narrative the play seeks to establish’ (2020: 64). In this case, Ostaszewska never mentions any of her backstory. She does not refer to her own experience. She remains ‘objective’, as if telling a story anyone could tell. That is to say, the decision not to cast Ostaszewska in a first-person autobiographic account meant that the space of weak factuality was ceded to the possibility of strong factuality. The actor took on the role of an amateur lawyer and activist. Because of her background, she was believable in this role and thus contributed to the performance as documentary or veridical representation, notwithstanding its fictional aspects.

Such a simple, straightforward setup is not typical of Zadara’s style. He is known for his elaborate and complex shows; at about the same time as this production, he directed a high-budget, three-hour staging of Olga Tokarczuk’s *Księgi Jakubowe* (*The Books of Jacob,* 2022) at Warsaw’s National Theatre with a cast of over twenty actors. One reviewer claimed that ‘one watches Zadara's performance like a panoramic film’ (Miłkowski 2022). Most actors play several characters, the scenes are additionally transformed by a moving set and monumental projections. The story is told like a fable, with added layers of historical commentary. But fundamentally, *The Books of Jacob* is a staging of a novel and does not need to build credibility as a representation of truth. Meanwhile in *Responsibility*, to an even greater extent than in *Justice*, the minimised setting allows Zadara to limit the distraction that the ‘aesthetic object’ Ryan writes about can introduce. Zadara does this by stripping away many of the conventions of theatricality, minimising the scenography, as well as the roles/characters, eliminating lighting changes, and substituting reading aloud for the utterance of a memorised text.

As the customary tools of theatricality are minimised, the question is whether the show’s truth claims are thus given credibility. Here is a fragment of the script:

> Issa Jerjos - In the year 2021 when our story begins, Issa Jerjos is twenty-four years old. He is a Christian - Issa is Arabic for Jesus.

He lives in Hama, the fourth largest city in Syria. He studies computer science, but drops out of college to earn money and support his family.
"Syria" slide
In Hama, however, it is difficult to earn a living.
There has been a civil war in Syria since 2011. 80% of Syrians live below the poverty line, more than half are at risk of starvation.
"map" slide
3 years earlier, Russian planes bombed Hama.
The map shows the intensity of the war.
The darkest colour means the worst situation. Hama, the hometown of Issa Jerjos, is located in the very south, in this area.

(Zadara *et al*. 2022: 2)

Every single sentence spoken by the actors in the above fragment is a truth claim. Some of them can be easily verified ('There has been a civil war in Syria since 2011'), others are more difficult ('Issa Jerjos - In the year 2021 when our story begins, Issa Jerjos is twenty-four years old') or have a large degree of interpretation ('In Hama, however, it is difficult to earn a living'). Yet the way the performance is staged concerns more fundamental issues than the particular truth claims which may appear – namely, the reliability of the entire apparatus, the very possibility of relating or representing facts on stage, what Carl Plantinga calls 'veridical representation' (2005: 112). Plantinga uses the term to describe documentary cinema as 'not deceptive', meaning its authors do not intend to deceive, but to the contrary, intend the audience to consider the work as a reliable source of belief about the 'actual world' (2005: 114). In Zadara's case, the intention is clear from the start. As in *Justice*, when entering the space, we see it as a text on a TV screen: 'Everything in this show is true'.

The above sentence is not a guarantee of truth. Theatrical factuality does not imply truth, only truth *claims*. The claims can turn out to be false. One such case is how the name Issa is introduced in the performance: 'He is a Christian - Issa is Arabic for Jesus.' This factual statement establishes an identity which removes the biggest tension many Poles felt regarding migrants: religion. Islamophobia in Poland is pervasive. Portraying the main protagonist as Christian makes him part of a culture with which nearly all Poles (92%) identify. But the name Jesus evokes much more than Christianity, and more than just the idea of innocence and

goodness: as Mariusz Rutkowski from the Polish Language Council describes, in Poland 'this name was (and is) reserved for God' (2020) and is consequently taboo, in Poland as in most European countries (with the exception of Spain).

Zadara uses the symbolic aura of the name to quickly build an analogy. Jesus from Nazareth was also a refugee, outcast and scorned by society. This man, Issa, was our, local, innocent victim. The dramaturgical gesture allows Zadara to create a protagonist – provided we accept the comparison. After all, a taboo remains a taboo. As of 2020, there was a single case of a person named Jezus in Poland. Rutkowski's description of the functioning of the name Jezus in Poland is a reply to a question by a Registry Office worker who had to decide whether the name was appropriate and could be accepted. Rutkowski's answer is negative. He considers that as a social reference the name has such powerful connotations that its use by a living person may be seen as confusing, at best, and as an insult, at worst:

> A name so religiously marked, endowed with a real cult by millions of believers, uniquely identifying Jesus Christ in our cultural circle, is difficult to consider neutral in terms of communication. One can easily imagine the negative reactions of believers who, having encountered someone using such a name, will feel hurt, confused, and it cannot be ruled out that they will also be offended (they may, for example, perceive the use of this name by a person as an attempt at a joke). This can also be seen as depreciating the religious denotation of the name. (Rutkowski 2020)

As an atheist (although brought up in a Catholic home), I cannot be sure this was the reason why, when watching *Responsibility*, I saw the analogy as problematic. It did feel inappropriate, and in hindsight wrong to identify an actual, imperfect and unique person with a god-figure whose innocence turns any act against him into a moral scandal from the outset. The entanglements of any living person require a different way of building values, which acknowledge, for instance, that causing harm to anyone is wrong intrinsically, rather than for their being faultless. I may have not felt this so strongly were the analogy not pushed even further by Zadara illustrating Jesus' passion by playing fragments of Bach's *St Matthew Passion.* The overwhelming pathos of the music and of the evangelist's text (translated during the performance, and thus brought to light) left little room for any other interpretation than that of identifying Issa with Jesus, and not

the historical or mythical or complex figure, but the religious totem and symbol of wronged perfection.

What makes the association of Issa with Jesus Christ even more problematic is that it is misleading. We are told Issa is Christian because the name means 'Jesus'. Implied is the idea that to name someone Jesus the parents identify with the legacy of Jesus Christ as Christians understand it. Yet the name Issa (or Isa), is used as Jesus' proper name specifically in the Quran, and is how Muslims generally refer to him (Djaballah 2004: 19). As a matter of fact, Arab Christians use a different name to refer to Jesus - Yasū'a (Stuart 2008: 235). Thus, it seems Issa was actually Muslim. It appears the suggestion that Issa was Christian was a manipulation. The failure to deliver truth, however, is not a failure of the documentary form. As philosopher Maurizio Ferraris notices (2015), a common misunderstanding is to consider instances of discovering the falsity of a proposition as arguments for the impossibility of knowledge or inexistence of facts. Instead, being able to prove a statement wrong provides the grounds for what Ferraris calls 'new realism'. Demonstrating that 'everything in this show is true' is a false statement does not impede the possibility of truth. It merely falsifies this statement, showing how the *ambition* of claiming truth does not equal infallibility. Were it not possible to establish that, based on the provided information, the particular claim is false, the performance would effectively end up in epistemological limbo. Here, on the contrary, I argue that whether what is being claimed on stage is true or not does not change the claim to factual narrative.

The issue is whether the provocation which claims 'everything in this show is true' does not backfire. For the audience it may be enough to realise or consider some argument or statement as misleading to then question the very factual character of the piece. A performance differs significantly from a research paper, notably in the way it is being experienced. There being hardly any space for discussion – other than a review or reaction piece online, for example – its phenomenological appearance gains great importance. The way it is being perceived is not fruit of a distanced deliberation, but keeps being negotiated throughout the show, and sometimes, indeed, long after.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sketched out why Michał Zadara's *Responsibility* is a legitimate source of factual knowledge about the world – an example of theatrical factuality. While Zadara himself acknowledges the legacy of Brecht and of Peter Handke's *Sprechstücke*, *Responsibility* is indebted to another German tradition: that of the 1960s documentary theatre, which insisted on it being possible to bring facts to the stage. The production is also informed by the context of a daring, provocative political theatre, in Poland in general, and at Teatr Powszechny in particular. In the minimalist, frontal way it is set up, and in its straightforward presentation of facts, *Responsibility* follows *Justice*, a previous show directed by Zadara at Powszechny. I argue both productions could be seen as an answer to Oliver Frljić's manipulation of truth and fiction in *The Curse*, a politically provocative performance that premiered at the same venue. Although it may be seen as a traditional theatre performance, where actors interpret a fixed text in a fictional setting, *Responsibility* is also veridical representation, a non-deceptive proposal containing precisely identifiable truth claims. Being non-deceptive does not entail being 'neutral' or refusing dramaturgical and staging tools, as Zadara's directorial choices exemplify. What is more, 'non-deceptive' does not imply documentary theatre is always true, and some of the statements made in *Responsibility* can be questioned – the possibility of corroboration is an important aspect of its strong factuality.

My central argument in this chapter is that there is an epistemic space available within theatre in which truth claims can emerge and be recognised – and that, in a documentary performance such as *Responsibility*, the resulting theatrical factuality means the claims are verifiable to spectators. The embeddedness of truth claims within theatrical structures does not necessarily diminish their capacity to function in ways comparable to those in non-theatrical contexts. Chapter 3 examines a documentary performance that establishes theatrical factuality precisely by refusing the autonomy – particularly the epistemic autonomy – typically ascribed to theatre. As an extension of non-theatrical space, theatre in this case facilitates the negotiation of truth claims on similar epistemic terms.

CHAPTER 3

EASY THINGS AND *JAWA:*

WHEN IS HETEROTOPIA NOT ENOUGH?

'That's all we have for today, and if you want, you can stay and explore the space, and chat to us'. These were the final words of *JaWa* (2023), a performance by Turkowski&Nowacka, an artist duo known for their personal, seemingly casual documentary productions. The radically understated ending of the show seemed to dissolve the moment of applause in informality: the clapping had barely begun and some spectators were already getting up to go on the stage and enter the small, silver-coated vehicle which stood out as the one clearly scenographic element; others were approaching the artists, Janek Turkowski and Iwona Nowacka, to ask questions about the events which have just been described. It all happened so fast, it felt like the performance was still happening. And in a sense – it was. The way *JaWa* was conceived made sure I considered it as an integral part of the social reality I was now witnessing.

In this chapter, I claim that, while theatre has been commonly analysed as a heterotopia (Foucault 1986; Topinka 2010), some documentary performances operate in a regime of truth that is not best served by being interpreted in terms of heterotopia. If heterotopia proves lacking in an account of such performances, why not move to another conceptualisation? Why keep the term? Heterotopias are useful in describing spaces of exception, where the hegemonic rules are suspended, giving way to the alternative worlds which reconfigure the prevailing episteme (Topinka 2010). Heterotopicity is sometimes seen as an essential quality of all theatre (Foucault 1986); at other times, it is understood as reserved for theatre which unsettles its own – and the audience's – relation to the outside world (Tompkins 2014). In the latter perspective, what is excluded are traditional theatrical forms, whose detachment from the world beyond theatre puts them closer to utopias. What all these interpretations omit are documentary performances where alternative epistemes are refused, both by the artists and by the spectators. This refusal is clear in productions where the 'assertions of veridical representation' (Plantinga 2005: 113) are treated the same way as they would be outside of the theatre context. Put succinctly, the limits of heterotopic interpretation correspond to the limits of theatre's epistemic autonomy. But can

heterotopicity be refused? As Foucault explains, spaces can become or stop being heterotopic, dependent on how they function in the surrounding social reality. Yet, as I show, under certain circumstances heterotopicity can be a quality taken on, or, indeed, dispensed with, voluntarily. As a ship's heterotopia disappears for a repairman who enters on board, treating it as yet another mechanical object, or as a house window can stop functioning as a mirror when lights are turned on on the other side, so, too, can theatre cease to be heterotopic when (and to the extent that) its episteme is levelled with that of the space outside.

To exemplify this situation, I compare a documentary performance that functions heterotopically, Anna Karasińska's *Łatwe rzeczy* (*Easy Things*, 2021), with one rejecting heterotopicity, Turkowski&Nowacka's *JaWa*. The two productions share some important characteristics. Both were made by well-established Polish artists using documentary tools (such as extended interviews or different levels of voice-over commentary) to produce staged insights into the lives of other people. Both tackle social issues extremely directly, and are in this regard emblematic of the engaged Polish theatre after 2005 (which I describe in Chapter 1), using the stage to contend with social injustice. The people they chose to present on the stage are, in both projects, given the role of protagonist. Protagonism, here, means that, as opposed to such work as *Minefield* (2016) by Lola Arias or *100% City* (2008-ongoing) by the group Rimini Protokoll, they are not on stage to represent a particular social group or problem. Instead, be they professional actors (in *Easy Things*) or people in crisis of homelessness (in *JaWa*), they reveal themselves to us as complex, at times contradictory individuals beyond their assigned social roles. While, regardless of the apparent complexity of its performers/subjects, *Minefield* can be boiled down to a performance about being a soldier in a war, *Easy Things* cannot be called a performance about being an actor, nor is *JaWa* reducible to one about homelessness. As anthropologists Jonatan Kurzwelly, Nigel Rapport and Andrew D. Spiegel plead for a recognition of the place of incompleteness and contradiction in thinking about the human realm, they argue: 'When the private becomes public and the personal becomes social […] the situation becomes less simple, coherent or consistent' (2020: 76). Ultimately, the significant agency the protagonists of the performances receive emphasises their struggles as meaningful and deserving of public attention.

Where the two productions differ is in their relation to heterotopia. In my close reading of the performances, however, I discern in each of them an exception, a scene that challenges any oversimplified, homogenous interpretation of their heterotopic status. Before proceeding to the comparison, it is necessary to get a better grasp what heterotopia is and its relevance for theatre.

Easy Things as Heterotopia

Heterotopia, literally meaning 'other space', is a concept of medical origin first tentatively introduced to the humanities by philosopher and historian Michel Foucault in the prologue to his 1966 book *The Order of Things*, and later developed more extensively in a 1967 lecture entitled 'On Other Spaces' (1986), which was not authorised to be published until just a few months before his death in 1984. Heterotopias are real spaces that function in ways alternative to the standard space. If utopia is a non-space, a non-existent fantasy of another possibility of being, heterotopias are at once the realisation of utopia, in that they embody an alternative to the status quo, and utopia's opposite, as they are real, physical spaces. Another crucial difference is that utopias are connected to desire for change and the idea of progress, while heterotopias are not. The list of examples of heterotopias given by Foucault is incredibly diverse, containing cemeteries, mirrors, ships, Jesuit colonies in South America, asylums, French brothels, and, indeed, theatres. Foucault's analyses of heterotopia as a concept ('heterotopology') were much criticised, even by his admirers, for being 'frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent, incoherent' (Soja 1996: 162), half-hearted (Topinka 2010: 58), too totalising (Saldanha 2008) or reactionary (Harvey 2009: 161). Yet, at the same time, the notion has inspired work in a plethora of areas, from economics to IT to music education. Its fundamental appeal seems to be the acknowledgement of real, concrete alternatives to a broad and seemingly all-encompassing, controlled, hegemonic space.

Joanne Tompkins provides the concept with a new perspective in her *Theatre's Heterotopias,* applying Foucault's term in a more specific manner than the French philosopher did: in Tompkins' version, theatre is not heterotopic by design (2014: 5). Following Kevin Hetherington, Tompkins argues that spaces that once were heterotopic can lose that quality over time, as their *otherness* fades. Tompkins includes traditional theatre in that category – since it does not provide enough 'world-making' to maintain the tension between the exceptionality of

the space and its encompassing in the world. Such theatre could, potentially, be included under the common umbrella term of 'utopia' – a non-place, a fictional place. What makes up heterotopia, as it is understood by Tompkins, is not just the difference of the space and the rules which guide it – traditional theatre did not lose that aspect. It is, rather, the tension between the heterotopic space and the hegemonic one it both inhabits and rejects (literally, in the sense of bracketing it outside of its perimeters).

The most important characteristic of heterotopia in the context of this investigation is its epistemic potential. Indeed, as Robert J. Topinka points out, 'Foucault uses heterotopias to map the space of existing knowledge' (2010: 59). The mapping, as per Topinka, happens thanks to a unique quality of heterotopias: they are able to contain many incompatible spaces or epistemes. Theatre, according to Foucault, is particularly good at this, as by design the stage hosts 'a whole series of places that are foreign to one another' (Foucault 1986: 25).

Yet, I argue, the Turkowski&Nowacka duo establish *JaWa* as a veridical proposal precisely by rejecting its status as heterotopia. In particular, refusing to use theatre's potential to combine places of fiction with those considered non-fictional, they build a proposal which extends the non-theatrical space, and the non-heterotopic episteme, into the theatre. This is not the case in all documentary performances, as I will explain by first looking into an example of a heterotopic documentary form: Anna Karasińska's *Easy Things*.

Anna Karasińska, hailed as one of the most original voices on the contemporary Polish theatre scene (Bargetto 2018), created in *Easy Things* a documentary performance for two actresses, ensemble members of the municipal Teatr im. Jaracza in the Polish city of Olsztyn. Irena Telesz-Burczyk and Milena Gauer share the stage to tell the histories of their acting careers. The events they choose are carefully selected: these are stories of acting bodies. Theatre critic Jowita Mazurkiewicz describes the show as a prime example of the 'female gaze' – a way of depicting the female view of the world alternative or opposed to the problematic, dominant and objectifying 'male gaze' (2022). As such, *Easy Things* allows its protagonists – who perform as themselves – to reconsider how their bodies are seen and portrayed. That this is a form of empowerment, of reclaiming the authorship of one's own narrative, is clear since the first scene, when on a nearly completely darkened stage Telesz-Burczyk and Gauer describe their own physical appearance, as they are seen by others and as they see themselves.

Games of shadow and light redefine the space as an alternative to the hegemonic space, abiding to different rules (starting with rules of visibility) and producing knowledge beyond questions of truth and falsehood. Darkness envelops the scene for much of the show, placing the actresses in an abstract, limitless void. The intensified abstraction from the surrounding physical space is accompanied by an analogous operation in the soundscape: during the first scenes, the actors' words are played from recordings. Although it takes several minutes for the stage to be filled with enough light for the audience to realise this, once that happens, the disconnection of the voice with its subjects/owners settles in as a conventional representation of a character's thoughts. Both the view and the voice are detached from the body, denoting the latter as an uncertain, constructed source. This perspective corresponds both to Joanne Tompkins' proposal to see theatre as a heterotopia when it maintains a tension with the hegemonic space, and the broader understanding of Foucault, for whom what makes theatre a heterotopia is its capacity to contain various contradictory spaces.

Thanks to the heterotopia, the audience are temporarily refused the gaze which would allow them to judge or question what is being said. The actresses appear in charge of how they are seen. But this description requires an amendment: the actresses *as characters* appear in charge, for the agency of the director-playwright is quickly established when Telesz-Burczyk says: 'I don't feel it is enough to just be here. I feel I need to deserve recognition from the audience. The director has been convincing me that this is enough – my presence' (Karasińska, 2023). If the actress appears on the stage against (what seems like) her own opinion, can we say she is there in her own capacity? If she is not accountable for her own presence, what about the words she speaks? Whose words are being spoken?

Such ambiguity of the speaker's agency informs most of Anna Karasińska's work. A good example is her first creation, *Ewelina płacze* (*Ewelina is Crying*, 2015), where several recognisable actors from the well-established TR Warszawa theatre are cast as their own fans standing in for them (for instance, Adam Woronowicz interprets the role of Zosia, a girl who worships Adam Woronowicz and tries to act on the stage based on her limited knowledge of the actor, his roles, 'type', etc). The question is not just who is who, but who can represent, or stand in for, someone else, and what are the terms of this representation. The ambivalence of agency, a topic which returns in such shows as *Fantazja* (*Fantasy,* 2017, TR Warszawa), or

2118. Karasińska (2018, Nowy Teatr), is in *Easy Things* combined with a constructed performance of the self – as Deirdre Heddon describes the autobiographic mode on the stage (2002). What is more, while the actresses speak in first person, the programme notes credit Karasińska as both director and author of the text. Is the source, then, the experience, statements and thoughts of the actresses? Did what is described on stage really happen? Can they be treated as veridically true statements?

Karasińska hides the veridical value of what is being said on the stage behind a veil of uncertainty. When Gauer says: 'I prefer to think my body is not me […] My body is now digesting the "Duet with forest berries" cake', there is no way for us to tell whether she really ate the cake before the show, or it was the case during rehearsals, was altogether made up by the actress, or by the playwright/director. Yet it *sounds* true, or true enough. The 'truth' is local, constructed for the duration of the event. Making assumptions about the actresses' lives based on the performance may turn out risky. The artist confirmed this in a post-show conversation: 'Truth and falsehood are not categories [I use]. The point is if we experience something or not' (Karasińska, 2024).

The impossibility of deciding who is speaking for whom brings about an epistemic insecurity akin to that described by Jenn Stephenson: the spectators are not afforded enough information to be sure of the truth. Stephenson considers this a fundamental quality of theatre: 'The basic iconicity of theatrical representation that employs the signified to indicate its own signifier further augments the epistemological doubt […] inherent in nonfiction' (2019: 28-29). But the concept of heterotopia explains how knowledge about the world can, at variance with Stephenson's claims, be obtained from such an uncertain space. As a documentary performance, *Easy Things* provides enough material for the audience to assume a strong connection with the outside space – what amounts to veridical statements. For instance, the physical descriptions actresses give of themselves are quite precise and non-deceptive: 'My knees are slightly inward-facing, the belly is, well, a little too big, 75D breasts, wide shoulders, short neck, blue eyes' (Karasińska 2023). Yet, while retaining a constant connection to the outside world, *Easy Things* is built as a space of autonomy: it provides a local episteme which questions, reinterprets or altogether elopes the rules of the hegemonic social space. For example, the texts, at times clearly

autobiographical, are at other instances imbued with a highly literary, poetic quality similar to that of Karasińska's other work:

> When something happens in my life…/ One Irena is living it / while another is standing and watching. / This actually helps, because one thinks / that this will at least have been useful, / this experiencing something. / Useful on the stage. / Even if someone beats me, / hurts me, / if I am hurt, / if I love, / or hate, / then I know / how to act it. / That's why dying makes no sense, / because I'll die and so what? / I won't ever be able to act it after, / so I will do something that has / no use for theatre… / I don't need it. / So I act dying without any preparation.
>
> (Karasińska 2021)

Karasińska is here playing with personhood and presence as if that were her own voice speaking through all of her actors/characters.

It may be tempting to ask what of the stories told on the stage is true, but, ultimately, *Easy Things* remains relevant regardless of whether everything said on the stage is true in the sense the concept would be imbued with outside the stage. Let us imagine, for instance, that when Milena Gauer shows how she was asked by a (male) director to move in a 'sexy' way while singing patriotic songs because, as the director stated, spectators would not care about the songs but 'would have some fun watching' (Karasińska 2021), she is exaggerating. Let us even consider the story is not hers, but was heard from another actress. It is still possible to imagine the chauvinist person the story's antagonist represents. The show provides a well-established symbolic level which turns the individual story into a general reference. As long as it is 'relatable', that is, as long as it corresponds to an event conceivable as true (possible or imaginable), its actual truth value is not fundamental. While connected to the outside world, *Easy Things* as heterotopia is autonomous: it relies on a reconfiguring of the episteme. But there are performances whose non-heterotopic qualities allow spectators to trust their veridical representations as 'not misleading' (Plantinga 2005: 112). To see how that occurs, it is first necessary to go back to Foucault's description of how heterotopia appears in the first place.

The Limits of Heterotopia

Works of art are not by definition heterotopias. We can see how a space can be interpreted as heterotopic in a fragment which never uses the term: Foucault's famous 1966 analysis of Velazquez's 'Las Meninas' in the first chapter of *The Order of Things* (1994). In the prologue immediately preceding the 'Las Meninas' chapter, Foucault underlines heterotopias' power of subverting language's very correspondence to the world (1994: xvi-xvii). Although the term is not picked up later in the work, the rejection of the adherence of 'words and things' is what Foucault effectively undertakes in the chapter. He does that by first tempting the reader with a factual reading of the painting. The long passage shows the French philosopher's awareness of the risks of refraining from interpreting an artwork as claims to factual representation:

> Perhaps it would be better, once and for all, to determine the identities of all the figures presented or indicated here, so as to avoid embroiling ourselves forever in those vague, rather abstract designations, so constantly prone to misunderstanding and duplication, 'the painter', 'the characters', 'the models', 'the spectators', 'the images'. Rather than pursue to infinity a language inevitably inadequate to the visible fact, it would be better to say that Velazquez composed a picture; that in this picture he represented himself, in his studio or in a room of the Escurial, in the act of painting two figures whom the Infanta Margarita has come there to watch, together with an entourage of duennas, maids of honour, courtiers, and dwarfs; that we can attribute names to this group of people with great precision: tradition recognizes that here we have Dona Maria Agustina Sarmiente, over there Nieto, in the foreground Nicolaso Pertusato, an Italian jester. We could then add that the two personages serving as models to the painter are not visible, at least directly; but that we can see them in a mirror; and that they are, without any doubt, King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana. (1994: 8)

After naming all the figures represented in the painting, Foucault rejects this entire perspective. Such pointing, he contends, would elude the tension between the image and language, while 'the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation' (1994: 8). Giving justice to this relation requires ignoring the designate of the figures in the painting, not to 'pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks' (1994: 8). The heterotopic quality relies on the *difference* between those spaces being preserved. When looking at the 'mirror' (referring to

the mirror in the painting which shows a reflection of the king and queen, but also the work of art as a mirror), we 'must therefore *pretend* not to know who is to be reflected in the depths of that mirror, and interrogate that reflection in its own terms' (1994:8; italics mine).

Pretending is necessary for a heterotopic autonomy, as the ties subjecting that place to the rules of hegemonic space which surrounds it are voluntarily ignored. Dramatic theatre is a clear example: when an actor says 'Denmark's a prison' on the stage, the audience does not consider it equivalent to the non-stage statement that Denmark is a prison. The social agreement regarding heterotopicity allows for the 'parasitic use of language' J.L. Austin describes (1988: 104). Without going into questions of mimesis, it is important to realise this radical autonomy of heterotopia only works if we accept the 'infinity of the relation'. In Karasińska's *Easy Things*, the decision not to ask whether Milena Gauer actually ate a cake before the performance allows for a detachment from the hegemonic space's episteme (for instance, the bodily consequences of eating a cake before each performance), and a judgement of the event on its own terms. Theatre scholar Dariusz Kosiński sees an analogy between such theatre and the classic paradox of the liar, who, by saying 'I am lying' enters the void of theatrical space which remains beyond – Kosiński even claims it *precedes* – language as based on the opposition between truth and falsehood (2020: 16). Freed from the burden of veridical correspondence with the outside world, Karasińska's theatre is hence able to forge a new path, but just as the ancient liar, at the cost of remaining *para doxa* – beyond the episteme established in the (non-theatrical) social space.

Easy Things contains a single, final scene which may challenge the heterotopic integrity of the stage. In it, an undressed Gauer has an improvised conversation with Telesz-Burczyk, who is dressed in a theatrical ball gown. During the chat, Gauer is ravenously eating cake, or, on some nights, roasted chicken, with her bare hands. Casual words are exchanged about the food, the rest of the evening and other mundane topics. The words, which could be misleading, but have no reason to be, are combined with a completely dressed down body that is ostentatiously refusing to be used as spectacle and objectify itself for the other's gaze. The body seems reunited with its voice, and agency regained, as the hyper-calorific meal is ingested by a person who just a short while earlier told us of the dietary rigour she has been on most of her life and how she dreamt of indulging in eating. If it looks like theatre is a place where dreams come true, the price is the increased tension between the autonomy of heterotopia that allows it and the

looming of the episteme of the outside world, with its calories and indigestion. The choice not to acknowledge the connection and 'pretend not to know who is to be reflected in the depths of that mirror' is increasingly difficult. Not pretending opens up the space for what is reflected in the image, moving beyond the entangled and entangling *other space* that 'destroys […] the syntax […] which causes words and things […] to "hold together"' (Foucault 1994: xvii).

Tellingly, Foucault chooses as his heterotopic case study a mirror which reveals next to nothing about what it reflects: it is not an actual mirror, or even a painting of one, only a small, blurry fragment of a painting. The very layout of *Las Meninas* makes it easier to see the constellation of figures than to draw any conclusions about the depicted world from the modest, pale rectangle of a looking glass in the background. And yet, naming the protagonists is still possible, and is more than an exercise in futility. It provides a grounding, a crucial layer which turns the image into something much different from an abstract game of figures. To illustrate this, rather than a mirror, I prefer the metaphor of a window. If the mirror is called a 'looking glass', a window is a double looking glass: depending on the light, seeing through and seeing the reflection are both possible. There is an outside which can be seen, and a heterotopic reflection of the inside, visible under specific conditions.

Instead of following the path proposed by Foucault, to suspend the conviction about the reality of a designate and remain with the reflection, I claim that the possibility of grounding the work in non-fictional reality is what turns it into an assertion of veridical representation. What is more, in the case of a documentary performance such as *JaWa*, this grounding brings about an ethical perspective. The way *JaWa* establishes its non-heterotopic status is rooted in Turkowski&Nowacka's previous work, but goes back to an even earlier time, when Janek Turkowski was working alone.

From *Margarete* to *Jawa*: Establishing a Space for Sharing

Turkowski&Nowacka have been working as an artistic duo since 2013. The background of the two artists is different. When they met, Iwona Nowacka was – and still is – an accomplished translator of German-language plays. Janek Turkowski was already a theatre-maker focusing on

documentary performances. Thus, the duo's artistic career stems from and extends Turkowski's solo work.

After graduating in Polish philology in the city of Szczecin in the far north-western corner of Poland, Turkowski began working in visual theatre, becoming a member of Szczecin's Kana theatre centre, an independent venue and theatre group supported by municipal and regional funding. Around 2005, he began exploring the possibilities of documentary performance. In 2008, his solo piece *Margarete* brought him international acclaim.

Margarete was the fruit of a trip to Germany. One day, while strolling through a German flea market, the artist came across a box of sixty-four rolls of home-made eight-millimetre films, sold with a vintage film projector. *Margarete* is the story of that discovery. The show, presented in a cosy setting to up to two dozen spectators, consists in Turkowski relating his attempts to find out as much as he could about the person appearing on most of the films. Shot in the 1950s and 60s in the GDR, the films seemed to have been made by a single person accompanying an anonymous, well-off woman. Piece by piece, the artist unravels the unspectacular mysteries contained in the footage. He fantasises about who the protagonist – judging on the inscriptions on the film boxes, her name was Margarete Rhube – could be, he admires the landscapes the cinematographer captured, and ends up revealing how, after a time-consuming investigation, he tracked the title character down. She was, at the time, ninety-nine years old, lived in a nursing home, and had lost most of her speech, memory and sight. She seemed to recognise some of the images, yet she could not explain their backstories, or how they ended up at a flea market. The mystery was solved, and yet, the mystery remained.

Turkowski's background in visual theatre is not immediately evident in *Margarete*, as some critics, notwithstanding their enthusiasm for the work, interpreted the performance as less a theatre piece than a 'presentation' (Meany 2013, Kowalska 2013, Stewart 2018) or described the space as 'improvised' (McGuinness 2018). Yet every part of this seemingly informal situation works towards the sense of community and trust that characterises *Margarete,* turning it into a documentary performance with a clearly established assertion of veridical representation. Seeing how this is achieved is all the more relevant as in that respect *Margarete* became a sort of blueprint for Turkowski&Nowacka's projects.



Setup of Margarete *by Janek Turkowski –*
presentation at Komuna Warszawa, Warsaw, 25.02.2024. Photo: Wojciech Ziemilski.

The stage in *Margarete* is usually situated in a space not originally designed for theatre, often lengthways, with the audience sitting on pillows or benches very close to the performer. The decision of putting the audience in that position prevents any distant perspective, creating a hospitable, though not quite homely space. A provisional stage is made from a colourful rug: a large, round, crocheted carpet. The rug's association to home has been clear to reviewers (e.g. Kowalska 2013, Mikrut-Majeranek 2016, McGuinness 2018), although if we treat it as an architectural intervention – a stand-in for home – it becomes a somewhat ironic gesture in the unhomely spaces where the performance is usually shown: classrooms, offices, gallery spaces, nondescript rooms. It is the largest openly scenographic element brought into the space, albeit decidedly more inconspicuous and less isolating than a standard theatre space. In his introductory text to heterotopias, Foucault reminds us that rugs were originally reproductions of gardens (more specifically – Islamic gardens) reflecting the entire cosmos – enclosed mirrors of the world. They resemble theatre sets in that they are fixed temporarily: 'the rug is a sort of garden

that can move across space' (1986: 26). The proposal of a mobile space with heterotopic characteristics will return in *JaWa.* Judging from the different touring photos, Turkowski's criteria for selecting a presentation space are far from a typical isolated black box: windows seem to be welcome, other non-theatrical sources of light – encouraged. The performance space is usually an extension of the non-performance space.[46] The projection screen is small, placed a few feet away from the audience, Turkowski kneeling comfortably by it, with his laptop in front of him on a small wooden box. The analogue film projector, the digital video projector (which will be showing footage from the market where the films were first found, but also the digitalised film rolls), and the screen itself also all stand tidily on small wooden boxes, resulting in a simple do-it-yourself set-up. Upon arriving, the audience is greeted by Turkowski, who (on some occasions) offers them tea and cookies. Several critics noticed his honest and charming attitude. This 'low key charisma', as a Financial Times critic put it (McGuinness 2018), sets the tone for an informal, communal gathering.

All these elements are not there to symbolise or simulate an informal situation or unfinished performance, as is often the case.[47] They are there to provide just such a performance, ultimately facilitating an intimate, unaffected storytelling evening – a model which will be further developed in tandem with Iwona Nowacka. Fifteen years and a number of projects after the premiere of *Margarete*, Turkowski together with Nowacka created *JaWa* – a performance which combined their anthropological interests with a deep engagement in social issues at a grassroots level.

JaWa as a Non-Deceptive Performance

JaWa, which premiered in Warsaw's Komuna Warszawa theatre on 25 November 2022, describes the creation and functioning of a social enterprise, a type of organisation whose economic

[46] There were some exceptions, when the performance took place on a theatre stage, but when discussing potential locations for showing *Margarete*, Turkowski tries to avoid them. The performance I assisted (pictured on p. 111) had the audience sit by the performer on a stage with marks of its previous function as basketball court, on chairs and pillows.

[47] See, for instance, Claudia Georgi's analysis of Mary Oliver, Prototype Theater and Forced Entertainment (2014: 133-141).

activity is the means to support and develop a specific community rather than to achieve maximum profit (Bartniak 2012). Using extensive video footage from the process which they comment on from the stage, Turkowski&Nowacka tell the story of JaWa: the Teatr Kana association Turkowski was part of received an EU grant and set up a social enterprise for two acquaintances – Jan ('Janek') Rozpędzik and Waldemar ('Waldek') Wieczorek, both of whom had a history of homelessness and precarity. As Turkowski&Nowacka explain,

> The tradition of social enterprises in Poland dates back to the interwar period. At a time when in Western Europe the development of the economy was driven mainly by the processes of industrialisation, in Poland it was also accompanied by political and national liberation motivations. In the 19th century, the history of the development of social economy can be traced at least to the Hrubieszów Agricultural Society founded by Stanisław Staszic. It was created to provide conditions for the enjoyment of the freedom that Staszic gave his peasants, and existed until the creation of the People's Republic of Poland. Its proper name: 'Agricultural Society for Joint Rescue in Misfortunes' well reflects the idea of the beginnings of social economy in Poland. ('PREMIERA! JaWa / Turkowski & Nowacka / instalacja performatywna', 2022)

The description warrants an explanation for those unfamiliar with the complexities of Polish history. Stanisław Staszic (1755-1826) was one of the most important personalities of the Polish Enlightenment, which took place between mid-eighteenth century and the 1820s. One of the most significant achievements of that era was the abolishment of serfdom, which was, however, accompanied by an often extremely precarious situation for the newly freed peasants. Staszic was among a relatively important group of nobility whose ethical stance regarding the peasants was a defining milestone of the Polish ethical paradigm of social solidarity. Two centuries later, it would be echoed in the union of the Polish intelligentsia with the working class which lay the foundations for the Solidarność (Solidarity) movement in the 1970s and 80s.

The reference to the freeing of peasants from serfdom places JaWa in this emancipatory lineage. It also sheds light on the scope of their ambitions: to give support to those in need by giving them work. The Social Enterprise JaWa (SE JaWa; from the first names of the workers – Janek and Waldek) specialises in carpentry and gardening, following the learned trade of its members. Because the goal is not one of commercial gain, only of support, the rules of the

enterprise, established between the parties when setting up the enterprise, state that things cannot be done in a hurry, and that everyone works individually. The third rule, added later, requires not drinking alcohol before or during work, which is verified using a breathalyser. As we see in the slide show, which starts off with still pictures from the initial phase of the project to later move to a series of short videos documenting its development, when Turkowski&Nowacka were invited to a residency at Warsaw's Komuna Warszawa theatre, they treated the residency as a 'delegation', bringing the SE JaWa workers for maintenance work around the venue. Once in the capital, the two members of SE JaWa encountered another person in a situation of homelessness, Artur Czechowicz, squatting in a make-shift dwelling at the very steps of Komuna Warszawa, and invited him to work with them. A recurring problem shown in the video clips was substance abuse, and before arriving in Warsaw the abstinence rule was alleviated by the introduction of a 'two beers after work' ritual.

The first part of the performance establishes the frame of the story, Janek Turkowski being the main storyteller, introducing the videos and providing context. Iwona Nowacka is co-hosting this situation, but speaks less, and stands more to the side of the stage. At one point, when in a video Waldek (one of the SE JaWa workers) mentions a crisis related to drinking a beer during work, the video projections temporarily stop. Nowacka takes over, isolates herself in a small trailer-like cabin, and confesses her own struggles with alcoholism, offering a different perspective on the story the audience has been hearing. After this intimate scene, the show returns to the videos documenting the SE JaWa developments, revealing how each participant in the project attempted to establish their own position and agency. Until the end of the residency, the situation never became stable and predictable – the JaWa workers sometimes failed the breathalyser, at other times, they disappeared. The videos (accompanied by the spoken narrative) go on to show how four months after the residency, the JaWa group visited Artur – the 'third JaWa worker' they had met in Warsaw. In the meantime, his life had significantly improved thanks to a member of Komuna Warszawa, who helped him find a job and a flat. The team decided to visit the downtown Marriott hotel, a popular symbol of success and luxury (American presidents stay there when visiting Warsaw, as did Taylor Swift), towering above Komuna Warszawa and Artur's former temporary dwelling. Turkowski and Nowacka rented a room for Artur on one of the hotel's top floors. At first, he appreciated the gesture but ultimately did not enjoy the stay, finding no pleasure in the luxury. He invited the workers of SE JaWa to join him.

Their opinions concerning the experience varied: Waldek loved it, took over the filming and monologuing, and improvised questions for the others ('What is freedom for you, and how would you describe it?'); Jan criticised the hotel, choosing what he referred to as his 'freedom on the street' over the bird's-eye perspective. In the show's final scene, we receive updates on what has happened to the three members of the working team since the last videos were shot. The last time I saw the performance (February 2024), Janek had been missing for several months, Artur was back on the street but remained in touch, and Waldek was joining a rehab programme.

The premiere of *JaWa* took place in an old classroom adjacent to the outside staircase that Artur had used as his dwelling for many weeks. Nowacka describes this in detail, and even opens the masked-out window to point to the exact spot where Artur was staying. From that point on, the videos from the Komuna *delegation* will be strongly anchored in the performance space. The latter becomes, in its turn, extended to a part of the 'outside world' the covered window was excluding from the performance. Claudia Georgi follows Mieke Matzke in describing an analogous situation in Gob Squad's famous *Super Night Shot* (2003), where the video was recorded in the direct proximity of the venue and was thus recognisable to many audience members. Georgi sees this proximity as providing the protagonists of the video documentation with a quasi-fictional status:

> Yet, the recordings of what lies beyond the stage offer no pure glimpses of reality. Their integration into the productions instead confers a fictional quality to these spaces or people beyond the stage. As a consequence, no clear distinction can be drawn any longer between stage fiction and the reality beyond it. This effect deconstructs the notions of 'reality' and 'realism,' whether resulting from liveness or mediatisation, and replaces them with an awareness of the relativity of reality. (2014: 206-207)

What worked differently in *JaWa* was the recognition of the videos as not deceptive. Once this framework was set, the opposite of *Super Night Shot* occurred: the factuality *reconstructed,* or added to, the documentary, veridical character of the show. This physical grounding of the event – corresponding to what, as I mentioned in the Introduction, Amelia Jones refers to as 'ontological anchoring' (1998: 37) – contributed to the sense of stubborn persistence of (outside) reality, or inescapability into fiction. The performance was too close to the real events for

fictional comfort.[48] Understanding the stage as an extension to the outside world meant steering away from heterotopicity, which would disrupt the non-deceptive quality of the proposal.

Turkowski&Nowacka sometimes call their performances 'video gawędy', roughly translated as 'video tales'. The Polish word 'gawęda' has the connotation of stories told by the campfire, and when combined with 'video' sounds both old-fashioned and funny. The amalgamation of these two words seems like an oxymoron. Carrying on the slightly self-ironic or even self-deprecating attitude, Nowacka explained in an interview that the 'video tales' is an art form consisting in 'chatting to the spectator, accompanied by video' ('Wywiad Iwona Nowacka i Janek Turkowski', 2019). The idea of an informal situation, a chat or a storytelling evening is at the core of the couple's work. Their performances have a malleable structure, which they change depending on the night and the audience. There is no script, which is replaced by a series of talking points contained in a loosely structured dramaturgy revolving around projected film material. The latter makes up the one set element of the show. The presence of the video-makers on the stage, their openness about their own involvement and the ethical questions it entails, all echo the work of another couple working together on the stage – the Brussels-based duo Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere. In their performance *Pleasant Island* (2019), Huysmans and Dereere limit their presence on the stage to playing a multitude of video and audio recordings, YouTube links, and apps, all from their phones, projected on large screens. There are no other events or elements, and the artists do not perform in any other way. The personal videos played from the phones are strong indexical traces of the real. The artists are the warrants of their account's truthfulness, as their onstage implicated presence 'pierces the Brechtian act of distancing' (Delbecke 2022: 182). Though it could be imagined that the videos were in reality an elaborate hoax, this is improbable. And the fact that they were recorded, selected and edited in an authorial way does not eliminate their factual status, as its character is similar to that of truth claims in documentary films, a genre theatre audiences will be familiar with – only more powerful, combining it with the presential aura analogous to that of a post-screening talk with the film director. Turkowski&Nowacka differ in one important respect: they substitute the

[48] The flip side of that coin may be that once *JaWa* left the original venue of presentation to be shown elsewhere, it may have lost some of that sense of the real, opening up more to doubt, or at least – to opaqueness.

disciplined playlist-like choreography with a thoroughly informal performance where the content and order of interventions is not fixed. Indeed, it often looks like the couple are not the ones introducing the video, but vice versa, the films guide the performers, reminding them of the topics and stories to address.

What may at first appear as a nonchalant attitude and lack of preparedness is in fact the fruit of a carefully pondered attitude, both aesthetic and ethical. In interviews, Both Turkowski and Nowacka accentuate the importance of the meeting with the particular audience, the atmosphere in the room and their own state. One consequence of this radical attachment to the the *hic et nunc* is that several of their performances cannot be accessed via video documentation. Among theatre artists, the typical procedure for even the most intimate performances is to provide interested curators and venues, as well as theatre studies scholars and students, with a recording of the production. It is understood, and usually also underlined by the authors, that the video cannot convey the event as it happened, yet artists are nearly always ready to pay this price, and that is what is considered good practice.[49] As Denise Varley and Rachel Fensham put it, 'Video is a necessary and unnecessarily maligned aid to research; without it, performance disappears and we lose our history and our capacity to think through performance' (2000: 89). Why would anyone oppose this? Turkowski first refused to record his performance when he created *Margarete.* The reason was that 'The performance is based on found private materials and from the very beginning there was a decision to protect the image of the owner of the films by only showing them "live"' (Turkowski&Nowacka, 2020). The only way to see the show was (and still is) to be physically present at the event. A similar decision was taken regarding *JaWa*: although in this case the artists created a video recording of the show, upon seeing it, they backed out of the idea of showing it to anyone, citing the fragile position of all the participants and the unnecessary stress of exposure (Nowacka and Turkowski 2024). Both times, the reasons have to do with an ethical engagement with the people whose lives are shown on stage. At the same time, they signal an association between the fragility of an individual and the inclusiveness of a performance. This connection paints the stage as a space of intimacy, opposing the liveness of the event to the distance and anonymity of a recording. The videos shown during the performances need thus to be carefully curated and accompanied by a contextualising discourse

[49] For an overview of the role and development of video documentation in theatre, see Bardiot: 2021.

to protect the persons being shown. After all, the people who appear are not protected by a heterotopic stage.

Non-Heterotopic Stage – Heterotopic Projects

Does that not, however, bring us back to the hegemonic universe that claims there are no alternatives? Innumerable thinkers warn against such thinking, and conceive of art as a way to refuse the hegemonic status quo. Avoiding heterotopia may seem like refusing art's capacity for seeing and putting forth alternative versions of the world.

What is different, in *JaWa*, is that the proposal of an alternative social order, of rendering visible what was made to disappear, happened elsewhere. The work of art was not what provoked the change in the *distribution of the visible*, to use Jacques Rancière's term, since SE JaWa was a project autonomous from and preceding the performance *JaWa*. To acknowledge the existence of such a process and its relevance (its impact and accountability), the heterotopic potential of theatre was restrained, refusing what art historian and gender scholar João Florêncio calls the 'delirious ontological vertigo' of ontological uncertainty which 'might – just might – turn hesitation and unknowing into a space of possibility from which new futures may emerge' (2019: 44). The proposal of a space of possibility, which allows for a different, counter-hegemonic organisation of social order, happens in SE JaWa, and spectators have access to that space thanks to the non-heterotopic qualities of the *JaWa* performance. The latter becomes the connector joining heterotopia and the hegemonic space. The documentary form as a linkage allows the challenge of a new episteme – so incommensurable Steven Connor calls the epistemic power of heterotopia a 'conceptual monstrosity' (1999: 9) – to redefine the old one. Thanks to *JaWa'*s agency, SE JaWa can be seen as less of an exception and more of a performative act, an attempt to take on the task of changing the world: an attempt whose efficacy may rest less in the outcome-as-product, and more on the putting to practice of the principles of solidarity. But before focusing on the ethics which connects the two JaWas, it is useful to first see how the performance presents SE JaWa and the spatial heterotopia – lawn – that preceded it.

The *JaWa* tale begins with a border. The video projection shows a birds-eye view of the Polish-German border, set on the Odra river. The Polish city of Szczecin, where the artist couple

live and work, is a few kilometres away. In that city lies the Kana Theatre Centre, which has a front lawn, nobilitated to the status of 'Kana's Meadow' ('Łąka Kany') by the management. The first time the spectators see the lawn on the projection screen, it is from a bird's eye perspective, which objectifies that fragment of land as real, providing the audience with a documentary frame. The story of the lawn is one of becoming a heterotopia. The lawn was being used by drivers as an informal parking space until Janek Turkowski attempted to address that problem. The first part of *JaWa* is the account of a series of such attempts – construction work, gardening work, an outdoor exhibition, all redefine the nondescript scrap of land as an *other space* – a heterotopia. It begins to function as a counter-site, 'a kind of effectively enacted utopia', as Foucault succintly described heterotopias (1986: 24). Through the device of the lawn, it is possible to see the issues surrounding public space in Szczecin, the oversaturation with cars, the social tensions regarding ownership and the struggle to maintain autonomy. The lawn provides, in the words of Joanne Tompkins, 'the potential for rethinking social space' (2014: 69).

But just as one could think that the story will focus on the lawn, it shifts: Waldek and Janek, the two men in crisis of homelessness, become the new protagonists. Hetherington and Tompkins make a point of underscoring how heterotopia 'unsettles the flow of meaning' (Hetherington: 1997: 50). Tompkins adds that theatre is particularly good at capitalising 'the enactment of things appearing out of place' (2014:182). Instead of putting things out of place, *JaWa* does the opposite: what, outside of the stage, would appear as heterotopic, out of place, significantly different, is, thanks to the stage, reinstated as *normal*. It belongs to the social norm, is laid out as part of the mainland, and consequently, can and should be treated as such. To achieve this, Turkowski&Nowacka use theatre, not as a mirror, a different episteme, but as a *theatron*, a place to see, to scrutinise and acknowledge how things are now appearing in place.

An example of such a treatment is how they approach and narrate the stories of the workers of SE JaWa. Turkowski&Nowacka seem to be aware of the risk of romanticising homelessness and avoid turning it into a *topos* either in the performance or, indeed, in their dealings with the SE JaWa workers. On a broader level, they steer clear of generalising their project: the participants are not referred to as representing the social group of 'the homeless', and the work is never introduced as 'social work'. Already in *Margarete*, Turkowski carefully circumvented what to several critics seemed like obvious theorising tropes related to the

potential Nazi past of the protagonist or to comparisons between German and Polish histories and social contexts. The story and its protagonist were treated as unique, individual, ungeneralisable.[50] Exercising epistemic humility, the virtue of being aware of one's epistemic limitations (Ryan 2019), the artist resisted the temptation of quick judgements and jumping to conclusions. Seen from this perspective, the ignorance regarding an actual, living person meant fantasising about their identity would only obfuscate the meticulous and humble work of searching for (and finally arriving at) the actual Margarete. Any presumptions regarding the background or social group of that person had thus to be scrutinised to not lead to false tropes. Epistemic humility, writes philosopher Vojko Strahovnik, means we 'can adequately consider and valuate various ideas and positions in a way that includes respect for others who disagree with us' (2021: 99), or, we might add, who are not what we thought they were. Not generalising, not theorising, was thus more than a pragmatic methodological choice: it was an ethical one.

In *JaWa*, still, the situation was different: the SE JaWa project lasted two years, and was preceded by other, less formal ways of social engagement with persons experiencing social marginalisation due to a range of issues (homelessness, poverty, migration, or reintegration after prison). The challenge was not to discover someone else's story, but to tell it in a way which would do them justice. In a conversation about the ethics of documentary filmmaking, director/producer Gordon Quinn relates a similar ethical engagement in cinema. As Quinn explains, when working on a documentary film for several years, a director develops a strong relation with their subjects, and with it, a responsibility towards them (Chicago Humanities Festival 2013). In that respect, SE JaWa differed radically from the great number of short-lived art projects whose motivations were curtailed by the date of the premiere. The Social Enterprise JaWa was a programme of long duration, for which the Teatr Kana Association (of which Turkowski was member at the time) acquired EU funding and whose aim was the demarginalisation of the SE JaWa workers. Resocialisation scholar and worker Aleksander Pindral describes homelessness as an extreme form of marginalisation, as 'the two basic forms of human rooting in the social structure are membership in the local community and in the work

[50] Turkowski does shortly fantasise about the possibility of the heroin or the cameraperson being a Stasi collaborator, yet quickly ridicules this idea with self-deprecating humour.

community, and the homeless are deprived of it' (2006). These two aspects were precisely what Turkowski&Nowacka addressed in their social enterprise.

At the same time, contrary to many performances (and conferences like TED) relating social initiatives, SE JaWa did not present itself as a model project. The artists lacked psychological, managerial, social worker competences that could provide their actions with a higher effectivity. Addressing a problem no one else is willing to approach may be interpreted as a pragmatic approach. It is less so if one considers the outcome – although it seems at least one, if not two of the three employed men achieved a more stable housing situation, none of them sustained a job or permanently stopped drinking.[51] A judgment based on the pragmatic results of the initiatives could be harsh. On the other hand, in a society that neglects those left out on the margins, reaching out to another human in need in the simplest, most humble way, may be no worse than the institutions devoted to assisting the needy have been achieving. Turkowski&Nowacka are not attempting to convince the audience that what they have been doing is good. One could argue the contrary – they put significant effort into sharing their own doubts regarding their actions. Such accountability is possible because they make sure to steer away from heterotopic special conditions and acknowledge their own limitations. The clear division between the Social Enterprise and the *JaWa* art project makes it possible. Many self-declaratively socially engaged projects fail to assert themselves as either social or artistic, veering towards the epistemic exceptionality of artistic heterotopia whenever questions of their social accountability are raised. As art critic and historian Hal Foster notes, declarations of art as 'social practice' often lack accountability because they treat each of these areas as an alibi for not meeting the criteria of the other, 'with any pressure from the one side dismissed as sociological and any from the other as aestheticist' (2012: 8).[52] By distinguishing the *JaWa* performance from the process of SE JaWa, the duo invited both an evaluation of the social engagement's effectivity, and of the show. The ethics which such an engagement upholds is one of solidarity, a concept with deep historic roots in Poland, which the artists themselves acknowledge.

[51] At the time of writing, Waldek has been admitted to rehab.

[52] See also Claire Bishop *Artificial Hells* (2012).

The origins of the modern concept of solidarity can be traced back to the nineteenth century appeal of French thinkers such as August Comte or Pierre Leroux to counter the atomisation of society by valuing social bonds and a communal responsibility (Ter Meulen 2016). And while in Poland solidarity is nearly universally associated with the social movement of Solidarność (Solidarity) born as a trade union in 1980, as I mentioned earlier, the roots of the ethos can be traced further back to the Polish Enlightenment and its nineteenth-century echoes. In 1816, nearly thirty years before the birth of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers (1844), Stanisław Staszic created the Hrubieszów Agricultural Society, the first cooperative organisation in Europe (Bartnik 2012), which the creators of *JaWa* refer to when describing their initiative. As the artists remind us, the cooperative's original name, the Agricultural Society of Joint Rescue from Misfortunes, accentuated its ethical aspect.

Poland had ceased to exist over twenty years earlier, and even before, peasants could not count on any authorities for protection (Pobłocki 2022), so instead of relying on an outside authority, Staszic formed an autonomously functioning social group based on the common management of land which redesigned the region's social structure. The project, which lasted until 1945, used the French Revolution's ideal of fraternity[53] in a pragmatic way: persons from different social classes were engaged in a common cause, that of assuring the prosperity of the land, and consequently developed a sense of responsibility for others they would not otherwise associate themselves with. Set against an understanding of solidarity as a moral obligation towards members of one's social group, this shift in the meaning meant 'each person extends to strangers the kind of moral commitment and sense of obligation which otherwise are reserved for those who are closest' (Spicker 2006:140).

The Social Enterprise JaWa stemmed from this lineage. Acting in solidarity, understood as mutual support and responsibility, meant, for Turkowski&Nowacka, representing the workers outside of the confines of SE JaWa. Without the exceptionality of heterotopia, the representation extended to the stage, translating to the support of, and taking responsibility for, the workers.

[53] While fraternity and solidarity share the ideals of mutual support and responsibility, the latter term puts more emphasis on moral obligation (Spicker 2006). Fraternity, as the French Revolution understood it, was also not about being part of a particular community (as a matter of fact, unions and other forms of interest groups were feared and delegalised), but rather, about a brotherhood of individuals (Ter Meulen 2016: 31).

JaWa was an opportunity to empower Janek, Waldek, and Artur: they were not just the protagonists of the story, but were given (and accepted) several opportunities to provide their own input. The camera was left to them and the interventions they devised – lengthy monologues about who they are and how they are seen by others – were included in *JaWa* on par with the Turkowski&Nowacka's material. They were given protagonism, providing them agency.

But solidarity may also have been the reason why the work that SE JaWa made was never questioned on the stage. The engagement of the workers was never put under scrutiny. Throughout the performance, the artists never allowed themselves to judge the sometimes controversial actions of the protagonists (such as leaving a job without warning, not staying sober). Solidarity, in the context of the performance, turned into loyalty or faithfulness – remaining true to the JaWa community. There is a risk that such a stand may forego pragmatic questions important for the life of an enterprise and for the possibility of introducing sustainable, long-term change. Analysing the legacy of the Polish Solidarity movement, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor remarked that the ethics of solidarity are in tension, or even in conflict, with the value of efficiency which, in capitalism, 'we cannot forsake' (2000: 34). But what if the economic efficacy of such an enterprise is not the ultimate goal? Turkowski&Nowacka used the heterotopic status of SE JaWa to refuse, not only efficacy as a fundamental criterion, but also, 'social change' as the aim of the social enterprise.

Interpreting heterotopias as disruptive and unsettling (Tompkins 2014:22) can raise the hopes they act as agents of change. 'They are meant to detonate, to deconstruct, not to be poured back into old containers', asserts Edward W. Soja (1996: 163). Yet, even judging by the examples given by Foucault himself, that hardly seems to be the case. Cemeteries, gardens, American motels, fairgrounds are not detonators. They are seldom distinguished by their performative, political potential. If anything, they share a capacity to *contain* change, but in the sense of containment: when seen in the broader landscape, they impede the spread of the specific, non-standard behaviour. Hospitals, prisons, brothels, theatres are all spaces which prevent worlds intermingling. They are the spatial equivalent of festivals, keeping the practice of excess under control. Granted, they are not hermetic, their interaction with the outside world is dynamic and they 'resonate with the actual world' (Tompkins 2019:101), but they 'hold no promise or space of liberation' (Johnson 2006: 87). The hope for change which they are sometimes asked to carry

may be counterproductive and paradoxically reinforce the status quo. In the words of Lauren Berlant, 'The vague expectations of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the heterotopias of sovereignty amid structural inequality, political depression, and other intimate disappointments' (2011: 49). Seen from this angle, as long as the belief persists that something good may come out of it, heterotopia will keep on luring its audiences away from the persistently harsh realities around it.

Turkowski&Nowacka's solution to that risk is to acknowledge the limitations of their ambitions and to showcase the reality of what such words as 'hope' or 'change' imply in the process of working with the SE JaWa workers. The outcome is close to what Berlant describes in her analysis of 'cruel optimism': 'we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place' (2011: 49). In *JaWa*, the 'moment of suspension' plays out during the discovery that it may well have been the unique position of artists as quasi-social workers which both allowed them to work with the *JaWa* participants and made that collaboration inviable. For example, after a while it became clear that alcohol dependence – in some cases severe – was a significant issue within the group. As Turkowski told me in an interview, the artists did not feel they had the right to stop the workers from drinking after work – after all, they were adults, and so Turkowski and Nowacka could only enforce sobriety during work hours for safety reasons (Turkowski and Nowacka 2024). Although they followed the guidance of addiction therapists, for instance having the workers write drinking diaries and pleading with them to progressively diminish their alcohol consumption, the extent of the problem limited the entire SE JaWa's ambitions. The enterprise could not replace a rehabilitation programme. Turkowski could only socialise with the team as an artist or colleague, not as a social worker. In other words, the 'two beers after work' rule was trading off the ambitions of supporting the participants in staying sober in exchange for a sense of kinship and the maintenance of an ever-unstable Social Enterprise.[54] And yet, at the same time, alcohol made being together impossible: Turkowski was not joining in the drinking, but, because of her being in recovery, integrating Nowacka in the process was even more of an issue. This serious shortcoming of SE JaWa was crucially not

[54] It is important to remember that this approach was consulted with addiction therapists and after the end of the project, two of the three men tried rehabilitation programmes.

elided by the artists when telling the story, allowing *JaWa* to overcome the impasse of the cruel optimism. The refusal to allow the performance to become heterotopic meant acknowledging that SE JaWa is a flawed, imperfect project but whose impact can be elsewhere: in the constant work of solidarity, or in the possibility of looking at it from the distance of a stage. Joanna Tompkins writes that, 'when audiences perceive heterotopia in theatre, they are presented with a sample of what spatial, structural, and political options might be tried out for evaluation, whether or not they are accepted as actual possibilities' (2014: 7). In this case, 'perceiving the heterotopia in theatre' meant perceiving, in the *non*-heterotopic space of theatre, the process of creating another heterotopia, a process which can be judged on its development and outcomes. Tompkins adds: 'Even rejecting selections affords the opportunity for audiences to decide which options are a step too far' (2014: 7). If a spectator decides SE JaWa was not a viable or desirable project, it will still have allowed them to gain that important insight about the possibility of redesigning social and work relations based on solidarity.

Heterotopia as Strong Objectivity

JaWa was part of a curated season 2022 at Komuna Warszawa entitled *Trudna Miłość /Tough Love*. It was also the poster child of that season, as that concept was at the core of the entire JaWa project. The curatorial text described it thus: 'With each successive [return to the profession], the question that everyone in SE JaWa faces is: is there also a place for tough love in the work system, workplace, outside the sphere of family, educational or partnership relations?' (*Poznań. Dwa dodatkowe spektakle na afiszu Sceny Roboczej*, 2023)

Tough love can be seen as a strategic version of enacting compassion. As psychologists Jon Limebury and Sue Shea explain, it resembles being a 'fair, kind but disciplined parent' (2015: 2). But being an 'authoritative parenting style' (Newman *et al.*, 2008), 'tough love' accentuates the difference between a giver and a recipient. This hierarchy persists when we leave the parenting context. In their research regarding the transposition of the 'tough love' philosophy to collaborative work environments, Steven Kelman and Sounman Hong consider what they call a '"hard" organizational context' dependent on three features: initiating structure (the leader is the initiator of activities and defines them), accountability (the obligation to justify one's actions and beliefs to others – 'typically a principal-agent type relationship between

overseers and subordinates') and direction (the boss decides what and how the subordinates do) (2016). The strongly hierarchical qualities of 'tough love' are in tension with SE JaWa's ethos of solidarity. It is the *us-them* dichotomy, which posits an insurmountable difference between the overseers and the subordinates, that makes 'tough love' a problematic concept both for the social and ethical ambitions of SE Jawa and for the *JaWa* performance.

As throughout the development of the project Nowacka seems to have been somewhat sidelined, interacting less with the SE JaWa workers once they moved to Warsaw, Turkowski represents both the attempts of the two artists to provide 'tough love' by creating a clear set of conditions for SE Jawa, and the failure of such attempts, when the artist integrates the different breaches of the rules by the workers (their drinking, their disappearances) into the project's modus operandi. Turkowski is thus the boss – a father figure attempting, and at times, failing, to set boundaries.

Enter Nowacka, who effectively dismantles the apparent verticality of the construction. Admittedly, being the co-author of *JaWa*, she is 'the other parent'. Yet at the same time, as a recovering alcoholic, she is the child that has been subject to such tough love and grew out of the bad habit she had developed. As such, she cannot join the group when alcohol is around. Nowacka is neither a parent nor a child. She is neither on top of that hierarchy nor at the bottom. Consequently, she must find a space for herself which is other, fundamentally other, establishing a new order, different from the parent-child division. This space will be strongly heterotopic, but yet again, understanding its theatrical and epistemic function requires going beyond the concept of heterotopia.

JaWa has a single scenographic object: built by Piotr Szczygielski, it is designated as a 'half-object' in the programme notes. It is a vehicle resembling a scaled-down camping trailer, forming a vertically positioned semicircle about two metres in diameter, one metre wide, fixed on four rubber wheels. Its surface of shiny, silver tin sheets, with small, dimmed plastic windows on the top part, makes it look like a quote from an old science fiction film. Attached to its front is a thin, two-metre-long handle rod reminiscent of carts or children's toys – seemingly designed to be pulled by a human. As the artists demonstrate during the performance, in reality it is heavy and difficult to manoeuvre.

Most of the time, the trailer serves as a projection screen. The video images of the people working at SE JaWa are distorted by the uneven surface and different building materials. The projected shapes are imperfect, adding more grassroots, DIY energy to the performance. At the same time, as Hal Foster points out, the screen is a filter protecting the spectators from a reality that is difficult to tackle. Foster refers to the Lacanian interpretation of the screen as a filter which protects from the Real, understood as the unbearable, amorphous 'negative space of non-sociality' (Foster 2003). While in the Western tradition screens were often considered a hindrance in arriving at the ultimate goal of truth (e.g. Plato's shadows in the cave), Foster points to Lacan's opposite reading, which gives the screen or veil the power of protecting onlookers from a truth they would not otherwise be able to endure. Foster considers all visual representation as such a screen, but we can interpret it more literally, as that which obfuscates the view so as to allow the spectator to bear the unbearable (he makes the analogy to Medusa's head which needs to be 'disarmed' not to arrest the viewer). Yet the screen is not just that which obfuscates the Real but also that which provides a substitute image, masking it – and thus providing mediated access to the Real's gaze. Foster quotes Lacan's words about how, as humans, 'we know how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze' (Lacan 1986: 107; quoted by Foster 2003: 188). The trailer is precisely such a mask. It even looks like one, with its face-like shape and two slanted windows resembling eyes:



Photo: Wojciech Ziemilski

But Lacan goes further than Foster wants to admit: he turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to note that, 'at a perceptual level, […] the screen re-establishes things, in their status as real' (Lacan, 107). By combining the space of projection with one protecting a fragile storyteller, that is precisely what the trailer does.

Indeed, the trailer is also used as a formal, abstract space of confession. In contrast to the futuristic outer layer, the handmade interior looks warm and cosy. Everything is made of plywood. The space is designed for one person, like a time capsule or a tomb. Near the end of the performance, Nowacka disappears in the trailer and shuts the door. The artist proceeds to tell the spectators she had good reasons not to engage in the process to the same extent as her partner. She then tells the story of her alcohol addiction and how being a recovering alcoholic made it impossible to join in the process. What could, until now, have been seen as a story about camaraderie and building ties of solidarity which help, is brutally revised. The question of drinking, which had been presented almost from a health and safety inspector's position, as pertaining to the work universe of SE JaWa, becomes a fundamental existential threat, a grave problem of substance abuse which challenges the very possibility of agency. As long as alcohol is present, this story will not have a happy ending.

If there is a heterotopic element in *JaWa*, it is the trailer as a space for Nowacka's monologue. The introduction of her situation is so far outside of the order of the show, it cannot be part of the space. Indeed, Nowacka questions the fundamental ordering of SE JaWa's way of functioning and, from the perspective of its dynamics, her presence can only be perceived as a crisis. David Hancock, Anthony Faramelli and Robert G. White point out that for Foucault, when an individual goes through what society considers a crisis, heterotopia is created as a space of crisis: 'The locus of the crisis is the individual, created by a state of abjection. The crisis individual leaves society so as not to infect it and creates a heterotopia by doing so' (2018: 4). The scenographic object, an installation which is at the centre of the performance, transforms into a heterotopia as a space of crisis. It protects from the rules of the stage, allowing to go through a crisis, to become abject to the order established by SE Jawa and survive. The abjection, as often, is a bodily truth. It is the truth of a social body, a body resisting its addiction to alcohol which participates in a performance and a social project whose main protagonists are active

alcoholics. Nowacka's truth claim is so disruptive that even within the intimate space of the piece it is a surplus of reality and requires special care, a special place to deal with the crisis by sharing it. Peter Johnson argues (2006: 84) that heterotopias oppose utopian frameworks of progress – and Nowacka's tiny room questions the utopic dreams of SE JaWa. With its shiny, silver surface, it can even be seen as a literal embodiment of what Foucault considered the ultimate heterotopia, the mirror, a reflection sending the image of the show back to itself.

Nowacka's entering the minuscule room looked, to this Polish, Catholic-raised observer, like someone going into a confession booth. Another association was the psychoanalytic couch, or the confession room in Big Brother. All those are spaces where the actor/patient/subject does not see their audience. The witness also does not watch (with the exception of TV formats like Big Brother, where the viewers' seeing of the person inside is an act of transgression which puts them in a god-like role). They listen. The physical isolation through the establishment of a fourth wall protects all sides, and allows the subject to share a painful truth. Yet this is not a Schrödinger's box of representation where it is impossible to tell the truth. Rather, it makes it conceivable that what is being said is a truth claim. Truth is withheld, so it can be shared. The trailer becomes the ship, the 'heterotopia par excellence' (Foucault 1986: 27),[55] carrying the merchandise of truth, 'protecting us from an outside which will otherwise swallow us, while delivering us to outside spaces' (Reid 2008: 45). In other words, this space does not suspend the question of truth indefinitely, but instead, protects its disclosure until it is safe to be shared.

I know this strategy first-hand. When creating my show *Pygmalion* (2014, Centrum Kultury Zamek, Poznań), I set myself the task of having the performer share an intimate and important personal story with an audience member. I arrived at the conclusion that for the sharing to happen, there should be no onlookers, as the auditorium made any gesture of opening up a spectacular one, thereby inflecting its character. To avoid the spectators' gaze, I had the scenographer Wojciech Pustoła build a large cardboard box which isolated and protected the performer and a single spectator. The remaining spectators could assist the process thanks to strategically placed microphones, but could not see what was happening inside, as even a video

[55] Edward S. Casey points out that for Aristotle, every place is 'like a vessel', it limits the thing, surrounds it and distinguishes it. It is neither form nor matter. (Aristotle, *Physics*, 212a28–29, cited in Casey 2011: 53-54).

camera would turn the interaction into a (literally) spectacular event. This unconscious echo of the spatiality of a confession booth can also be found in *JaWa's* heterotopic box. It also shares a quality of some heterotopias, in that it is 'absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden, kept isolated without however being allowed out in the open' (Foucault, 1986). The doors of the trailer are shut, as what is inside can only be shared paradoxically, *as that which is isolated*.

Nowacka's room is a space of critique of a supposedly neutral situation where the presence of alcohol is a mere disturbance in the texture of the social reality, but it is also a new perspective, an example of strong objectivity, where the subjective position of the marginalised allows a redefinition of objectivity. Sandra Harding's depiction of standpoint theory, which is at the core of the concept of strong objectivity, explains this spatially, as if describing Nowacka's trailer scene: it 'is not only about how to get a less limited understanding of marginal lives – women's lives, for example. Instead, research is to *start off* from such locations (not to take as truth what people in those locations think or say) in order to explain not only those lives but also the rest of the micro and macro social order' (1995: 342). Thanks to this isolation, the inner space becomes a space of critique and contestation as it provides a drastically different reading of the whole project of SE JaWa.

The trailer is a paradoxical space. Its form recalls that of a caravan – a house on wheels (Turkowski calls it a 'hut on wheels').[56] Yet it is too small to be a house – or, to be more precise, the seating inside barely allows lying down, let alone living there. It is thus devoid of the very core function of the space of a trailer. It becomes the space of undoing, a theatrical object which subtracts theatricality, as what is being said inside takes away the possibility of presenting oneself to the gaze, which has been until now a core way of establishing agency in the performance, substituting that figure by that of an 'actor' with a different agency. Nowacka uses the temporary shelter to improvise an extremely personal tale that questions the norm of a negotiated common ground. The drinking, after her intervention, is not just a negotiable, difficult issue that can be dealt with in many ways. From now on, it becomes an impossibility, a condition that cannot be relativised to appease the atmosphere or make others feel good. The heterotopic

[56] Its shape is a reference to the temporary dwelling built by SE Jawa for Artur from an old, discarded fragment of a theatre set.

conditions of the trailer act like a greenhouse that allows a truth to grow until it is ripe enough, expressed enough, that its part in the entire jigsaw of the show becomes significant.

However, if that is the case, even this tiny theatre's heterotopia may not be entirely consistent with how heterotopias have been described in the first place: it is performative, it does not isolate the person in crisis entirely. After all, Nowacka's words can be heard, they become part of the *JaWa* performance and influence it. It is only a quasi-heterotopia, part of the repetitive re-presentation of a claim to truth. Or maybe that is the utopic hope in thinking about 'other sites' as performance spaces: that they extend their performance beyond themselves. Foucault explains it precisely when he writes in his preface to *The Order of Things* that heterotopias 'dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences' (Foucault 1994: xvii). Nowacka dissolves the myth of a neutral story told by an objective Turkowski, excusing the excesses of the SE workers. Using the heterotopic space, she proposes a strong objectivity that sterilises the lyricism of a utopic mission.

Conclusion: Beyond Heterotopia

When analysing *JaWa's* factuality, seeing it as heterotopia is not merely insufficient, but may be counterproductive. A fundamental quality of heterotopic spaces is being free from the bonds of the hegemonic social space, being 'encapsulated through their otherness' (Varlygina 2023: 178). Although they are connected to the hegemonic space, heterotopias endure as 'radical incommensurability' (Connor 1999: 8). But considering documentary performances such as *JaWa* in terms of isolation or alternative omits their essential feature: their porosity. The performance is not just crucially connected to the outside world – but extends it. *JaWa* as a project is the presentation of a non-stage project called SE JaWa. This entails that after the show, the artists remain accountable for what is being presented on the stage. Thus, if heterotopia removes the conceptual space which allowed a stable knowledge (Topinka 2010), *JaWa* reconnects the heterotopic structure with the hegemonic space. Heterotopia provides a combination of different spaces in one by subtracting itself from the main space and building its own episteme; yet, in work such as *JaWa* it is fundamental that the episteme remain the same. The persons described in the show are the same as the ones participating in SE JaWa; the project is the same. It is thus essential to acknowledge the *non-heterotopic* aspects of the work, if not to

move beyond the concept altogether, in order to understand not just the aesthetic experience of seeing a show about real people, but perhaps more importantly, its ethical consequences. For, once we refuse the utopic idea of a heterotopia as a space which is always an exception protected by a magical frontier from the rest of the world, what we do on stage and how we present the world can be judged by the same standards as what we do offstage. It is the primary argument of this chapter that statements contained in such a documentary performance can, and should, be seen as truth claims.

In the Chapters 2 and 3, I asserted the presence and value of truth claims in documentary theatre and showed the dynamics of their establishment and recognition in specific performances. This raises further questions regarding the relation of the creative process to the effective articulation of truth claims. In order to investigate how such claims are constituted and negotiated in practice – and to what extent they depend on forms of evidence – I dedicated the final chapter to developing a new performance. This practice was not simply an extension of my artistic work, but a methodological strategy: by assuming the position of practitioner-researcher, I was able to interrogate truth claims from within the creative process itself.

CHAPTER 4

PERFORMING THE HIDDEN:
TRUTH CLAIMS AND INVISIBLE DISABILITY IN *INNER MONOLOGUE*

> In perception, nothing is hidden. The world is there to be taken in. But in perception, in a sense, everything is hidden. For wherever you look there is unbounded complexity, there is too much to be taken in. Consider the case of listening to speech in an unfamiliar language. The sounds are all there for you, at least in a sense. But the words and what is being said are invisible to you. Because you can only perceive them – as with the art object at the outset – once you understand them. Knowing them makes them perceptible. But how do you achieve understanding?
>
> Alva Noë (2007:127)

> Art is creating FACT OUT OF WACK.
>
> William Pope.L (in Carr 2008: 314)

In Chapter 1, I set out how the development of the documentary in Polish theatre corresponded to a paradigm change. Beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, the stage, hitherto seen as a haven for contemplating moral ideals, turned into a space for exposing what had remained hidden. Both Michał Zadara's *Responsibility* (Chapter 2) and Turkowski&Nowacka's *JaWa* (Chapter 3) participate in this paradigm, presenting facts concealed by national and international authorities (*Responsibility*) or by less formal social structures (*JaWa*). The two productions shared a concern with documentation that translated to a factuality supported by visual (mainly video) evidence. But how can we speak of theatrical factuality – the presentation of recognised and verifiable facts on stage – when the verifiable facts are scarce, or when the statements are difficult or impossible to verify? And what is the process of arriving at such a theatrical factuality? *Monolog wewnętrzny* (*Inner Monologue*, 2024) is a performance I created to investigate precisely those questions.

The decision to move from analysing other people's work to producing my own came about during the writing of this thesis. As the above questions began taking shape, particularly since they depended on the intricacies of the creative process, it became clear it would be more

effective to address and explore the issues directly in the making, rather than attempt to search for a match in someone else's performance. Being a theatre-maker, I had the crucial advantage of being able to design a show tailored to the questions raised in my research. Rather than relying solely on analysing other artists' work, I could directly engage with these questions through my own creative process. If, as the Wittgensteinian epigraph of the introduction to this thesis asserts, 'My believing the trustworthy [person] stems from my admitting that it is possible for [them] to make sure' (Wittgenstein 1969: §23), I asked myself: as a practitioner, how do I lead spectators to admit that it is possible for me to make sure? The move to practice research allowed me to control and investigate the very process of producing truth claims. I observed the conjunction of aesthetic, material, psychological, and dramaturgical factors progressively shaping the finally produced claims. Some of these factors were explicitly addressed during rehearsals, while others remained implicit, influencing my process in ways I might not have recognised without the theoretical radar this research allowed me to set up.

This reflective approach to practice aligns with the etymology of 'theory', which stems from the Greek *theoron* – a messenger sent to another city-state to witness and take part in local festivals, rituals, and prophecies. The returning *theoron*'s account helped their home city-state position itself in relation to others.[57] Likewise, sending myself out to accompany my own process and provide a theoretical account allowed me to position myself and address the questions raised in this thesis by using my own working process.[58] I examine the construction of *Inner Monologue* to support my main claim: in explicitly autobiographical performances, theatrical factuality depends on social conventions of trust in truthfulness and an objectifying context. This reliance allows such performances to function without the need for tangible proof or other theatrical reality effects.[59]

I start off by analysing how, in *Inner Monologue*, I rendered facts accessible. Specifically, I chose a form – an autobiographical account of a health issue – that showcased the

[57] For a detailed account of the ancient *theoroi*, their roles, evolution and connection to concepts of theory and spectacle, see Rutherford 2018.

[58] And vice versa, thanks to this endeavour, I can see my own practice through the theoretical lens developed in the previous chapters.

[59] This is not tantamount, of course, to saying that reality effects do not exist.

complex relation between a scientific search for objectivity (and possibility of corroboration), and an autobiographical account based on truthfulness. I argue that, in an explicitly autobiographical documentary performance, the combination of accountability and trust allows the establishment of an epistemic community – spectators sharing knowledge.

A crucial element of *Inner Monologue* is that the health issue is an 'invisible disability' (Davis 2005) – a chronic disease with no visible signs on the body. Invisibility complicates both stereotypical notions of disability and the understanding of theatre as *theatron* – a place to see. After an overview of the main debates within the disabled community, I follow authors who see vulnerability as a quality overcoming the able/disabled dichotomy (Knight 2014, Satz 2008, Tomasini 2019), to contend establishing it as a basis for the performer's (and performance's) relation with the audience. I show how the staging of vulnerability in *Inner Monologue* produces a suspension of disbelief necessary to acknowledge truth claims. I go on to argue that thanks to a shift from visuality to a listening-in, it was possible, in *Inner Monologue*, to establish facts within a space both heterotopic and non-heterotopic. This is due to the fact my gut microbiota, a group protagonist I address, remains invisible: of microscopic scale and hidden deep inside the body. Its presence, to the audience, oscillates between materiality and spectrality.

Lastly, the performance was not just the consequence of the questions that emerged during the writing of this thesis. The process of analysing my work in this chapter made me realise that the final scene of the already premiered performance needed to be redrafted. The new ending, in turn, made me go back to the thesis, creating a feedback loop between writing and practice. I end this chapter with the description and analysis of how that occurred. Before I move to an analysis of the truth claims *Inner Monologue* contains, I will briefly describe the production, as well as the process of its creation. First, however, I will proceed with an autobiographical introduction.

My Road to *Inner Monologue*

I was born to Polish parents and raised mainly in Poland, although I spent a year of my childhood in the United States, my five years of high school in Montreal, and two of my six years of undergraduate studies in different parts of France, followed by five years in Portugal.

This complicated map of references translated to an uncertainty regarding who I was and what legacy was mine – which voices I was reiterating. I wrote my MA dissertation (more precisely, a French diploma called *Maîtrise*) in philosophy about 'Alterity and identity in the experience of the theatre spectator', arguing for a theatre that focuses on the spectator's experience, rather than the creator's. Upon finishing my studies, I moved to Portugal, where I had my first big theatre success with *Hamlet Light* (2007).[60] After moving back to Poland in 2009, I premiered *Small Narration* (2010), which achieved significant success[61] and turned out to be a defining work for my career, positioning me as an experimental artist in a documentary, often autobiographical line of theatre (Lemańska and Wycisk 2018). It also set up several themes and strategies present in *Inner Monologue.*

Small Narration is a forty-minute-long autobiographical performance lecture. At its source was the discovery, in 2003, that my beloved grandfather (who at the time of the events was ninety-four years old) had been collaborating with the secret services of the Polish Communist regime for over twenty years. The performance is literally a lecture: for the duration of the piece, I read from a text on a stand in front of me, without ever looking at the audience. My reading is formal and dry, accentuating the literariness of the text rather than searching for a dynamic way of communicating a story.[62] As the text jumps between my intellectual and artistic inspirations and background, the story of the terrible family discovery and fragments of the reports allegedly written by my grandfather, more and more knowledge is gained, but with less

[60] Jovens Artistas Jovens national award for best young theatre artist.

[61] Small Narration premiered at the Teatr Studio in Warsaw. It was shown in eight Polish cities, as well as in: Madrid, Spain (El Matadero); Munich, Germany (Spielart); Rio de Janeiro, Brasil (Tempo Festival); Paris, France (Cartoucherie de Vincennes); Brussels, Belgium (La Bellonne); Moscow, Russia (Golden Mask); Athens, Greece (Onassis Cultural Centre); Edinburgh, Scotland (Polish showcase at the Edinburgh Fringe); New York, USA (New York Theatre Workshop); Troy, USA (EMPAC); Vilnius, Lithuania (Arts Printing House); Nitra, Slovakia (Nitra Festival); Cluj, Romania (Temps d'Images); Dresden, Germany (Hellerau). The play was also translated to English, French, Russian and Belarussian.

[62] The austerity of the performance brought radically polarised reactions. After the Polish showcase at the Edinburgh Fringe, for instance, actor-director Chris Thorpe declared *Small Narration* the best show he has ever seen in Edinburgh (The Guardian, 2014), while writer and publisher Tom Chivers found it 'utterly tedious' (Chivers 2012).

and less hope for a clear answer, identity or conclusion. Access to the original documents was refused by the Institute of National Memory,[63] what little material was being disclosed was manipulated, and my grandfather claimed he remembered nothing – and was indeed losing his memory. The question of truth and possibility of knowledge is the performance's leitmotif, guided by projected quotes from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *On Certainty.* The real-life story had no closure – each new discovery raised more questions, and attempts at reconstructing past events, though at times seemingly successful, left huge blanks which, with my grandfather's passing in 2008, would remain unfilled. Correspondingly, the show ends with the description of a body without memory, fading out and 'suddenly ending'. I read a UK review of *Small Narration* which considered this lack of conclusion regarding the allegations a structural problem, asking for 'some sort of sudden revelation'.[64] This inspired me to add two sentences to the penultimate paragraph of the text's English version: 'Do not think the memory which seems yours belongs to you. And this body, here, in front of you, will not bring about some sudden revelation, will not provide closure'. *Small Narration* shows the questionable agency of a corporeality subject to forces it cannot control – a theme which I will return to over a decade later in *Inner Monologue*.

Several reviewers and scholars saw in *Small Narration* a postmodern disappearance of the subject, and an argument for the impossibility of arriving at truth or knowledge (Smolarska 2018, Michalak 2010). I did not share their epistemic pessimism. In fact, such reviews contradicted themselves, declaring, for instance, 'We will not take away from *Small Narration* the belief that we know something' (Michalak 2010), while relating the facts I claimed concerning scientific articles, history, art, and my family history. Indeed, the case – and the performance – provided a great deal of knowledge. Although that knowledge was not sufficient to have a clear idea concerning crucial events from the past and their causes, the performance was nonetheless providing factual insight concerning my and my grandfather's lives, as well as regarding institutions, historians, artists, artworks and philosophy. Many of these truth claims

[63] Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – the official translation of the name of this institution set up by an openly right-wing, nationalistic government is Institute of National Remembrance, but the Polish term 'pamięć' points unequivocally to 'memory'.

[64] Twelve years later, I have not been able to locate that review, hence it will have to remain the one anecdotal reference of this thesis.

were accompanied by precise references on video projections. All of them constituted the piece's theatrical factuality. The tension between a subjective, nearly solipsistic narrative and different objectifying processes and strategies returned in *Inner Monologue.*

After *Small Narration,* for many years I did not venture into autobiography. I directed several documentary theatre productions.[65] Practically all of those shows had an autobiographical construction in the sense of the performers talking about their own experiences. But I was the one who took on the responsibility for the entire projects and assumed the authorship (although in several cases the performers were credited with their contribution to the text). The only other time I performed an autobiographical text was called *Essence of Poland* (2019). The performance, premiering at the Culturescapes festival in Basel, Switzerland, was the presentation of an actual product I developed together with Swiss perfume designer Andreas Wilhelm: a perfume that smelled like Poland. The demonstration was an introduction to the dramaturgy of the scent as the latter was changing in time (every spectator received a sample). The script was a poetic narrative about the Polish strain of my biography, with its idiosyncratic or archetypal episodes. While it did not directly ask questions about facts and truth, the materiality of the object (perfume) was juxtaposed with what could be called my subjective 'inner monologue', in a way echoed in my most recent piece. However, what made *Inner Monologue* different from my previous work was that, although it was a commissioned work, the idea, motivation and process all stemmed directly from my academic research.

In 2023, curator Tomasz Plata invited me to take part in a series of performances he titled *Rozum TERAZ* (*Reason NOW*). The goal of the series was to reconsider the value of reason in an era of post-truth. Plata wanted to investigate how, after the fierce criticism of reason, both from within the scientific and intellectual fields and from a more mainstream culture, we can find (new or old) ways of relying on reason ('Monolog wewnętrzny, reż. Wojtek Ziemilski' 2024). He proposed I work around the theme of medicine. Several possible directions were on the table.

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[65] I.a.: *W samo południe* (*High Noon*, 2014) about the democratic changes in Poland in 1989, *Kosmologia rozdrażewska* (*The Rozdrażew* Cosmology, 2014) about and with a large group of amateur astronomers in the village of Rozdrażew, *Pigmalion* (*Pygmalion*, 2014) about and with an actress and her son who was having trouble learning to speak, *Jeden gest* (*One Gesture,* 2016), a show about sign languages performed by an ensemble of Deaf actors, or *Oda do radości* (*Ode to Joy*, 2022) about heritage.

One of them was the story of my chronic illness and the diverse, conventional and alternative, ways I have tried to get it under control. Another idea was to look at the COVID-19 pandemic and the different anti-scientific waves that accompanied it (the most obvious being the anti-vaxxers' movement). I chose the former starting point, as it was a deeply personal one, and I had already studied my disease extensively through the last years. It also coincided with my interest in disability studies, and, last but not least, it was an opportunity to take another step in my doctoral research and – for reasons I have elucidated earlier – move from a strictly theoretical model to one employing practice research. That last point gained more and more importance as I entered the creative process of what ended up as the *Inner Monologue*, premiering at Komuna Warszawa, the same Warsaw venue where *JaWa* (which I analyse in Chapter Three) had its premiere some time earlier.

Inner Monologue is a nearly hour-long solo performance which I wrote, directed and performed. Its starting point is a chronic gut disease I have had since 2015, ulcerative colitis. The performance, however, is not the story of the ailment. Instead, it uses colitis, my unstable, episodic disability (Vick 2012), to scrutinise the ambiguous nature of agency in a temporarily able body. Being part of what Arthur W. Frank calls 'the remission society' (2006: 8-13) – people who recover from their disease for an indefinite duration and feel intermittently (and at times, simultaneously) ill and healthy – I took my medical story outside of the medical context and shared it elsewhere. Formally, the core of *Inner Monologue* is a spoken address to the gut microbiota of my large intestine. As I lie, immobile, on the stage, a digital stethoscope I press against my belly provides the performance's soundtrack: the live sounds of my gut. The sound is mastered by a sound engineer present on the side of the stage, and then transmitted to the headphones each of the spectators is wearing. Thus, the audience hears both my monologue (I wear a lavalier microphone) and its addressee/respondent. Besides my performing, though immobile, body, and the sound engineer's post, a third visual element is also present: video projections of the bibliographic references offering a scientific context for my words. The text I deliver is autobiographic, partly narrative, yet it does not follow a timeline; anecdotes connected to the illness are interspersed among pleas to the microbiota and attempts to decipher its way of functioning based on scientific data. All this is addressed to the microbiota. The performance ends with a scene where I question the possibility of communication and take on a rather comic role of bacteria, declaring their will to be entertained rather than burdened with questions. In that

scene, at 'their' request, I end up playing a fragment of Rossini for and to the bacteria, using a small Bluetooth speaker I press against my abdomen. The audience only hear the music as it is discernible in the gut. Finally, I stand up and disconnect the stethoscope.

The relation of a subjective perspective with a strong case for factuality is present since the very title of the piece: 'inner monologue' can be seen both as a time of introspection, and, given a different interpretation, as the performance of or about what is physically inside the body. Its Polish context underscores this semiotic tension even more. 'Inner monologue' is a particularly resonant term in the Polish theatre setting. Krystian Lupa, one of the most prominent theatre directors of the last half-century, uses the concept as a foundational way of preparing actors for their roles. The writing of the inner monologue revolves around what Bryce Lease calls '"deep" readings of a buried or repressed unconscious' (2016: 41), far beyond what the text of the play itself determines, until one's own self is at the service of the character. The text of the inner monologue is personal to the extent of usually not being shared with the remaining cast or the director (Picon-Vallin, Lupa and Thibaudat, 2010: 303-308). Whether understood colloquially or as a theatrical technique, the inner monologue is an act of utmost subjectivity. Which is the opposite to how the *Inner Monologue* functions.

Though it is often underlined that the very concept of objectivity 'requires avoidance of *internal* perspectives to see the world as it is/was' (Gashi 2021: 107, italics in original), it is precisely the *internal* perspective that provides *Inner Monologue* with the most objective content. The *Inner Monologue* is also (or possibly, above all) an *Internal Monologue*,[66] a monologue about the biological processes happening inside the body,[67] and to an even greater extent, a monologue from the inside. Although most of such processes remain subconscious, *Inner Monologue* does not abide by Lupa's method, and combines introspection with the objectifying discourse of science. That the performer is not *aware* of what is happening to his body does not imply he cannot *know* – possess theoretical knowledge (or, to use Bertrand Russell's more precise term, 'knowledge by description'; 1910). And vice versa: knowing what the science provides does not necessarily translate to a more conscious relation, let alone

[66] The Polish word 'wewnętrzny' present in the title can be translated as 'internal', 'inner' or 'interior'.

[67] That is why one reviewer called the title 'very deceitful'. See: Niedurny 2024.

communication, with the internal body. Yet Lupa's method and the biological perspective have something in common. Katarzyna Niedurny touches on it in her review of the performance, pointing to an expression which, according to her, is at the core of *Inner Monologue.* It is nearly identical in Polish and in English: '"to speak from the gut" – or to say something for real, from within, without pretending' (2024). [68] This impression was the fruit of a meeting between this particular spectator's disposition and the theatrical factuality proposed in the work. It did not boil down to a reality effect, just as everything anyone sees or hears does not convince them of its reality just because it is an effective illusion. If Wittgenstein, in the above-quoted remark, connects trustworthiness to the conviction that 'it is possible' for the person making claims 'to make sure', the conditions are clearly met. Niedurny's conclusion means that she considered me trustworthy enough to be satisfied with this epistemic level and not require additional proof. By the critic's standards, I made sure I was ill, I made sure I got well informed and made sure to share my discoveries. Establishing this platform of trustworthiness is particularly important in an environment where facts that could corroborate my story are not easy to access.

Accessibility of Facts

The conditions of witnessing a performance limit the possibilities of enquiry about the presented claims. This has sometimes been interpreted as participating in rendering any ontological claims impossible within the framework of a theatre production (Stephenson 2019, Tomlin 2013). Yet, an explicitly autobiographical performance is in many ways similar to a lecture, where there are often limited possibilities of corroborating the received information *hic et nunc*. Given that the tradition of documentary theatre is an intermittent one at best, or, as Derek Paget put it, is a 'broken tradition' (2009), the prevailing postulated genealogy of documentary theatre, which sees it as stemming from fiction, needs an alternative explanation, a competing set of roots, in the form of scientific lectures, TED-talks, YouTube instruction films or mostly documentary podcasts. All these forms treat discourse as an imperfect but effective way of making truth claims. While retaining an obvious connection to the theatrical tradition, autobiographical

[68] The original 'mówić z bebechów' is slightly more visceral, less metaphoric – closer to 'speaking from tripes'.

performances can also be seen as profiting from the more recent forms of expression which provide an alternative to the stringent rejection of factuality theatre and its critique have been producing.

On the other hand, the darkness, silence and lack of movement in a typical theatre production inhibit, for instance, taking out one's phone to verify information online. I was considering a different protocol, where spectators would be encouraged to go online by projections of QR codes which would link to the reference articles. As my research was similar to that made during the doctoral studies, I wanted to provide a possibility of verifying the performance's claims analogous to that of academic readers and I researched examples of performances which included bibliographies. The problem with using a bibliography on the stage was the type of attention required for executing the search, impossible to maintain in a theatre without breaking the flow of the performance. Even less so in the *Inner Monologue* as it was taking shape. The engagement required from the setup – listening to a sort of concert on headphones and focusing on the dense text – was not compatible with looking up references or marking them down for later. I tried showing slides with quotations from scientific papers during my monologue. Too many signals were then competing for the audience's attention – the scene became a semiotic nightmare, with an overflow of information to process. As the form of the performance was by now more intimate – with a private conversation of an immobile performer with his body, QR codes and online articles appeared as a distraction from the aesthetic experience.

I did not always consider such an accumulation problematic. In the final scene of *Small Narration*, I had juxtaposed an increasing number of citations on a slide presentation, which corresponded to the ever-increasing number of explanations leading to the impossibility of achieving a singular, objective account of events. This solution followed what, in 2007, Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera described as the new paradigm of theatre: any attempt at a representation of truth was to be replaced by a succession of 'heterogeneous', 'ambiguous' worlds which are 'full of gaps'. The goal was to activate the spectators:

> The spectators can rely neither on their common knowledge, nor on their cultural knowledge when trying to consistently interpret the bits and pieces out of which the text and the performance are woven. This task is by no means easier when the author openly

> quotes from other commonly known literary sources, since neither single cited fragments, nor their clusters are provided with a clear meaning. When confronted with this performative flux, and disarmed from the well-established procedures of meaning constitution, the spectator is forced to take active part in the creation of the fictional world of stage and search for a way of ordering the scattered pieces of a puzzle. (2007: 8)

While Borowski's and Sugiera's enthusiastic account focuses on non-documentary theatre performances, the final scene of *Small Narration* used an approach analogous to that described by the Polish scholars, with the same hope of 'forcing' the spectator to an active 'ordering of the scattered pieces of a puzzle'. At the same time, just as Borowski's and Sugiera's text, it implicitly – and paradoxically – questioned the possibility of an order altogether.

Inner Monologue, steeped in the research on truth claims I have been conducting in this thesis, led me in the opposite direction: that of exploring how the construction of stage situations can assist the sharing of truth claims. This translated, among others, to a careful consideration, and ultimate limiting, of the amount and type of provided information. Even quotations from the articles, or their summaries, projected on the screen, made it difficult to go back to the intimacy of the stage situation. In the end, I kept the article titles, translated to Polish for clarity.[69] They marked interludes between the segments of the spoken text.

In the final run-up to the premiere, I realised the number of factual references I provided kept diminishing, in favour of an uninterrupted flow. This process echoed many artists' weariness of including scientific knowledge in their practical stage work. Choreographer Meg Stuart represented this attitude in a conversation with Scott DeLahunta: 'Of course, when I read about developments in neuroscience I'm very interested, but I can never go and use it in the studio in doing practical research or work. I don't have the access to this knowledge in that sense, but the moment of reading about it is thrilling. But my main interest is in what works in the creative research process' (2007: 133). Still, my aim was to somehow include such knowledge in the work, after all. While its direct presence in the performance ended up diminishing significantly, I looked for ways of making sure it supports the performance. As documentary playwright Johnny

[69] The English version of the performance, created for international showings, contained the original English titles.

Saldaña put it, 'The ethical conundrum for ethnodramatists[70] to maintain fidelity to our transcripts and fieldnotes should not paralyze us from thinking imaginatively about a research study's staging potential' (2011: 207). Saldaña describes a similar conundrum to mine, where the peppering of important scientific data stopped the flow of action in a first draft of *Vaqueeros*, a play by Carlos Manuel. After considering eliminating the data altogether, Manuel ends up creating a separate scene to present 'the statistics as a campy PowerPoint slide presentation with accompanying hard-copy handouts for the audience ("Here, take one and pass'em on down")' (2011: 210). In *Inner Monologue,* I proceeded in an analogous way, only what corresponded to that separate scene was twofold, occurring both during and after the performance itself. The monologue was punctuated by silent interludes between segments of my speech (the 'silence' was, to be precise, an absence of spoken text, as the intestines could still be heard 'speaking' via the stethoscope). During the interludes, the scientific references were projected (in a bibliographic manner adjusted to be easily read) on the back curtain. In some cases, I explicitly referred to them when talking:

> WOJTEK: […] that study where participants were given a yoghurt with a meal, twice a day, for a month. Later, they were shown pictures of people looking dangerous or afraid. And those participants displayed less stressful reactions. After eating yoghurt with live bacterial cultures!
>
> PROJECTED TEXT: Kirsten Tillisch et al. *Consumption of Fermented Milk Product with Probiotic Modulates Brain Activity*, 'Gastroenterology' 2013 no. 7 (144), pp. 1394-1401.
>
> WOJTEK: That's the study. Imagine that! Culture changes people.

But most of the time, the titles simply echoed or provided background for what was being said (e.g. analysing the side effects of a treatment I mentioned or using a similar warlike metaphor to describe the gut microbiota).

The article titles' veracity was hard to identify during the show. Some were so funny, bizarre or relevant that they may have seemed made-up. Indeed, several spectators mentioned

[70] Saldaña coined the term 'ethnodrama' to describe a documentary theatre script based on personal investigation (2011:13).

thinking during the performance that they had been. As it was crucial for me to provide a corroboration of the references, I did not stop there and introduced an element beyond the confines of the performance. In her introduction to *Walking, Writing and Performance,* Roberta Mock describes how many autobiographical pieces encourage the spectator to act, often suggesting a return to the space inhabited by the author (2009: 13-14). *Inner Monologue* includes such a call: it takes the form of a QR code exhibited at the exit of the show. The code contains a link to the full bibliography of the performance, assembled in the Zotero reference management software.[71] The vast majority of the 100 references on the list are scientific peer-reviewed articles. As only about twenty percent of the titles are projected during the performance, the site figures as an extension of the show, and its corroboration. This version of a call to action is a performative gesture, yet it diverges significantly from the association of autobiographic performativity with 'a certain anti-theoreticism' by some scholars (Marcus 1994: 287, cited in: Mock 2009: 14). Instead, it does the exact opposite, grounding the scientific claims of the performance in a network of theoretical references based on empirical research.

Yet, the scientific layer of truth claims which relies on a matrix of empirical studies is not the only way factuality appears in *Inner Monologue*. An entire set of claims remains veridical even without empirical corroboration. From the general category of autobiographical performance, I want to single out explicitly autobiographical performances, which openly posit the performer as the author and protagonist of a documentary work about themselves. My argument is that in such embodied performances, truth claims are possible and do not need to be substantiated, or even verifiable, to be recognised as such.

But let us start with text. *Inner Monologue* begins with these words:

> Recently, a TikToker came up with this new thing:
> when he was in the toilet, he would play music from his smartphone to his flatmates,
> using loudspeakers placed around the apartment.
> The character of the music corresponded to the character of the defecation.
> Like: light shit = light music.
> A few years ago, my music would have been something like this:

[71] https://www.zotero.org/groups/5503806/monolog_wewn%C4%99trzny_inner_monologue/item-list.

What follows is a mash-up of György Ligeti's, Krzysztof Penderecki's, Witold Lutosławski's, Guiseppe Verdi's and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's most dramatic or tragic music. The pieces enter one by one, adding to the previous ones, quickly developing from tragedy (they are mostly requiems) to chaos to absolute madness.

What is the status of this story? Is it a truth claim? Or can it be fiction made for dramatic effect? If it is not truth, what has been made up? What can be doubted? Everything, of course, can be doubted, as in autobiographical territory 'Life as the sum of its (rhetorically modified) parts is always "written" and not "de-scribed"' (Möller 2019: 172). For all we know, there may not have even been a TikToker who came up with such a silly game. But it is unlikely that any spectator will doubt there was. Also, the music illustrating my situation could be interpreted as pointing, not to digestive problems, only to anger, sadness, resentment. But it is not. Just in case anybody in the audience – or reading these words – has any doubts, as the music stops, I proceed to say:

> Fortunately, in 2021, a new drug appeared in Poland.
> Exactly when all the other available drugs had failed.
> And this one worked. It put a muzzle on my body.

After these words, it does not make sense to doubt these claims to truth amount to more than a rhetorical 'discursive effect' (Möller 2019). There seems to have really been an illness, and a drug, which appeared in 2021, to help alleviate the situation. The way the fragments are composed is meant to make legible an aspect of my life. This could be considered a sort of fictionalising process, a construction of a narrative that Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the biographical illusion' (2000). But that illusion is just one aspect, one way of looking at the work; focusing on it as the ultimate reading of *Inner Monologue* falls prey to the same kind of essentialism critical thinking attempts to overcome. Besides the 'writing' of life, there is also the 'de-scribing' – the referring to facts, the unveiling of what the audience accepts as truth.

In an article from 2016 called 'Auto-theatre in times of post-truth', Joanna Krakowska points to a (then) new paradigm among Polish theatre practitioners. The key ingredient in this movement she calls 'auto-teatr' is personal accountability: the actors speak in their own name,

relating their own experiences ('from the self about the self'), attempting to honestly reveal their positionality, circumstances or biases, and standing by what they say. This paradigm, whose roots I believe stem from dance and performance art, has allowed the artists to reframe the performance as a more private event, in the sense of allowing the private aspect of their lives to not just become public, but also to shape the epistemic matrix of their performances. The private, off-stage identities of the authors-performers, warrant, if not necessarily the performance's 'authenticity', at least the accountability of the creators. Rather than abolish the distinction between the private sphere and the public one, this movement uses the specificity of the former to provide a new way of dealing with the latter. Krakowska believes auto-teatr to be a 'rather desperate' reaction to the effects of 'post-truth' such as Brexit and the (then – first) election of Donald Trump.

Interestingly, the existence of differing English translations of the two versions of the Polish article points to distinct possibilities of understanding how explicitly autobiographical performances operate. The last sentence of the text, as translated by Monika Bokiniec, is:

> In the face of post-truth, in which 'talking a load of rubbish' is by no means a study from the production *Ewelina's Crying* but an immanent quality of doing politics, delivering verifiable results from Brexit to the Trump presidential campaign, auto-theatre can offer ver[i]dical catharsis. (Krakowska 2018)

I want to focus on the very last fragment of this sentence: 'auto-theatre can offer ver[i]dical catharsis'. An earlier translation of another version of the article, made by Marek Kaźmierski, has this fragment as: 'auto-theatre can offer a loud and clear catharsis' (Krakowska 2016). The latter interpretation posits Krakowska's claims as having to do with the clarity and strength of the spectators' experience. In other words, auto-theatre's cathartic experience is unambiguous, marking a difference with the blurriness and confusion of post-truth.

Bokiniec's translation, following Krakowska à la lettre, points instead to an epistemological claim. 'A veridical perception', according to Simon Blackburn in the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, 'is one that represents things as they are, contrasted with an illusory or even delusory one' (Blackburn, 2008). The catharsis, here, has an epistemological quality. If in Kaźmierski's interpretation 'auto-teatr' is a way of establishing an effective channel of

communication, Bokiniec's version (and, I would argue, Krakowska's original) points to the ambition of a sharing which leads to some common understanding of (a fragment of) the world. While such endeavours may be resulting from 'desperation', their effectiveness lies in the creation of an epistemic community – a shared idea of the state of things. Here, autobiography is the opposite of the 'biographical illusion': it allows the spectators to move past the illusory games of post-truth and trust what they see.

The need to communicate one's situation, which can be seen as an important counterpoint to the 'biographical illusion', is recognised as an effort to convey what the author considers truth. An important aspect of this lack of doubt is the trust in the truthfulness of the author. Where veracity is the accurate representation of truth, truthfulness has more to do with the author's relation to it. In that line, Micaela Maftei follows John D. Barbour in differentiating autobiographical truth from truthfulness (Maftei 2013). Where the former term corresponds to a state of affairs – a strict correspondence of what is said to reality which is impossible to obtain, the latter is a question of ethos*,* an attitude of striving to honestly convey one's truth. Truthfulness, writes Barbour, is 'a continual dialogue between a writer's conscience and his [*sic*] imagination' (1992: 28). Maftei considers that the focus on truthfulness instead of truth puts 'a burden on the writer *not* to ensure "correspondence between thought and reality", but rather to interpret the material they have according to certain principles' (Maftei 2013: 22. Italics in original). I take issue with such an interpretation. An example given by Barbour to prove his point can, I believe, elucidate mine. Barbour describes the case of an autobiography where the author goes to great lengths to explain to the reader where exactly she managed to confirm her account in historical sources, and where she relied only on her memory and imagination (1992: 28-30). As per Barbour, this shows how imagination and reality are intertwined in autobiographic work. I argue instead that, if what mattered above all was to be 'honest with oneself' (1992: 19), that case proved that honesty often required thorough research and corroboration, which would not make sense had the author – or those analysing her work – stopped on the intertwining as a principle. The 'correspondence between thought and reality' never ceased being constantly negotiated.

This way of making sense, both by the creator and the receiver, can be much more than a mere illusion, or a process of fictionalisation. It may be interpreted, as it is by David Carr, as a

crucial connection between telling stories and making sense of life 'in the face of an ever-threatening, impending chaos at all levels' (1986: 91). The sense-making is, in Carr's view, much more than an illusion: it is a fundamental part of our being in time which corresponds to the way life is lived and can provide significant insight in that regard (1986). As Volker Depkat points out, autobiographical texts help reveal otherwise inaccessible facts, which, although confined by the author's positionality, interests and discursive limitations, can be analysed in historical terms and looked at to 'build bridges from the textuality of autobiography into the biographical and historical context of an autobiographical act' (2019: 79). Yet the ties connecting my small autobiographical introduction to the facts of my life go beyond mere 'context'. One of *Inner Monologue*'s contexts that appear from the beginning of the performance is my disability. Only here, disability is much more: it is the *text* of the performance, its condition of existence. To explain how this plays out, I need to first clarify what I mean by 'disability', as, particularly in the United Kingdom, the term has been the subject of intense debate, ever since the appearance of what is usually referred to as the 'social model of disability'.

Performing Invisible Disability

The social model of disability is a form of social constructionism, which describes reality as interpreted or construed rather than predetermined and fixed (Vehmas and Mäkelä, 2008: 42, 52). As philosopher Ian Hacking explains, social constructivists, regardless of the area they analyse (Hacking's non-exhaustive list of over two dozen such areas extends from 'Authorship' to 'Zulu nationalism'), share the conviction that the issue at stake is not inevitable, and, often, that it should be radically transformed (1999: 1-7). Disability scholars fighting against the discrimination of people with disabilities believed a fundamental transformation was possible and necessary. Thus, since the second half of the twentieth century when its ideas were first developed in the United Kingdom, the social model has been shifting the public understanding of disability from an individualist, normative perspective where individuals were judged as normal or abnormal, to a structural one, where the focus became the social creation of norms. Querying both the essentialist view that there is a 'normal' human being, and the concomitant reduction of disability to a medical deviation from that 'norm', the social model of disability frames the debate around how to overcome the obstacles and prejudices rooted in an ableist society. This

has allowed important progress in terms of the recognition, inclusion and emancipation of people with disabilities.

However, such pragmatic goals and achievements have frequently been accompanied by a depreciation of the personal and corporeal aspects of disability, bringing about a new, social essentialism (Vehmas 2019: 299). Indeed, since the model's beginnings, its advocates not only make a sharp distinction between disability, understood as a social construct, and impairment as limitation of the body, but often treat accounts of illness and impairment as, at best, 'sentimental autobiography' (Hunt 1966: ix), and, at worst, an unwitting contribution to the ableist paradigm (Oliver 1990). Disability scholar Tom Shakespeare is one of the most prominent voices taking issue with such a standpoint, arguing that, as the role of impairment – understood as a physical fact – is negated or downplayed, the social model fails to do justice to the complexity and diversity of experiences of disability (Shakespeare 2014: 11-46, see also Williams 1999). Shakespeare relates how, since the early 1990s, disability scholars such as Jenny Morris, Liz Crow or Sally French began questioning the possibility, and the sense, of a disability/ impairment dichotomy (2014: 26-33). What these scholars noticed was that the political gains of excluding impairment from disability came at the risk 'of ignoring the problematic reality of biological limitation' (2014: 28), paradoxically leaving everything related to the body's shortcomings and problems at the mercy of the medical discourse (Williams 1999: 803-804; Hughes and Paterson 1997: 329-330).

In that vein, disability scholar and philosopher Simo Vehmas pleaded not to forget that 'some impairments seem to cause distress and downright suffering regardless of the environmental and social conditions' (2019: 303), all the while maintaining important and complex relations with the social and political aspects of disability. That has been the case of my chronic illness. And, while it was crucial for me, when working on *Inner Monologue*, to move beyond the distress and suffering, I followed Vehmas' warning that 'it would be intellectually and politically disastrous to conclude that impairments are not primarily or even secondarily physical facts and that nothing exists until it is spoken of or written about' (2012: 299). The acknowledgement of the impairment and the way it has transformed my life was tantamount to claiming facts about my story, facts not reducible to social constructs or discursive phenomena.

I had never directed a production explicitly positing myself as a person with disability, let alone performed in such a show. Exposing one's disability on the stage is a complex process. Petra Kuppers begins her book *Disability and Contemporary Performance* (2004) by underscoring that the meeting of these two – performance and disability – is always a way of framing the unknown, and of un-knowing the frame, challenging habits and norms that seem certain (2004: 1-4). That is why, according to Kuppers, 'meetings [of disability and performance] are characterized by a flow of energy, and a way of being alive, that negates fixity. Fixes on the nature of disability, and on images associated with it, can become unstable' (2004: 1). Yet, as opposed to Kuppers' description of a fundamentally undefinable, fluid condition which, when put on the stage, proves identity is formed by discourse, my experience of disability, with all its fluctuations, uncertainties, baffling incongruencies and surprises, has had a hard core of impairment and pain. This phenomenological experience came first, and reading theories which seem to try and prove my pain insufficiently real to deserve a pre-discursive, not-performed status was a frustrating experience. I felt acutely the problem Ludwig Wittgenstein described regarding the impossibility of sharing one's pain with others – it does not make sense to say 'I know I am in pain', because my pain is not sharable. I can only say 'I am in pain' ('Philosophical Investigations Part 1: Sections 243–309 summary and analysis', n.d.). But that same sentence should be an indication that my pain is a state. The disability could be called the transfer of that sensation to the social realm, the outside expression of my impairment and its relationship to the outside world. Floris Tomasini, a philosopher of health and disability, describes this: 'The feel of being in an impaired body, with all its uncertainties, is a prelinguistic experience to which words and narratives accrue' (2019: 15). The words and narratives build the edifice of our understanding and communicating of what the embodiment of our impairment is, but they do not constitute that initial 'feel'.

There is an analogy to be made between this perspective and body art in the 1960s and 70s, with artists such as Marina Abramović or Chris Burden and their breaking down of the safety net of what J. L. Austin called theatre's 'hollow performative utterances' (1962: 22) – statements which have no actual performative power. What happens in the performance space, claimed those artists, does not (need to) stay in the performance space. The wounds do not close with the curtain falling. In addition, the wounds proved the preconceived idea of body and agency ill-conceived. They questioned the essentialist view of a normative, integral body. Or, to

be more precise, they presented the somatic concreteness to critique semiotic essentialism.[72] Although many scholars have since argued that performance is not an ontologically self-contained event and is rather assembled together with what comes before and after it, including its documentation (eg. Schneider 2011, Bedford 2012), it is important to note that, if we are to include the performer's perspective in the performance, the case is far from settled. Chris Burden, for instance, insisted on distinguishing his performances from documentation, which was 'just a hint of the real thing' (*I Think Museums Function the Way Churches Function to Religion / Chris Burden*, 2015). The specificity of the event, its disruption of the flow of things, was, as per Burden, clearly distinct from the distanced view of what he called 'tidbits' which remain. The same went for what Philip Auslander claimed was the fundamental impossibility of distinguishing between liveness and its mediatisation (1999). When asked by the interviewer if the media was part of 'his image and the work', Burden replied: 'I don't think so. I think my person is separate'. This separate person, one feeling and thinking and suffering – as was the case with his *Shoot* (1971), where he had a friend shoot him in the arm with a gun – is then put on as a spectacle, analogically to the prediscursive impairment 'to which words and narratives accrue'.

Disability is performed in that it is being embodied on the stage, and consequently, brought to light as co-constitutive of the observed performer. As Petra Kuppers put it, 'people with physical impairments are […] instantly defined in their physicality' (2004: 49). Speaking for oneself – indeed, performing oneself on the stage – provides the possibility to renegotiate one's position on (more) one's own terms (2001).[73] The first such case within the Polish context

[72] Admittedly, some see this under a different light. Alan Read seems disappointed by what he calls 'the suspension of the "suspension of disbelief" in theatre for the more prosaic promises of performance' (2008: 6).

[73] That is why the two performances I directed with and about Deaf performers, *One Gesture* and *In Translation*, although they address issues of disability and are sometimes seen as important examples of *cripping* (McRuer 2006) the stage, remain, in my view, problematic in adjusting the disability discourse to my own positioned understanding, and more importantly, to my epistemic and political needs. The disabled subject is only enabled to the extent they are communicable in the eyes of the able-bodied artist (in the context of these performances, my position was not that of a person with disability, as I was a hearing artist directing Deaf performers). Although both times I was aware of the problem and put significant effort into mitigating it by extensive research and including the performers in the creative process, I ended up claiming authorship of both productions, considering this corresponded to the positionality of the pieces and the responsibility for the way it portrayed the protagonists.

of disability and performance was choreographer and disability/crip activist Rafał Urbacki (Hoczyk 2012). When in 2010 Urbacki showed his autobiographical *Mt 9,7*, he told the story of his disability and of his homosexuality, and their difficult relation to his religiosity (and to the Catholic Church). In what was arguably the most poignant scene of the short, now legendary performance, Urbacki literally *performed* his disability, piercing his own foot with a spike, creating an image reminiscent of Christ's stigmas. The action was preceded by the explanation that because of his condition, the performer had no sensation of pain in his feet. In her analysis of autobiographical texts, Brigitt Flohr points out that the possibility of verifying what is being claimed outside of the text is an indication of autobiographicality (2012: 2). By performing the somatic, sensual aspect of that 'outside reality' of impairment, Urbacki showed the limits of the interpretation of autobiography as illusion. If, as distinguished disability scholar Tobin Siebers suggests, the disabled body on stage requires an explanation lest it threaten 'to disable the theatre as a place of seeing' (2016: 141), modifying the body, particularly the disabled body, is a brutal explanation – an 'ontological anchor'. I borrow this last term from Amelia Jones, who uses it in the context of photography and body art: 'The body art event *needs* the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph *needs* the body art event as an ontological "anchor" of its indexicality' (1998: 137; italics in original). As attested by Urbacki's performance, however, the anchoring extends beyond photography – and beyond body art: representation uses the modified body as an ontological anchor of its indexicality. Urbacki's claim to truth was strengthened (anchored) in his self-inflicted wound.

Yet, when a disability is not visible or apparent, the process of claiming truth is different. Disability's spectacular character (Siebers 2016: 145), present in most documentary performances, is here absent. Performing the invisible has a long tradition in theatre,[74] but the sharing of a real, invisible impairment, on the stage, in a spectacle, is fundamentally paradoxical: there is nothing to see. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's influential book *Staring: How We Look* points out that the history of disability is a history of being stared at. The book ends with an encouragement to 'flaunt the visible marks of […] disability' in order to be recognised (2009:

74 See: Sofer 2013. More on that below.

195). But how to take possession of being looked at? And what does this mean when the disability is invisible?

'Invisible disability' (or 'invisible impairment') is a term frequently used in disability studies (Siebers 2016: 142). It emphasises sight, since, in a society which privileges visuality, that is how disability is most often recognised by non-disabled persons (Lingsom 2008). Some scholars prefer other terms to acknowledge the general imperceptibility of such conditions – for instance, Ana Bê proposes the expression 'undistinguishable impairments' (2012: 368). Still, because of the character of my disability, and the resulting importance of the threshold of invisibility in *Inner Monologue*, I opt here for 'invisible disability'. Tobin Siebers states (while self-ironically acknowledging the apparent tautology) that, since visibility is a social construction, 'Disabilities are visible when they appear. When they do not appear, they are invisible' (2016: 142). This is a nod to the social theory of disability, which argues that, although its effects are omnipresent, disability as a social experience remains invisible, insofar as it is absorbed by the normative operation of society. Yet, in an overwhelming majority of situations, it is easy to distinguish between the poles of a visible and invisible disability. As does Siebers himself, when he declares 'The disabled body threatens to disable the theater as a place for seeing' (2016: 141). What he means, of course, is a *visibly* disabled body. When thematised, invisible disability does something different: it creates a paradoxical place for seeing where there is nothing to see. Any claims to factuality have seemingly no anchorage. They are merely an affirmation: a truth claim.

But there is a difference between exposing one's invisible disability on the stage and doing it in real life. On a social level, invisible disability requires constant decisions whether to reveal the condition or pass as able-bodied (Lingsom 2008). This places the person with an impairment in a 'highly vulnerable position': their condition remains unseen, though they are acutely aware of it (Reeve 2019: 88). They are thus not seen as disabled, and, especially in the case of persons with chronic diseases where fatigue and pain are major concerns, they often have difficulty convincing others that their condition is real (Reeve 2019: 88).

Theatre, where space and time can function differently (Foucault 1986; Fischer-Lichte 2008),[75] along with the division between stage and audience, has the potential to provide an aura of credibility. That was the case with *Inner Monologue.* The stage as a setting not only allowed me, a performer with a chronic disease, to expose that part of my identity, but also – to be considered truthful. My *ontological destabilisation*, as Andrea Vick poignantly calls such an in-between (2012: 46), provided me with the necessary trustworthiness. Performing invisible disability, I recast the seemingly able, 'neutral' body as fundamentally vulnerable. The vulnerability associated with impairment reflected an existential, human vulnerability. Sociologist Bryan S. Turner explains that, as we are all vulnerable, we can develop empathy by recognising this quality in others (2006: 54). The stage produced the conditions for such a recognition. As attested by every single review, conversation and commentary after the show, spectators gave me the benefit of the doubt and embraced an affirmation that outside of the theatre would risk being questioned or trivialised.

Indeed, according to disability scholar Susan Lingsom, disclosing an invisible disability is often met with disbelief, insistence on the expectations of 'normal' behaviours and an 'increased social tension' (2008: 11). Having to constantly justify my fatigue or deal with an over-zealous, unbearably sympathetic treatment on the part of acquaintances had made me limit my social life and even, at one point, stop directing. Not being believed when I was trying to explain in a store that I was sick and desperately needed immediate access to a lavatory made me question the existence of a basic human bond based on trust. Theatre allowed me to regain some of that trust. Crucially, the scholarly warnings that in theatre relying on truthfulness is a mistake and a misunderstanding of its very nature (Stephenson 2019, Dobrowolski 2018), or that recourse to theatricality installs immedicable doubt (Peetz 2019), were laid to rest. Theatre allowed doubt and an obsessive (and hurtful) criticality to cede to an epistemic grounding, a trust and a structural openness to the autobiographical claim to truth.

Philosopher Jennifer Scuro proposes a challenge to ableism by a focus on the Other. Using Levinasian ethics as a frame, Scuro asks for attitudes ranging from a minimum of 'non-indifference' and lack of aversion to the foreign, to what she terms an '*ethical* substitution': the

[75] Though, as I have shown in the previous chapter, they do not always need to.

acceptance of being put in an anti-egocentric position, which 'makes the static comforts of selfhood vulnerable in its obligation to the other' (2017: 18). The vulnerability, here, becomes a human, and extra-human, interdependence and connection. This follows pleas of a number of authors to overcome the able/disabled (or capacity/incapacity) dichotomy by embracing vulnerability as a shared, diverse but easily recognisable experience (Knight 2014, Satz 2008, Clough 2017). Floris Tomasini argues, for instance, that vulnerability is a more fitting and universal term than either impairment, which suggests a physiological problem to be solved, or disability, evoking 'political emancipation' (2019: 1). Lying motionless on the stage through the duration of *Inner Monologue* is a token to such a universal vulnerability. 'To lie down in front of others feels so *exposed*' writes disability activist Liz Crow (2017: 44). Lying down can be a necessity, but it can also become a deliberate and enduring 'giving up of verticality', as performance theorist André Lepecki described the signature *Crawls* of William Pope.L, in which he crawled on the ground across public spaces (2006:97). Then, it is a proposal of changing perspective, an utmost humility, almost, but never completely, self-objectifying, nor is it tantamount to disappearing. The flatness of the floor accentuates the materiality of the body. 'In public, reclined, I have so much body; it unfolds and unravels on the horizontal plane, taking up more than its share of space', writes Crow (2017: 44). Lying down, according to art critic Pamela L. Lee, could also be seen as part of a 'civilization of latitude', suffering from burnouts and looking for an escape from the capitalist obsession with verticality and alertness (2021). Yet Lee notices that 'with new technological affordances' even horizontality is not an escape from work. That was certainly my case: I was lying down with a stethoscope in one ear, an earbud with the text of the play in the other, and a lavalier microphone stuck to my cheek. This combination made it difficult to move, so I decided to avoid movement altogether.

The enormity of a lying, immobile body is accentuated in what Lee considers a 'foundational case study': Niki de Saint Phalle's monumental sculpture *She* (created in collaboration with Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt in 1968) representing a surreal, caricature figure of a woman. Lee quotes critics Arthur Secunda and Jan Thunholm describing the work as a symbol of passivity, of a society 'victimized helplessly' (cited in Lee: 2021: 61). The passivity goes along with another characteristic: the figure's penetrability. The spectators walked inside of the sculpture through a vagina-doorway, to find a sort of playground. The passive body lying on the floor is *exposed* and prone to being penetrated. This motive comes back in more recent

projects: in *The Bride and the Goodnight Cinderella,* a performance that premiered at the Festival d'Avignon in 2023*,* Brazilian artist Carolina Bianchi takes a 'date-rape drug', falls asleep, spends most of the two-and-half hour performance lying down insentient, and at the climax of the show is physically penetrated by a live-streaming camera. The temptation to go inside, to cross the boundary of the objectified body, is here combined with the body's, and performer's, vulnerability. Bianchi keeps commenting on her situation in pre-recorded videos and sound recordings, and vulnerability is what makes her believable. Vulnerability brings about the conviction that even if this or that part of the story may be fictionalised, the Brazilian director is being truthful.

The ill body lying prostrate on the floor, meanwhile, does not need drugs to be stereotypically passive (Kuppers 2001: 25). It has already been penetrated and colonised by the disease. Its truthfulness comes from a well-worn vulnerability. The trust that it is imbued with, however, does not appear as a sudden phenomenologically-driven reaction. It has been prepared by a number of possible paths. The spectators may have read the programme notes which state: 'The starting point of Wojtek Ziemilski's new performance was his chronic disease' ('Monolog wewnętrzny, reż. Wojtek Ziemilski', 2024); they may have assisted some of my other work, seen other documentary performances, as well as documentary films and read non-fiction; they may know of the disease, etc. All these boil down to the idea that spectators come informed about the documentary nature of the event (Reinelt 2009). The audience's theatrical epistemic sensitivity is performative: it changes over time with each use, with each iteration of veridical claims. But one aspect of the theatrical iterations seems particularly relevant: suspended disbelief. It is, after all, the thoroughly examined (and at times contested), endlessly reproduced mechanism of opening up to the possibility of *something else*. In the words of Mieke Bal, 'As concrete, material, and public, as soliciting a receptivity to dreaming, fantasy, and the willing suspension of disbelief, staging reconciles the private and the public without diminishing the powerful "specialization" of either' (2002: 119). The private has, thanks to suspended disbelief, access to the public via a temporary openness to the unknown. Adjusted to a documentary, autobiographical context, my argument here is that suspended disbelief becomes an openness to the Other, with their idiosyncratic story which otherwise may have been hard to believe or acknowledge. This also explains why documentary theatre thrives on autobiographical performances by persons from

marginalised environments. Here, there is enough time, and enough *suspension*, for the margin to become the mainstream.

Theatre as a Space for Not Seeing

In his *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, Nicholas Ridout points out how, within the confines of (modern bourgeois) theatre, the human is associated with intentionality. Ridout gives the example of animals, who on stage cannot provide such intentionality: 'By not meaning anything by its appearance [on the stage] the mouse appears as less than human' (2006: 101). He goes on to explain that at the same time, every object on the stage is seen as intentional, whence the difficulty of watching animals on stage: they unwittingly perform their intentionality, creating an uncanny experience for the viewers (2006: 101-05).

Once, in *Inner Monologue*, the bacteria become performers, their auditory presence gains some of that unintentional surplus of reality. Yet, while the sound of the gut may seem unintentional, the very text of the performance explains the complex and overwhelming agency the gut inhabitants represent. The sounds seem the opposite of the voice of human reason, yet the explanation points out that there is reason to this madness: the less-than-human body effectively and consequently performs its relation to the more-than-human ecosystem of human plus microbiota. The question which bothered me as a theatre-maker was: should we not see it? Should there not be a way of visualising the presence of the non-human performers?

In the end, the entire performance seems to move away from visuality. Watching – seeing *Inner Monologue* is, I have been told, not easy. The protagonist is not very visible, lying on the floor at some distance from the audience, with his feet closer to them than his head. At the beginning, a white, intense studio light provides the opportunity to see the details of the figure, but before long, the lighting transforms to become a moving haze of colourful patches. The one clearly visible element of the stage is the sound engineer sitting by his table with a small desktop lamp emitting a warm, stable light – but he, in turn, has his back to the audience and is about as immobile as the main performer. All this is an encouragement not to see.

Not seeing is fundamental. Ethnographer John Conquergood points out that 'Dominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing are not attuned to meanings that are masked,

camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context' (2002: 146). What is there is ambiguous, opaquely present. If 'theatre' is to be the *theatron,* 'a place for seeing', then this theatre is playing a trick on the viewers. Yet it is not a live radio broadcast, nor a concert of the gut. The actor's body is there, tangible, present in its impenetrable corporeality. The *theatron,* here, is a place for seeing this body's impossible conversation with what cannot be seen: the inside.

Sound is a palpable trace. It brings a certain degree of epistemic confidence. At the same time, it underscores the limits of such confidence. The sounds coming from the gut can hardly be described as communicating. Although the performance may be interpreted as a 'conversation', the term cannot do without brackets, as only one side is communicating in a way humans can understand. The microbiota's sound may carry some semiotic aspects, yet, as the cognisant sea in Stanisław Lem's classic science-fiction novel *Solaris,* if it does, humans are not able to decipher the message. The sound becomes, then, both a sign of agency, and a reminder of the insufficiency of the available means to perceive its significance.

The sounds of the gut are what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls 'emerging phenomena', elements of a performance seemingly unconnected to a 'logical system of action or psychology' (2007: 232). Such elements introduce a tension, or 'oscillation' between the semiotic and phenomenal layers of the performance. Fischer-Lichte sees in this oscillation an important source of aesthetic experience. The impossibility of attaching meaning to the materiality of the phenomena is connected to their opacity. As Alva Noë points out in another text from the same collection, perception, to be accessible, needs to be understood (Fischer-Lichte might add: understood as something more than a collection of haphazard sounds). Perception, claims Noë, resembles listening to a speech in an unfamiliar language: everything is present, yet, at once, oblique, 'invisible' (2007: 127). Reading the sounds requires time and guidance. As a performer, I make a broad introduction to the potential sources and implications of the sounds – yet I make it clear that at present they cannot 'be read' – their significance and relation to what is happening with my body is still largely impossible to decipher. The invisible materiality is in sharp contrast with my attempt at communication. At the same time, it provides an aesthetic, liminal experience. Still, it is all but impossible to resist attempting to somehow decipher the sounds as language. As Rebecca Schneider reacted to prehistoric handprints, wondering if they could be seen as hails by the very fact of an onlooker considering them as such and putting their hand on

the prehistoric sign (2017: 82-83), so also, with every sound which comes after every human address, the possibility of a retroactive, projected, imagined, or *performed* communication emerges.

Conducting the research through practice made me realise the quality of sound was crucial, as by allowing the audience to hear the gut noises it opened up two spaces at the same time, a heterotopic one and a non-heterotopic one. The latter was the material reality of a person's body. Inescapable as long as the headphones were not taken off, it was a space of confrontation with a here and now which, while it was not raw (it was openly adjusted by the sound designer), had all the signs of not being feigned: because of the stethoscope's sensitivity, my slightest move could be heard as a muffled thud. The body was thus present in all its bluntness. At the same time, the very same sounds produced a heterotopic space, to the extent that, in order to include the bacteria as co-protagonists, the sound was openly manipulated, exposing the epistemic autonomy of what was heard.

But the tinkering with the sound implied something else: it was necessary to readjust the very way of understanding the bacteria's functioning, and the function of the body itself, and thus change the scale from one sensed directly by human bodies – Jens Hauser and Lucie Strecker refer to it as bursting the 'mesoscopic bubble' of what it is to be human – to (in this case) a microscopic level which requires adjusting our senses and epistemes (Hauser and Strecker, 2020: 1). Bernard Andrieu, Anais Bernard, Giorgio Cipoletta, Yanna Marussich and Petrucia da Nobrega call this process 'emersive microperformativity' (as in: emerging, coming out), when unconscious, uncontrollable processes of the body appear to trouble its perception as a unity: 'how, including in dramaturgical perception, physiological flows and processes collide with the image of a whole body' (Andrieu et al. 2020: 138). At the same time, because it is a perception grounded in what is established as an objective situation of bodily noises, the spectator does not become what Jenn Stephenson calls a 'percipient', who brackets out 'concerns about distinctions between actual and fictional, focusing on the flow of phenomena and on our own processes of apprehension' (2019: 160). Losing oneself in the heterotopical proposal of *Inner Monologue* does not impede a notion of what and how truth claims are proposed.

As a further consequence of the non-visuality, the choice of the sonosphere as main focus was accompanied by an avoidance of images. Not only was I lying on the stage nearly

motionless throughout the performance, but the video projection behind me was limited to bibliographic references, and a single final image – a black-and-white reproduction of a group of bacteria.[76] This approach functions as a refusal of what Achille Mbembe calls 'image-capitalism', an ever-increasing circuit of images, affects and capital, which transforms the very 'conditions of embodiment in our time' (Mbembe 2021, 23). But such a strong limiting of sight was also a rejection of any fundamental epistemic role of visuality. It corresponded both to the invisibility of the disability and to the opacity, both literal and medical, of the microbiota. Invisible disability was thus rendered present to the senses, not through visibility, but by bringing about another type of recognition, indeed, one that is at once literally *opaque* and acutely, unambiguously present.

The opacity of the stage's microscopic universe closely resembles what playwright and scholar Andrew Sofer calls 'theatre's dark matter', theatre's invisible phenomena (2013). In a way analogous to the mysterious physical entity that remains impenetrable, and yet constitutes most of the universe, those 'felt absences' hold theatre together (2013: 4). Bacteria are on the edge of this: they are felt as absences, since they have an intermediate, non-mesoscopic scale – one not possible to experience by unmediated human senses. Yet bacteria are acknowledged as real. They are present on the stage, though not considered subjects in any way even remotely comparable to a dog or a bird. They remain invisible and hidden away. They could be seen under a microscope – but in this case, they are not. They remain inside of the performer's body in very much the same way they typically do. Still, they are not hypothetical. Declaring their existence in the body brings about no more doubts than a performer declaring 'I have a head'. They are, thus, 'felt absences' more than what Andrew Sofer meant by that term. They are not ghosts or even absent fictional characters. They are real, physical beings, that are absent to the naked eye and still, are felt. In another sense, however, they are literally what ghosts are in theatre: 'We are expanding our investigative spectrum beyond material bodies and objects in order to discern hidden wavelengths beyond the reach of the naked (critical) eye' (Sofer 2013: 5). It may seem ironic that the bacteria be considered as beyond the reach of the critical eye, when it is precisely the critical eye which allows one to prove their presence. Yet to a layman standing (lying) on the

[76] This version, shown during the premiere set, was later modified. I write more about that development below.

stage, treating them not just as real but as agential is a leap of faith – a faith in the materiality of what cannot be accessed. The spectacle of the bacterial activity also carries with it a truth claim requiring trust.

Sofer describes the theatrical dark matter in a context of fiction. The situation does change, however, in a documentary setting (one considered factual, as I explained in Chapter 2). Gay McAuley declares that 'Fictional place is "conceived" whether it is on or off (Nora's drawing room is not, in fact, a drawing room)' (1999: 29-30). In an explicitly autobiographical performance where a performer is on the stage, the place of the body is not 'conceived'. Yet the space of the gut – is. However, it is 'conceived' not because it is not a gut, but because it is part of the dark matter of what is not seen. For Sofer, 'invisible' is synonymous with 'impossible to perceive'. In this particular case, perception is augmented via stethoscope: there is *something* in there. Science tells us whatever we hear is (not always directly, but nonetheless) related to bacteria being there. Although instead of opting for an illumination of this dark matter through something like a virtual colonoscopy, the inside is accessed only indirectly, eavesdropping through a stethoscope, this relation is enough to provide what Sofer considers a fundamental function of the dark matter: holding things together (2013: 9-10). By providing the soundtrack as a token of its existence, the bacteria make the performance possible: if they were not real, the entire endeavour would have a status akin to a conversation with angels, losing its material grounding.

Yet, there is something compelling about Sofer's insistence that the absent beings in theatre are ghosts. His 'spectral reading' of Macbeth's imagined dagger – how it is 'not there' and 'not not there' at the same time are closer to bacteria than may at first appear (2013: 7-9). When Macbeth talks to the dagger, he focuses on its being palpable, yet inexistent, impossibly present. But it is not just words: 'although it is conjured by language, the dagger is not reducible to language' (2013: 8). The audience imagines the dagger as a spectre within that world. When I address the bacteria, when I talk to them, they become such impossible beings. They have no ears, their way of being does not communicate with mine. They are, as far as communication goes, ghosts. The sound we hear is not an attempt at replying. Yet it is exactly what the spectral reading creates. It is a spectral reading of bacterial performance.

Sofer pushes the idea that the invisible presences into an even deeper level of existence: 'what seems at stake (…) is nothing less than the soul' (14). The ambition, then, would be to somehow make this soul manifest. As Wittgenstein put it, 'It is a great temptation to want to make the spirit explicit' (2004: 11). If we are to substitute 'soul' for 'human agency', *Inner Monologue*'s non-human protagonists complicate what Sofer ultimately considers an individual journey, as agency becomes at least partially rooted in foreign bodies, in the Other. At the same time, ostensibly, there is but one subject speaking (intelligibly), a single protagonist. Sofer quotes a seventeenth-century anonymous author writing 'sit in a full Theater, and you will thinke you see so many lines drawne from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the *Actor* is the *Center*' (2004: 22). This is exactly the spatial structure of *Inner Monologue* – the headphones used by the spectators have wires (for sound quality), so they are literally connected by lines to the central figure of the actor.[77] What the ears receive is actor-as-performer, but, at the same time, actor-as-body, the habitat of the *other actors*. Via the sound, the body is perceived as one, and simultaneously, as a rhizomatic many.[78]

The extremely varied, unpredictable noises of the gut are more than indexical traces of a presence: they are, via the intermediary of the sound designer, literally *body art*.[79] They produce art as readymades do, or as found footage or field recordings. And, although they are, at times, accompanied by the performer's comments about them, in the words of philosopher Markus Gabriel, 'Conditions of appearing are only operative when they are functionally implicit, which is not to say that they cannot be made explicit. But their explication differs from their functional role as conditions of appearing' (2015: 258). The difference between what is being said and what is being heard is the gap between the possible *understanding* of the presence of the microbiota, and the *experience* of that presence.

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[77] An initial sketch actually had the audience sitting around me, with cables running from my body to their earphones.

[78] André Lepecki goes as far as to question the validity of the term 'body' in favour of a more encompassing 'corporeality' (2017).

[79] One of the possible sources of the gut sound is even called 'mass movement' (Azzouz and Sharma, 2024).

The sound is a phenomenal (based on phenomena) way of being-with. Tom Six picks up on Tim Ingold's reappropriation of Merleau-Ponty's phrase 'coiling over' and uses it in a theatre setting (Cornford 2020: 84-85). To coil over, for Ingold, is to be together with another form of being, embracing the horizontal ontology. Six notices that when Michael Chekhov asks the actors to feel the presence and contact of not just people but the material surroundings, he is effectively asking them to create 'a space of "coiling over", in which subject-object distinctions blur and double, and in which we encounter a relational experience of and interaction with an objective, external reality that is also fundamentally unstable and continually co-created with and among us' (2020: 84). This instability, in being with the gut microbiota in *Inner Monologue*, is a fundamental quality. Instability is an important part of performing disability, and in a different way – of staging invisible disability. Now, it seems like changing the scale makes identification unstable in a whole new way: the coiling over is always potentially present, yet impossible to pinpoint. The Other is co-present in an extremely opaque way, for too little is known, and too little is felt, to have a notion of their relation to the host. Ingold provides a poetic image of a stone which upon being touched, does not recoil into itself, but rather, 'greets the digits of the archaeologist's hands' through its lined surface, allowing us to imagine 'a certain correspondence between the hand of the archaeologist and the stone he [*sic*] touches' (2015: 85). The Other from *Inner Monologue*, however, does not come from an outside, as in Ingold's example; it has been with the host all along. The performance is not a meeting. It is, instead, an act of paying attention. This is a specific type of attention, though, as one cannot get closer to what is already inside. The stethoscope can be seen as a way, not of *entering* the body, but of keeping the distance, of paying attention to the superficiality – what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009) call 'surface reading' – of being-with instead of intervening or breaking in. That is how, when the Other's co-presence is opaque, through the distance, their *presence* is clear.

In 2002, ethnographer and performance theorist Dwight Conquergood criticised influential cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's ethnocentric understanding of all cultures as text to be interpreted. He accused Geertz of trying to 'peer over their shoulder to read their texts', instead of 'listening, absorbing, and standing in solidarity' (2002:150). The dichotomy remains important in the *Inner Monologue*: instead of trying to see, to uncover and see, I try to listen and absorb using 'dialogical and aestheticized modes of inquiry', as Travis Brisini and Jake Simmons called Conquergood's methods, appealing for a similar treatment of the 'other-than-human

Others' (2016: 193). But also: instead of trying to peer over my shoulder to gaze at me from up close, the spectators are invited to listen, absorb and stand in solidarity. While Conquergood focuses principally on subordinate groups looked at by the White Western ethnographer, the appeal to listen instead of forcing a reading relates to other vulnerable groups, human and non-human.

At the same time, Conquergood's vision still finds a place for texts and a scholarly perspective. He sees this potential in performance studies: 'The performance studies project makes its most radical intervention, I believe, by embracing both written scholarship and creative work, papers and performances' (2002: 151). When creating *Inner Monologue,* I saw that chance in performance itself, one based on the 'horizontal, metonymic tension' which combines 'the romance of performance' with 'the authority of the text' (151). The romance of *Inner Monologue* still requires a sense of responsibility for the Other which brings to the forefront the tension between the power of the text, of the speaking subject, and those he claims to represent.

While recognising the risks of assuming the role of someone (something) else's ambassador, philosopher Linda Alcoff considers the challenge of speaking-for necessary to achieve political effectivity. Alcoff sees it as a crucial tool in any attempt to provide agency or recognition to others:

> We certainly want to encourage a more receptive listening on the part of the discursively privileged and discourage presumptuous and oppressive practices of speaking for. But a retreat from speaking for will not result in an increase in receptive listening in all cases; it may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility for her society whatsoever. (1991: 17)

In resistance to the narcissistic position, I opt for engagement and tell the story of the microbiota through the device of addressing it, an emancipatory strategy of 'speaking to' instead of 'speaking for'. I say, for example:

> I always imagined you as my community, a civilisation that thrives somewhere inside. The thing is, I recently found out from a scientist friend that, as he put it, it's not like there's some kind of bacterial society, that you have some sort of community. So he says

> if you look at the *cells* of the body, it's apparently very easy to imagine that these are countries that enter into relationships, systems, constellations, and that, that is a stable situation. And it's the exact opposite of yours, right? He says that what is happening where you are is like, a post-apocalyptic landscape, it's a total war of all against all, I mean, hardcore. I asked him, but is this happening even within species? And he says yes, *bacterio bacterii lupus*, it's apparently almost impossible to survive… And it's a strange feeling when I think that this is not this culture of my fantasies. Maybe because yours is not a culture from a laboratory, but, you know, more like *our* culture. (*Inner Monologue,* unpublished script)

At the same time, this will never turn to be a 'speaking with' (Alcoff 1991: 23). My knowledge of the Other is necessarily limited and, in more than one sense, extremely superficial, so the insistence on representing them will eventually turn to an abuse of power, an exercise in imagination, or – fiction. That is why, at the end, the only possible representation left is a caricature, an anthropocentric mimetism (Alcoff calls it a 'dangerous representation', 1991: 23) which points to its own absurdity. The Other is both recognised as real and present, and respected in their insularity: I admit I cannot possibly imagine what the gut microbiota has to say. Or, to be precise: I admit I can, but it will only make things worse. Thus, I back out, again and again, to remain with the sole responsibility for my own entangled self, although unsure how and where that self begins or ends.

Yet the uncertainty about the self, the fall into parody and self-derision in no way imply that truthfulness – and with it, access to factuality – is lost. To the contrary, their presence within the documentary performance shows that theatrical factuality allows a wide range of aesthetic and semiotic constructions going far beyond the focus on any sort of reality effect. In its stead, *Inner Monologue* proposes a 'listening in solidarity' supported, though not conditioned, by scientific referencing, and fundamentally relying on trust.

The Feedback Loop of Writing and Practice

I am writing these words several months after the premiere. Writing the present chapter has led me to change my ('finished') performance. To be more specific, the research I undertook for this

thesis brought about a shift towards practice, which brought about new research ideas, which in turn made me rethink some scenes, creating a feedback loop of practice research. I have had the chance to see the video recording of the finished show, and to ponder on it while writing a large part of this chapter. If a thesis is a trace of thinking, this present text, aptly in the context of *live* art, turned out to be a performative trace, in an Austinian sense of engendering transformation. As I was tracing the construction of *Inner Monologue*, the tracing-as-thinking ended up doing things to the art itself. Specifically, it made me rethink the final scene and radically modify it. I realised I had created a form which, although clearly documentary, retained a way of performing the real which did little to overcome the limitations brought about by the fiction of the fourth wall.

The premiere and the entire first set (consisting of three showings) had the following ending: after playing back the finale of Gioachino Rossini's *Barber of Seville* to the gut, for a short while I remain on the floor in silence. Then, I get up, carefully, so as not to produce any unwanted noises over the stethoscope, which I am still holding against my abdomen. I do all this without looking at the audience (I am facing forward, and my position is slightly turned to one side), so when I get up, I have still not looked at them once during the formal part of the performance.[80] I am now facing the space between the audience and the sound engineer. I look at the latter and make a slight nod to let him know I am ready. In a swift, slightly exaggerated move, I then remove the stethoscope from my skin and hold it to the side. Behind me, a huge black-and-white image of a colony of gut bacteria fades in on the projection screen. I look back and freeze for a moment. As the projection fades back out, the stage lights fade with it.

Writing this chapter, I have understood why I am unsatisfied with this final scene. As a stage persona, I remain distant until the very end, respecting the fourth wall. I compared this to Oliver Frljić describing Dimiter Gotscheff's provocative *Lehrstücke:*

[80] When the audience enters, I am standing by the sound engineer and having an informal conversation. For that time, I acknowledge the incoming spectators, looking at them and greeting some of them. Once they are seated, I proceed to my position on the floor and from then on, I only look straight up, or at the projection.

> Speech, text and word establish here and in other cases an intimate relationship which overcomes the fourth wall, allowing the theatre to become a space for thinking and reflection, interrupting the purely aesthetic apprehension by a provocative 'implication' of the spectators, who are forced to go along with this radical reduction of theatricality and enter into an unusually intense relation with the 'pure' speech act of the performer. (2011: 39)

My issue with that initial version of *Inner Monologue* is not so much about not acknowledging the audience as it is about not being able to acknowledge my own agency on the stage. I never left the space of interpretation of a written text made by a person pretending to be somewhere else than the stage, or at least, I failed to acknowledge fully where and who I am. Although it is clear the performance is autobiographical, it never challenges the position I am (and have put myself) in: one objectified not just by the gaze of the spectators, but by the entire theatrical apparatus. Austin's claim that actors' words are '*in a peculiar way* void or hollow' (Austin 1962: 22, italics in original), so often challenged by performers and performance and theatre scholars alike, ring surprisingly true here. Even Krystian Lupa's version of an 'inner monologue' is '*in a peculiar way*' more performative, as the improvisation is something accounted for by the actor, something they produce beyond a mimetic *re*-iteration, something they take ownership of. What they lack is an accountability for the relation between the truth regime of the performance (and its claims to factuality) and the extra-theatrical world: Lupa's actor saying 'I am ill' has no bearing on our understanding of whether a real doctor could confirm that the actor is ill.

Meanwhile, the accountability I had as the performer of *Inner Monologue* for my words and actions was uncertain ('*in a peculiar way*'), as there was no indication they could have real-world consequences. Yes, the bacteria were real – but they did not speak or reply in any other way. Whatever means of communications they had, it was inaccessible *hic et nunc*. Without me crossing, or at least attempting to cross, the threshold of my own agency within this setup, the microbiota was but a real-life backdrop to a play, rather reminiscent of Tadeusz Kantor's scenographic experiments with real ruins during World War II.[81]

[81] See Chapter 1, pp. 38-39.

My next showings of *Inner Monologue* took place in September 2024. I implemented a different ending. Upon removing the stethoscope from my abdomen, I did not go on refusing to acknowledge the presence of the audience. To the contrary, I looked right back at them. bell hooks proposes looking back – returning the gaze as fundamental in establishing a relation between subjects (a motive going back to Merleau-Ponty).[82] Yet in 2025, Polish stages are full of actors looking back at audiences.[83] At *Teatr na Faktach 2024,* a documentary theatre festival in Wrocław, *all* of the actors in *all* of the five productions I saw used direct address. It was also a gesture I put an effort to avoid in *Inner Monologue*. But for a specific reason: I was talking to the bacteria. I could not be addressing one group of interlocutors/spectators while looking at another. However, the stethoscope being a sign of that address, once it is removed, that entire inner space of my body is lost to the (spectators', and to a great extent – my own) senses. As the stethoscope's role is indexical and not fundamental, i.e. it does not *allow* my address (I can still speak to the microbiota without a stethoscope) but merely points to it, my change of behaviour is not *necessary* – which is why I missed that possibility in the first place.

Once I look at the audience, and by returning the gaze 'eagerly leave the privatized domain to confront the public' (hooks 2007: 130), I am free to speak. Had I had the gift of improvisation, I would have possibly done so, bringing back the excitement and risk of an inner monologue. Still, I did change my attitude, becoming very informal, and asking the audience to take off their headphones. Once they do so, I thank them for having gone through this with me. Then I proceed to explain there will be a QR code at the exit, with a link to the full bibliography of the show. The goal of such a turn to an informal, direct address, is not to create a Brechtian bracket to expose the artificiality of what has been said (present since at least Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see: Rey Lee 2015). It is also not to produce an effect of the real, which Jenn Stephenson claims is the one way of convincing the audience of the full correspondence of the onstage persona/character with the offstage person (2019: 17-19). It is, instead, a way of leaving a specific performance mode, and with it, of positioning the narrative in

[82] Hooks 2007: 129-130. For the legacy of Merleau-Ponty's intersubjective gaze, see Bernet 1999.

[83] If we look at the 'returned gaze' more acutely, in theatre, it is of course only a reality effect, a theatrical illusion: the actor cannot return *each and every* gaze, unless there is but one spectator.

a relation to the audience and replacing it by another. The main purpose of these few sentences is to let go of the tension accumulated for the hour and to regain a relation of togetherness. An inner monologue? That new performance mode, in its informality (accentuated by removing my microphone and encouraging the audience to remove their headsets), is to be a relief: at last, the person will be talking to *people*, to *viewers*, outside of the formal, estranging frame of a body that speaks up while lying down.

'Just one more thing,' I add. And, after a silence: 'I / AM / WOJTEK / ZIEMILSKI / AND THIS / WAS / MY / INNER / MONOLOGUE'. The words are a reference to a story I tell when lying down: when I was very ill and was taking a high quantity of steroids, my face got extremely swollen, and an old acquaintance I met did not recognise me. When I told her I was Wojtek Ziemilski, I explain to the audience, the person burst out laughing and replied: 'Wojtek Ziemilski you are not!'. The story ends with the realisation that I got confused myself, having so many *others* influence the way I look and feel. Thus, the final words of *Inner Monologue* are a way of reclaiming that ground and asserting accountability. With each word, spoken out very slowly and with big pauses, a large photographic portrait of mine appears in the background, showing the transformation of my face over the years of the illness.

The appearance of the photos is not counter to my claims regarding the possibility of acknowledging (facts, disability) without visible proof. Granted, visibility is, here, pivotal. How I want to read this final scene, however, is that it uses the privileged status of visuality in modernity (Lingsom 2008: 3) to anchor my story more thoroughly as a sensory experience. As the topic of the performance is twofold – the microbiota on the one hand, and the story of a disability on the other – the latter contains an aspect which can be quickly accessed by seeing the visible transformation of the body. The sight of the transformation brings us back to Amelia Jones' idea that the 'body art event *needs* the photograph to confirm its having happened', although here the 'body art event' is substituted by 'a non-normative body', one that disrupts the superficially stable visual identity of personhood. The inclusion of these images is also important as the 'ontological anchor' of a disability aesthetics, which, in the words of Tobin Siebers, 'refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body – and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty – as the sole determination of the aesthetic' (2016:149). Beyond proof, it is the reframing of factuality at the service of a broader and open idea of what it is to be human.

At the same time, the last photo shown during that final scene is one taken immediately before the beginning of the performance. The disability has, as of 2025, once again – for an indefinite time – become invisible. What in the case of Rafał Urbacki's performance was the ontological spectacle of an unflinching, relaxed body being pierced, is here the disappearance of *difference*. The spectacle is one of invisibility, after all. The visual substantiation of the truth claims regarding the disease is now, indeed, replaced by my trustworthiness – the belief that I am being truthful.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that my *Inner Monologue,* as an example of explicitly autobiographical performance, relies on truth claims. Those claims are recognised and acknowledged by audiences because of their viewing contexts as well as because of the phenomenological experience of the performance.

Coming back to research on the limits of personal identity and corporeality I began with in *Small Narration* (2010), I used my own invisible disability as a case study. As *Inner Monologue* was created in the final stages of my thesis writing, I also wanted to explore the possible applications of theatrical factuality. Thus, I applied my academic habits to documentary theatre's referentiality by including not just bibliographic references during the performance, but a link to a full scientific bibliography presented immediately after the show.

Another means of providing truth claims was by simply making them, without any sort of corroboration. This innocuous way of sharing stories is often looked at with suspicion by scholars averse to the idea of truth in theatre. As I explain, such an aversion is misguided in that it does not take into account that we can consider as contemporary documentary theatre's roots also such phenomena as scientific conferences and TED talks, where the criteria for establishing truthfulness and credibility differ significantly from those habitually referenced by theatre scholars and historians. What is more, instead of analysing the performance through the prism of the often discussed reality effects which are to create the impression of a veridical situation, I analyse *Inner Monologue* as a case of what Joanna Krakowska refers to as 'auto-teatr', an

intimate account relying on honesty and accountability. In this context, rather than refer to truth, it is more productive to address truthfulness, the intention of sharing one's truth.

This truth, in my case, had to do with my invisible disability. Invisible disability, which outside of the theatre stage is often distrusted as unreal or exaggerated (Lingsom 2008), in this context became a credible token of trustworthiness. As I show, staging invisible disability creates a paradox where the spectacle is one of not-seeing, which encourages an attitude of solidarity, being-with and trust. The unassailable core of impairment that my disability contains, which I compare to the phenomenological somatics of the 1960s and 70s body art, is something I can only attempt to share, and the not-seeing helps the spectators, to some extent, to accompany me on the journey, which takes me inside my own body.

The substitution of the disability/ability dichotomy with vulnerability helps to understand the function of my position throughout the near entirety of the performance – lying motionless on the floor. The immobile body does nothing to gain a spectacular advantage, it offers itself in all its helplessness to the spectators' gaze, once again relying on trust. As a performer I trust the audience to stay with me, while they trust me both because of my vulnerability and because they come prepared by the circumstances which set the event up as an autobiographical documentary performance.

The live sound of my gut bacteria is another layer where what is being heard requires a being-with, a companionship that accepts the limits of understanding and acknowledges the presence – and factual agency – of an Other. I use Andrew Sofer's analysis of 'theatre's dark matter' as an analogy to the invisible world of the microbiota, which the audience both acknowledges as real and fantasises about. Dwight Conquergood's ideas concerning a humble listening and 'standing in solidarity' instead of eavesdropping on the space of the other explain how the fragile stage situation asks of both myself as performer and the audience an attitude of respect and care. Finally, I show how the present thesis changed the very performance I am writing about, making me add a scene which confronts what the audience imagined about my intermittent disability with the reality of a series of photographs, both revealing the visible aspects of the condition and showing the strong limits to this very visibility.

CONCLUSIONS

> Appeals to the truth often assume a transparent relationship between reality and the rhetorical representation of that reality, an assumption that is fundamentally flawed. Even so, the possibility of anything like a democratic society requires public accountability to reality and the critical ability to separate lies from truths.
>
> Dana L. Cloud (2018:6)

'Now you know!' is an expression typically used to underline the importance of sharing – and gaining – knowledge. Rather than point towards ontology or representation, it stresses the relevance of passing on knowledge and personal experience. It also carries ethical implications, as the receiver of the claims is faced with sharing the burden of knowledge. At the same time, it points to the temporality and finitude of knowledge. As in the paradox of Electra, who both knew and did not know her brother Orestes (as after many years of absence he arrived so transformed she did not recognise him in the person she was seeing), knowledge is never absolute. You know *now*. This does not, however, imply the Nietzschean conclusion that only interpretation exists.[84] In the vein of American pragmatism, philosopher David Shusterman (1990) argues that knowledge is distinct from interpretation since it is information that does not require questioning; yet it can at any point become interpretation, the moment it is challenged by circumstances that call for critical inquiry. Electra knows her brother until the moment her knowledge turns into interpretation – when she discovers the person in front of her to be Orestes, and thanks to interpretation, what she knew is replaced by new knowledge.[85] This perspective – that knowledge is negotiated, and not reducible to interpretation alone – informs my investigation into how truth claims function in Polish documentary theatre, and underpins the thesis's broader exploration of performance as a mode of epistemic engagement.

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[84] Nietzsche famously declared that 'facts are precisely what is lacking, all that exists consists of *interpretations*' (2016: 12).

[85] Ultimately, 'Now you know!' thus also denotes the limits of knowledge: what will happen to our knowledge in the future, we just do not know.

This thesis contributes towards documentary theatre studies, as well as research on the history of Polish theatre. It explores the nature of truth claims in contemporary Polish documentary theatre, considering their epistemic status, phenomenological impact, and ethical implications. Through a historical overview, case studies, and a practice-based research approach, I argue that documentary theatre can serve as a site for the articulation and negotiation of factuality, despite the challenges posed by epistemological doubt and the fluidity of theatrical representation.

Chapter 1 demonstrates how Polish documentary theatre has evolved in the context of political and social transformations. From the propagandistic documentary theatre of the interwar period to the politically engaged work of the twenty-first century, the genre has continually adapted its methods for staging reality. This trajectory established a framework for understanding how contemporary performances make and substantiate truth claims. Throughout the chapter, I highlight how different historical moments shaped the reception of documentary strategies, particularly in the setting of Poland's shifting political landscape.

While the forms of Polish documentary theatre were always deeply connected to the socio-political realities of their times, they also provided a crucial foundation for today's practitioners. The fact-based montages of Leon Schiller, the documentary dramas of the Communist period, the transfers of real-life behaviours by Helmut Kajzar or Akademia Ruchu, and the politically engaged or transdisciplinary works of the post-1989 era have all contributed to an evolving discourse on how theatre engages with truth. The analysis of these historical shifts provides insight into the ways in which theatre artists navigate the relationship between truth claims and theatricality, as well as how audiences interpret and engage with the assertions made on stage.

I trace the history of Polish documentary theatre as a series of strategies for making spectators admit the possibility of truth. The methods varied: direct iterations of widely acknowledged facts, ontological anchors like photographs and documents, taking on of the role of witness or real-life protagonist, or providing a theatrical framing to non-theatrical objects or realities. While my historiographic chapter provides an overview of the changing approaches, the remaining chapters analyse the intricate processes through which observations, experiences, and convictions are transferred into stage material.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer close readings of contemporary performances that explicitly engage with truth claims. They identify the characteristics of those claims and the strategic means by which they are put on stage. In Chapter 2, I approach Michał Zadara's *Responsibility*, arguing that it achieves strong factuality. Marie-Laure Ryan reserves this term for biographical and historiographic accounts, but I assert it can also be applied to documentary performances such as *Responsibility*. I examine Zadara's performance as a case of veridical representation, in which the staging of legal and factual documentation created an event that was simultaneously theatrical and evidentiary. I demonstrate that the claims present in the production can be recognised by audiences as veridical and verifiable. Chapter 3 is devoted to *JaWa*, directed by the Turkowski&Nowacka duo. Comparing *JaWa* to Anna Karasińska's *Easy Things*, I offer an analysis of the limits of understanding theatre as heterotopia, a term introduced by Michel Foucault. As I show, *JaWa* complicates the notion of theatrical factuality by staging a non-heterotopic space where truth claims extend beyond the theatre into an ongoing social project. I claim the refusal of heterotopia, along with its concomitant epistemic autonomy, is an effective way of establishing truth claims.

These case studies demonstrate that theatrical factuality is neither a pure copy of reality nor a fictional construct, but rather a form of truth claims about the world mediated by theatrical conventions. Furthermore, they reveal how theatre artists actively challenge hegemonic narratives, offering counter-histories and alternative accounts that resist dominant ideological frameworks. In this case, the dominant discourse about the insurmountable 'insecurity' of documentary theatre's claims (Stephenson 2019) is challenged by effective strategies of communicating states of things.

The methodological approaches in these case studies reveal an important tension between epistemological scepticism and the necessity of truth claims in documentary theatre. By positioning these performances within theoretical debates on authenticity, objectivity, and epistemic authority, I show that documentary theatre is not merely about presenting facts but also about shaping the conditions under which truth claims can be received and validated. This analysis contributes to broader discussions about the politics of representation, the ethics of testimonial performance, and the role of theatricality in knowledge production.

In Chapter 4, I turn to my own practice research in *Inner Monologue* to interrogate the limits and possibilities of asserting truth claims in an autobiographical performance. By staging an invisible disability, *Inner Monologue* foregrounds the role of trust and audience perception in the validation of truth claims. The performance illustrates how theatrical structures can facilitate the recognition of factual statements, even in the absence of conventional forms of verification. The shift from merely presenting facts to actively fostering an environment of truthfulness underscores the relational aspect of theatrical factuality. In addition, my analysis of *Inner Monologue* demonstrates that audiences participate in the negotiation of truth claims in theatre, engaging in a form of active witnessing that transcends passive reception.

My practice-based approach provides a crucial insight into how autobiographical documentary theatre negotiates between personal testimony and public reception. Accompanying my own process with theoretical tools allows me to pinpoint motivations and conditions which shape the form of truth claims. This opportunity enables me to scrutinise the dramaturgy of truth claim formation – that is, how these claims developed, were established, and transformed from the initial idea through rehearsals to the premiere and beyond. It also underscores the role of embodiment in shaping the audience's engagement with truth claims. My performance research highlights the importance of dramaturgical framing, ethical considerations, and aesthetic strategies in constructing an epistemologically compelling theatrical event.

For an Accountable Documentary Theatre

Beginning around 2006, and gaining momentum after 2015, new interpretations of how performance can be political have signalled a distinct turn towards documentary practices in Polish theatre.[86] Such artists as Mateusz Buszewicz, Małgorzata Wdowik, Jakub Skrzywanek, Justyna Sobczyk, Magda Szpecht, Ludomir Franczak, Mateusz Pakuła, have all been developing explicitly documentary work alongside other types of performances – in some cases making it their trademark approach. All these artists use abundantly the strategies and methods described in this thesis, with great success. What a decade ago seemed a niche genre is now being presented at a large range of venues and festivals across the country. Directors using documentary

[86] I describe the events which led to these changes in Chapter 1 (pp. 60-69).

methodologies are also gaining institutional recognition. Among the aforementioned, Buszewicz is artistic director of Szczecin's celebrated Teatr Współczesny, Sobczyk – artistic director of Teatr Ochoty in Warsaw, Skrzywanek – of the National Old Theatre in Krakow, while Wdowik is, among other formal functions, president of the Guild of Polish Theatre Directors. Those are all indications that Polish audiences, and the professional theatre milieu, are all acknowledging the value of theatre as a space for negotiating truth. This thesis has contributed to a better understanding of this phenomenon.

At the same time, it has not been my ambition to describe the entirety of documentary theatre practices present on the Polish stages. My analysis focuses on a strand of documentary where accountability and truthfulness are paramount values. But it is important to recognise this is not the only approach to documentary present in contemporary Poland's theatrical landscape. To grasp the scope of my proposal, I want to use a distinction Hans-Thies Lehmann makes between 'an artful exposure of realities' and 'a representation of dramatic fictions about them' (2022: 35). My selected case studies all stand firmly in the first category. As they aim to 'expose realities', they assert truthfulness and attempt to provide accurate accounts of reality, while acknowledging the effects introduced by theatricality.

To see why I have decided to embrace this distinction, I want to briefly refer to a documentary production that deliberately transforms real-life issues into fictionalised accounts in the form of dramatic theatre. If we broadly define documentary theatre as an account of real events on the stage, the most talked about documentary production in contemporary Poland has been without a doubt *1989*, directed by Katarzyna Szyngiera. Premiering on December 2, 2022 at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Krakow, the co-production with the Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre is a piece of musical theatre telling the story of the fall of communism in Poland in 1989. Playwright Marcin Napiórkowski was inspired by the highly successful American musical *Hamilton* (written and directed by Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2015) and invited Szyngiera and Mirosław Wlekły to create a 'Polish *Hamilton*', a hip-hop musical portraying the key figures responsible for the events of 1989. The performance has been hailed as the biggest success of contemporary theatre in Poland (Bąk 2023), a return to a socially engaged theatre in a new form, but above all, as the creation of a 'positive myth' (Wyszomirski 2022). The phrase 'we need a

positive myth at last' was also one of the musical's catchy lyrics and was extensively used by the producers to advertise the show ('1989 – Gdański Teatr Szekspirowski', n.d.).

As a self-proclaimed myth, *1989* can undoubtedly be positioned as 'dramatic fiction', to go back to Lehmann's term. The entire apparatus of fiction is here used to tell a story *based on* facts. It is important to stress, however, that as a historical production, *1989* also functions as an emblematic example of documentary theatre as it is commonly understood: it draws on actual, historical events and records, creating what Carol Martin calls 'additional historical accounts' (2006: 13), and reflects what Attilio Favorini describes as 'a disposition to set individual behavior in an articulated political and/or social context' (1994: 32; see also Reinelt 2009; Martin 2013: 5-6). The Polish musical's formal lineage can be traced to the post-war documentary productions I describe in Chapter 1, which similarly used real-life topics, characters, events, or biographies to construct wholly new theatrical universes.

In an era where, as Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson observe, historical truth has become 'an embattled site of contestation' (2009: 3), I have argued how a performance's constructed world relates to that contested site is of central importance. In *1989*, that relationship is oblique: there is no way of judging where the truth claims stop and the myth begins. In other words, any conclusions regarding the non-theatrical world – any potential truth claims – are, here indeed, essentially imbued with Jenn Stephenson's 'insecurity' (2019). This ambiguity has not gone unnoticed by reviewers. Wiesław Kowalski underlined that *1989* was a 'highly modified' interpretation of the past, distant from any 'documentary-archival record' (2023), while others pointed to the simplifications and historical inaccuracies (Wach 2023, Knera 2023, Wyszomirski 2022). Grzegorz Kondrasiuk captured the essence of the production's epistemological stance:

> After the first scenes of the performance, it was completely obvious that the facts did not matter here, because it was a creative work based on collective imaginations from recent history. But today hardly anyone is interested in facts, since it is not facts that are used to fight for the government – the symbolic one, the government of souls, and the real one, resulting from the election results (2023).

I am interested in facts. And as I have argued above, I am not an exception. Meanwhile, by embracing theatrical heterotopicity – an autonomy from the social and epistemic rules of the

everyday – and by privileging spectacularity, productions such as *1989* construct situations where, indeed, 'facts do not matter'. In consequence, and much like some of the historical documentary productions I discussed in Chapter 1, such performances are only tangentially reliant on truthfulness – and ultimately lack accountability.

The difference between the documentary work I have analysed and a production such as *1989* is also reflected in the relationship to the audience. As Lehmann asserts, it is not enough to bring to the stage an important topic without acknowledging the dramaturgy of the spectator. It is worth reiterating Lehmann's words:

> Understandable as the desire to "thematize" social and political issues may be, we must not forget that the truly social dimension of art is the form, as the young Georg Lukács observed. As long as the forms of conventionalized ways of spectating are not interrupted, the conventional mode of reception in theatre (and film) tends to reduce to insignificance even the most daring documentation and political criticism. (2022: 35)

While *Responsibility*, *JaWa,* and *Inner Monologue* all experiment with documentary forms to confront the spectators with truth claims, inciting them to acknowledge states of affairs, historical documentary spectacles such as *1989* do not go beyond 'conventionalised ways of spectating', using a plethora of special effects and theatrical devices to substitute fact for myth. *1989* makes a political point, yet any 'daring documentation' or critical stance it could explore is, indeed, reduced to insignificance. By substituting assessments of facts by a contest of myths, the debate about truth is back at the polemical starting point the artists I describe managed to overcome. Unsurprisingly, *1989* did not fulfil the goal of establishing a 'unifying myth' for antagonistic political groups. On the contrary, it participated in political polarisation (Knera 2023), as myths require neither arguments, nor evidence, nor any other form of corroboration that could settle a discussion.

Truth Claims

A key insight of this research is that documentary theatre does not always merely shape how reality is perceived and understood – at times, it manages to convince the audience that,

paraphrasing Ludwig Wittgenstein, it is possible to make sure. This process is not neutral but is always embedded in a broader socio-political and epistemological context. The ability of documentary theatre to claim truth thus depends not only on its referential strategies but also on the ethical contract it establishes with its spectators. Rather than insisting on a rigid dichotomy between truth and fiction, this thesis has argued for a nuanced understanding of truthfulness in theatre, one that acknowledges the constructed nature of performance while affirming the possibility of making legitimate truth claims.

This perspective also helped me resolve a critical dichotomy in documentary theatre: the opposition between the naïve realist, who believes in documentary as a transparent means of conveying objective truth, and the disillusioned creator, who sees truth claims as entirely constructed, dependent on discourse and thus fundamentally unreliable. The main finding of my research is that truth claims are not the opposite of negotiated belief; rather, they emerge within a dynamic interplay of intention, strategy, and reception.

The decision to write on the current topic resulted from the discovery that an important – and worrying – gap opened in contemporary scholarship. It was brought about by an intensifying wave of critical scholarly writing reacting to the naïve conviction that what is being shown on the stage in a documentary production is by design objective reality. Such writing was informed by a fierce philosophical critique of objectivity led by post-structuralist thinkers. By the time I decided to go back to academia after twenty years of directing mainly documentary theatre, I discovered that such a critical perspective had become paradigmatic in documentary theatre scholarship. While I shared the concerns regarding the risks of gullibility and understood the theoretical premises of the approach, it could not be further from my own experience of documentary theatre, both as director and as spectator. The possibility – and importance – of sharing truthful accounts of the world was corroborated by countless reviews, conversations, and post-show talks I have witnessed or been the subject of. Since the task of scholarship is to investigate and explain the world, I considered it crucial that the value ascribed to truth claims in documentary theatre – a value socially recognised and cherished – be explained rather than eschewed. Thus, this research addressed the need for an approach to documentary theatre that acknowledges the existence of truth claims, understood as statements about the non-theatrical world that propose themselves as accurate.

Accordingly, this study has illuminated how documentary theatre engages with contemporary philosophical debates about truth. While poststructuralist critiques have problematised the notion of objective truth, my analysis has shown that theatre-makers do not necessarily abandon truth claims but rather reposition them within a situated, relational framework. Following theorists such as Bruno Latour and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I have argued that documentary theatre operates within a reparative epistemology, one that does not reject truth outright but instead cultivates conditions for trust and shared meaning. The documentary form in theatre, therefore, provides a crucial space for negotiating contemporary crises of truth, including the rise of disinformation, media scepticism, and the erosion of public trust in institutions.

Future Directions

Looking ahead, future research might explore the role of audience agency in shaping the reception of documentary theatre. How do audiences navigate conflicting truth claims within a performance? What are the possible ways of measuring the effectiveness of convincing truth claims, including the epistemic communities they aim to establish? These questions are particularly relevant in an era characterised by deepening political divisions and media fragmentation.

Another crucial area for exploration is how emerging digital technologies are reshaping the epistemic landscape of documentary performance. The rise of virtual and augmented reality, as well as AI-generated media, poses new challenges and opportunities for the staging of truth claims. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural and geopolitical contexts could further illuminate the dynamics of theatrical factuality. By continuing to investigate the intersections of theatre, truth, and public discourse, scholars and practitioners can contribute to a more nuanced and critical understanding of how performance participates in the broader struggle over meaning and reality in the contemporary world.

Additionally, further research is needed on the intersections between documentary theatre and other forms of non-fiction media, such as documentary film, journalism, and oral-history projects. How do different mediums negotiate the ethics of representation, the challenges

of authenticity, and the responsibilities of testimony? By expanding the scope of inquiry beyond theatre and comparing the dynamics of epistemic negotiations, scholars can develop a more comprehensive understanding of how truth claims function across diverse cultural forms.

Finally, the appearance of several recent documentary productions whose explicit aim is to effect real-world change rekindles interest in theatre's performative potential, in the Austinian sense of producing consequences in the world through speech and action. Two examples demonstrate the extent of the shift. In *Spygirls* (2024), Magda Szpecht documents her and her colleagues' successful attempts to infiltrate the Russian military via dating apps, thereby obtaining intelligence about Russian troop movements during the invasion of Ukraine. The performance functions both as documentation of the work and as a pretext for it in the first place. The second example concerns Michał Zadara, whose *Responsibility* I analysed in Chapter 2. In the recent documentary theatre production *Smutna rzeka* (*Sad River*, 2024), Zadara reclaims the one-million-złoty award announced by the authorities for identifying those responsible for the ecological disaster on the Odra River. He demonstrates that the different levels of Polish authorities were in fact legally and ethically culpable themselves. When the show's producer, Zadara's Fundacja Centralna, is denied the award, the foundation successfully sues the state (Mrozek 2025; Greenpeace Polska, 2025). Szpecht's and Zadara's projects both represent a degree of intervention in the social realm that, until recently, theatre-makers rarely attempted. It is important to examine how, in such cases, theatrical factuality is mobilised as a strategy for producing tangible real-life effects – under the guise of, and through the mechanisms of, documentary art.

The study of truth claims in documentary theatre opens up broader questions about the role of performance in knowledge production. While documentary theatre cannot escape the complexities of representation, it offers a compelling space in which truth claims can be negotiated. As contemporary theatre continues to engage with pressing social and political realities, its capacity to assert and negotiate truth claims within a concrete social gathering remains a vital area of inquiry. This thesis has sought to contribute to that discourse by demonstrating that, despite epistemological challenges, documentary theatre retains a crucial role in fostering understanding and accountability in the public sphere. Ultimately, the ability to make and contest truth claims in the theatrical space is not just a question of aesthetics but one of civic

and ethical significance. Documentary theatre remains a space where the public negotiation of truth continues to unfold, offering spectators support in their engagement with the world around them.

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