

DOCTOR SCHOOL OF UNIVERSITY OF THEATRE AND FILM ARTS BUDAPEST

**WORKING METHODS IN DOCUMENTARY THEATRE**

Thesis of Doctoral Dissertation

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2018

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## **The subject of the thesis**

My thesis examines documentary theatre and its methods, a perspective that became more and more important in the past decades. My study is based on three main sources: documentary theatre plays I attended, my own experience of making documentary theatre, and essays and papers on this topic. My objective is to systemise the countless methods of documentary theatre. A summary of this kind cannot be found in available literature, therefore I find this is a niche piece of work. Also, having presented these methods through the description of actual plays, this paper shows such methods to both the Hungarian audience and professionals that have not yet reached Hungary. Since documentary theatre looks for the essence and the limits of theatre, my paper also proposes the question: what makes theatre *theatre* in today's age.

## **The structure of the thesis**

My paper starts with the section called '*Basics*' in which I identify the subject and my research methods. I also explain the meaning of documentary theatre in the 21st century, which is not only using documents in plays but is also a theatrical approach. Its essence is the selected theme around which the actual play is organised. Usually creators reflect to the historical or sociological aspects of current events affecting our society. This is followed by a theoretical and/or empirical research. While the theoretical research means that creators of the play research related literature, the empirical research consists of interviews conducted by the creators with relevant experts. The research phase is followed by the preparation of the script of the play. Most documentary theatre performances are prepared through this process, but selecting the actors or the process of rehearsal might differ - I will present these later.

During the systemisation of documentary theatre methods I used the minimal definition of theatre proposed by Eric Bentley as a starting point, according to which "A impersonates B while C looks on". Contemporary creators of documentary theatre aim at finding the limits of theatre. Having this in mind, I grouped the methods according to their distance from the minimal definition of Bentley.

The first chapter is called '*Showdown with the author*'. I present plays which are set in a conventional theatrical environment, in which actors are impersonating characters, presenting technical texts (from various sources), curated by the editors. Therefore the purpose of these

texts is to present the topic and the literary value of them is non-essential. However, these texts - as usually other texts of documentary theatre - are texts of the specific performance, and not theatrical texts to be published and reused whenever and with whoever. E.g. verbatim theatre known in Hungary as well, or reenactments, reenacting true events.

The next chapter is '*Showdown with the role*', in which I examine plays where, from the minimal definition of Bentley, the impersonation (B) is missing. This is only possible if there is no role to be impersonated, e.g. the performer sees the text for the very first time performing. It's also possible if the performer 'impersonates' himself, in first-person, singular - in these cases virtually there is no impersonation like during one man shows. The past years it has become more popular to find performers who have a connection to the selected theme, e.g. Yael Ronen made a number of performances about the Middle East with Israeli and Palestinian actors.

The third chapter is '*Showdown with the actor*'. In this chapter I describe plays where there are no actors, only the creators or civilians without theatrical experience. There are a number of performance groups (eg. *She She Pop* and *Gob Squad*) where performers are theatre professionals and not actors, and they stage the selected topics themselves. One of the most well-known group is *Rimini Protokoll*: after settling on the topic, they select experts to play the performance. Their latest performances don't even require these experts to be present, but they set up installations with various broadcasting media, therefore towards the end of the chapter I report on performances based on radio plays, phone calls, video games, and even a performance where only the audience is present. On these occasions the performer from the minimal definition of Bentley (A) is missing too, and only the audience (C) remains - therefore it's only their experience deciding on interpreting the performance as theatre or not.

Many of the past decades' most prominent documentary theatre creators studied on the same course, hence I'd like to present the course of Justus Liebig University's Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft in Gießen, which provides an alternative to the various, century-old drama educations. In the chapter called '*The school of Gießen*' I examine their teaching method, which I hope to be very valuable for the students and teachers of the University of Theatre and film arts in Budapest, because it is always interesting to find out about education in other institutions.

## Norwegian for beginners

The performance called *Norwegian for beginners* is part of my doctoral dissertation. For the first time I held it 9th September 2017, in Effy Language Studio, on Blaha Lujza square. The maximum number of people attending was 12, previous registration required. The topic of the performance is Norway and Norwegian. The performance resembles a language class, therefore it lasts two times forty-five minutes, ninety minutes in total. The performance is entirely mine: from the concept to the execution, I do everything by myself, and I am the performer, as an expert of Norwegian education.

The first part is a more conventional theatrical and educational situation where the performer assumes a frontal position, shares his experience and knowledge about Norwegian, but even this part is interactive: the participants are encouraged to ask questions or share their thoughts - this happens regularly. For this very reason the performance doesn't have a script, just an outline. So far there were a total of 7 performances with 68 participants, and each of the performances was different.

The second half of the performance is a classic lecture situation, in which participants start to study Norwegian, the alphabet, pronunciation and a few words. They meet with common situations such as repeating a text after listening, reading out loud the textbook and these are theatrical situations in themselves.

The *Norwegian for beginners* is the interactive reenactment of the first lesson, in which the performer is the same and the base of the reenactment is himself (as all the teachers), but the recipients are each times different. This can be defined as a lecture performance, which fuses a pedagogical situation with performance art.

With the performance I was looking for the limits of theatre, and where does it start. In the case of *Norwegian for beginners* the organiser is not an art institution, there are no tickets, there no stage, director, actor etc - therefore it is not a conventional play, but I still consider it a documentary theatre piece. But the position of the recipient is even more interesting, because it's them deciding if this can be interpreted as theatre or not. In this case there was example for both. During the discussion after the play somebody asked if they can sign up for the Norwegian course, others had cathartic theatric experience. I think there is a place for documentary theatre in the Hungarian scene, especially if I can create performances about topics that are important to me, and make the recipients think about the theme or what is theatre.