

Book Review

*Theatre of Real People: Diverse Encounters at Berlin's
Hebbel am Ufer and Beyond*
by Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford
(London: Bloomsbury, 2016)

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The ontological categories of 'truth' and 'reality' have never been especially stable, but through reality television, social media, and the 'performance' of world politics they are becoming even less so. Who and what is 'real'? Documentary, verbatim, tribunal and testimonial plays seek to depict—in a variety of ways—the legitimate, unmediated and authentic 'real' on stage, and scholars such as Carol Martin, Derek Paget and many others investigate this borderland. Now Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford join them, with their relevant and readable book *Theatre of Real People: Diverse Encounters at Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer and Beyond*, which analyses the theatrical, theoretical and socio-political ramifications of placing real people as performers in professional theatre contexts.

The book begins with the term "theatre strangers," which has two connotations for Garde and Mumford (3). Firstly, it refers to people who may be "different, foreign or insufficiently known due to their occupation, class, and ethnic background" (3), and secondly it signifies individuals who do not and have not performed in theatre, which is to say, non-actors. The book examines strategies not just to represent "theatre strangers" and their communities but to collaborate with "multiple and diverse others" across a range of differences (42). The authors devote considerable space, approximately ninety pages, to historical contextualisation and theoretical analysis.

The first chapter charts a history of placing 'real' people on stage, from Brecht's *Lehrstücke* through to Allan Kaprow's Happenings in the early 1960s to Roland Brus's productions performed in Germany in the 1990s by homeless people. While some of this ground is familiar, the chapter usefully draws together multiple Theatre of Real People practices and provides a clear critical survey of the field. More importantly, it grounds the later sections of the book that explore selected performances from Berlin's Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) production house under the artistic leadership of Matthias Lilienthal for nine years from 2003 to 2012.

Central to the book's analysis of Theatre of Real People, and indeed to its contribution to the field, is the concept of "Authenticity-Effects" (drawn from German language terms *Authentizitätseffekte* and *Authentizitätseindrücke*). In Chapter Three, Garde and Mumford elaborate this concept in considerable detail. In their words, the term "Authenticity-Effects" refers to theatrical techniques and modes of representation that either "generate and/or destabilize a sense of contact with the sincere, truthful, unmediated, and intimate" (23), especially in relation to spectators' contact with 'real' people in theatrical performances, as well as "the perceptual experiences that result from such techniques" (199). They compare and contrast Authenticity-Effects with Barthes' "reality effects" and Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* respectively, highlighting crucial differences. For example, unlike *Verfremdungseffekt*, Garde and Mumford assert that Authenticity-Effects in Theatre of Real People productions are "not always intentionally created by theatre-makers" (87), an idea that is returned to in the book's detailed case studies. In addition, the authors distinguish between the so-called "idealising" and "sceptical" approaches to its deployment. In the idealising approach, "makers or spectators often operate under the assumption that performance can offer direct access to truthful, sincere or unmediated speech, selves or bodies" (73). In contrast, more sceptical approaches draw attention to "the complexity and difficulty of truthful representation" (77). By mapping sceptical approaches onto selected case studies, the authors argue that Theatre of Real People performances can provide audiences with opportunities to interrogate notions of 'truth' and 'authenticity', but also destabilise our preconceptions and classifications, sometimes leading to fresh understandings about human relationships. The concept of the Authenticity-Effect provides a useful framework through which to consider the vexed concepts of truth, authenticity and reliability in Theatre of Real People performances.

In their second chapter, Garde and Mumford present a detailed examination of selected HAU productions from 2003 to 2012, during which time works were created for a host of theatre and non-theatre spaces. The authors outline artistic director Lilienthal's preoccupations as a theatre-maker who strove for "authentic encounter" (67), and offer persuasive examples of how this preoccupation played out in HAU productions under his directorship. Of particular interest is the book's exploration of how Lilienthal "managed Theatre of Real People's twofold concern with the problems of representing social reality through the arts of theatre, and of representing culturally unfamiliar others within a capitalist, postmodern, and globalized world" (50). This tension emerges clearly in the book's central case studies and the analysis and argument really come alive in chapters five through eight.

The first of these case studies investigates the *100% City* series first created in 2008 to celebrate the Hebbel Theatre's 100th birthday (105). In the project's *100% Berlin* iteration, created by Rimini Protokoll, 100 citizens of Berlin, each of whom occupied a strict demographic category that purportedly accurately represented the statistical composition of Berlin, performed as themselves on stage. Ways in which the production draws attention to notions of authenticity, individuality and a contemporary desire for unmediated connection with real people and their stories form the basis for detailed discussion in this

section of the book. An example reveals the production's requirement that each participant fit strict statistical criteria: apparently a newspaper advertisement had to be placed in order to find a married or widowed German, Polish or Serbian citizen over the age of 65 who lived in a specific suburb of Berlin (109). Variations of *100% City* were performed in several cities around the world; in addition to the Berlin version, Garde and Mumford provide a close analysis of *100% Melbourne*, observing that in each case, the work had powerful social and theatrical effects. In both iterations examined in the book, *100% City* "destabilized spectators' expectations of seemingly familiar home towns around the world" (105) and called into question "statistical information and its reliance on 'authentic' data" (115).

Each case study provides the reader with an increasingly clear picture of how Theatre of Real People functions in performance, how a wide range of Authenticity-Effects challenges the blurry border between the 'real' and the 'performed', and especially how Lilienthal's theatrical preoccupations played out in practice. For instance, whereas HAU's *100% City* was performed on stage in a theatre building, the next production the authors analyse, *X-Apartments*, used real apartments as settings for performance, marking this piece as "emblematic of Lilienthal's artistic credo and a 'characteristic of the HAU and the theatre's desire to observe and comment on the real'" (126, quoting Muller 2004). Here the identities of performer and non-performer were less clear than in *100% City*; in *X-Apartments* "performative spaces overlap with the spaces of everyday reality" (127). Consequently, the borders became so blurry that that spectators began to interpret everything on the roads and sidewalks between apartments, including an injured man, as part of the performance (129–30). In the corridor on the way to Frau Barthelmess's apartment, spectators were menaced by a gang of youths—played by actors—asking them for money (130). Audience members in another flat ate barbecued sausages while the owner bricked up the exit door, obliging those spectators to exert agency and climb out a window (133–34). In yet another apartment, spectators were made to kneel at a keyhole to watch the performance (142), thus unsettlingly positioning audience members as voyeurs or witnesses.

The next chapter analyses *Call Cutta: Mobile Phone Theatre* (2005) performed in Berlin and created by Rimini Protokoll during their tenure as artists-in-residence at the HAU. Audience members were guided through a tour of Berlin neighbourhoods "from the Hallesches Ufer via Kreuzberg to Potsdamer Platz" by an "unfamiliar" call centre employee speaking from India, who communicated with the spectator via their mobile phone (147). The authors consider how the performance signifies the "increased possibilities of communication in a globalized world where space seems to have been condensed" (153). *Call Cutta's* defamiliarisation strategies are described by Garde and Mumford as being like a "hall of mirrors" (159), a "house of mirrors" (162) and, more than once, like a kind of "scavenger hunt" (154–55), but one in which the trustworthiness of the information the audience member receives is called into question. The authors outline several of those defamiliarisation strategies, including the fact that participants relied on the call centre operator for directions but also developed a more personal relationship with them; a potentially unreliable sense of "proximity and intimacy...[was] fostered through flirting, compliments and personal questions" (153). In addition to "functioning as tour guides"

(149) the operator told stories of their life in India, and at one point sang a song for the participant (152). Photographs were interspersed throughout the *parcours*, and the spectator was instructed to pick them up. These photographs depicted Indian freedom fighter Netaji, who travelled to Berlin in 1941 looking for military support from the National Socialists (155, 158, 159). The call centre operator drew the participant's attention to a figure standing beside Netaji in one photograph, and claimed this man was their grandfather (155). As well as developing a relationship with the call centre operator, the participant also became acquainted or re-acquainted with the district where the walk took place. For instance, participants arrived at the historic Anhalter station where trains departed for "transportation to concentration camps" (159), not by way of the more public commemorative columns at the front of the station, but through the less familiar, adjacent woods. Through this case study, the authors clearly show how 'authenticity' remains ultimately ungraspable.

In chapter eight Garde and Mumford analyse the seventh version of *Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge* (*Blackmarket* No. 7), created by Mobile Academy at the HAU in 2007. In this participatory piece, audience members engaged in one-on-one dialogue with—or listened via headphones and watched—a wide range of real people "present[ing] their expertise in areas such as migration, new forms of nomadism, and/or culturally hybrid ways of living" (170) in an encounter that was part performance and part educational forum. In their analysis of the work, Garde and Mumford focus on the problematic practice of "outsourcing" (177). In *Blackmarket* it is the 'performance' that is outsourced to real-life "experts" (175) and—unlike many other instances of outsourcing—here the practice has a productive outcome in that it "contributes to the assertion of alternative and marginalized knowledge practices" (178). It is clear from Garde and Mumford's analysis that the production clearly foregrounded the conception of knowledge as an "ever-changing product of negotiation and inter-human encounter that always bursts the boxes of a fixed taxonomy" (179). In the same chapter the authors discuss *Mr. Dağaçar and the Golden Tectonics of Trash*, also by members of Rimini Protokoll, which also focuses on migration, and is both about and mainly performed by trash recyclers from Istanbul. The politics of mobility are demonstrated through personal stories and "meta-textual sections devoted to commentary on the making of the work" (182); the authors emphasise that, "the production presents a small window and by no means a complete picture of the situation of these workers, both as a group and as individuals" (183). The book discusses ways in which both *Blackmarket* and *Mr Dağaçar* "in their bid to create proximity for their audience members to unfamiliar real people, generate Authenticity-Effects" (184). Like Sara Ahmed (2000), the authors stress that proximity does not necessarily draw spectators closer to the experiences of "unfamiliar" people (184). However, they see this lack of proximity as a positive and argue for "the value of creating perceptual distance and acknowledging cultural difference during encounters with the unfamiliar" (184).

Theatre of Real People's conclusion lays out both criticisms of and potential opportunities for Theatre of Real People performances, and briefly outlines Lilienthal's post-HAU projects in Munich's Kammerspiele that continue his artistic commitment to "experimentation on

multiple fronts with socially engaged performance that would serve and be made by culturally diverse people” (209). The range of examples Garde and Mumford offer here compellingly contributes to a complex depiction of how Authenticity-Effects operate to reframe spectators’ perceptions of theatrical and social meaning-making. Overall, the book considers how theatrical and social knowledge is created and produced, and provokes questions about how to negotiate “the controlling gaze of theatre artists and spectators” (197). I recommend *Theatre of Real People* both to practitioners and scholars as a rich work that challenges representations of ‘the real’ and the knowability of ‘the unfamiliar’ through performance in this precarious age.

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