

Book Review

Theatre of the Real,
by Carol Martin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

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It is now almost a decade since *TDR: The Drama Review* published its special issue on documentary theatre, edited by Carol Martin (2006). In the intervening years, Martin has contributed to Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson's edited book *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2009) as well as edited her own book *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010). Now, at last, we have her monograph—*Theatre of the Real*, published in 2013. In her contribution to *Get Real*, Martin made the persuasive argument that Israeli vocal artist Victoria Hanna's work could be considered documentary for two reasons: first, she sang sacred texts from the bible, i.e. the performance derived from the archive; and second, she sang digital sounds, i.e. the performance commented on the nature of that archive and its relation to contemporary documents. In *Theatre of the Real* Martin goes even further, expanding her remit and thus the field to include a "wide range of theatre practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical" (5).

Theatre of the real includes "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" (5). Its methods include "theatre created from the verbatim use of transcripts, facts, trials, autobiography, and interviews; theatre created from enacting experiences of witnesses, portraying historic events, and reconstructing real places; theatre created from the Internet including YouTube and Facebook; and any combination of these" (5). While there is a risk that the category is becoming too capacious here, Martin maintains a tight focus through her case studies, which occur, for the most part, on a stage. The exceptions are Hotel Modern's *History of the World – Part Eleven* (2004), a five-minute animated short film about September 11 2001, and International WOW Company's *Surrender: A Simulated War Deployment in Three Acts* (2008), a participatory performance.

The first and second chapters provide an overview of theatre of the real, with the former focusing on the contemporary moment and the latter taking a more historical approach. The contemporary examples that Martin gives the most attention to are: *Is.Man* (2007), a play by Dutch writer and director Adelheid Roosen and based on interviews with men who were imprisoned for honour killings; *I Am My Own Wife* (2004), a play by American writer Doug Wright based conversations he had with German transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, who survived Nazism and then Communism; and *Stop the Blood* (2005), in which Israeli performer Sancho Goshen put a heparin lock in each arm, opened his veins and announced "stop the blood". What unites these otherwise diverse performances are the operations of the accident or more broadly chance. In *Is.Man*, an actor leaves the stage in what appears to be a fit of temper, though no one can tell if it is part of the show or not (3). In *I Am My Own Wife*, an actor is performing the play in the museum that

Mahlsdorf herself curated, when he realises the couch described in the play is the couch in the room; even more magically, when he delivers a line about snow falling, there is an actual snowstorm outside (8). In *Stop the Blood*, the audience sits in stunned silence before a fainting videographer jolts them into action and they help both the performer and his documenter (21). In all three instances, the accident produces an irruption of the real, a real that “duplicate[s] and confirm[s] ... [and] inhabit[s] the theatrical, providing spectators with an uncanny spectacle of double vision, an inherent pleasure of the theatrical” (8).

The second chapter starts by examining how “real life” in the 1960s and 70s became increasingly theatrical, through the blurring of public and private life and the staging of protests among other things. Theatre, in its turn, started to incorporate and interrogate the real. Focusing on several New York productions from the period, Martin identifies four major shifts in performance practice, specifically in acting, casting, *mise-en-scène*, and media. In terms of acting, Martin argues that two major shifts occurred. First, acting was reconceived, by Joseph Chaikin in particular, as a mode of “witnessing and giving testimony” (31). In other words, to act was to deliver testimony on behalf of oneself, an absent other or both; on occasion, it also involved displaying one’s body as testimony. Second, acting moved from being matrixed to non-matrixed, as Michael Kirby would call it, shifting the emphasis from creating a character to undertaking a series of tasks. Changes in acting evolved alongside changes in casting practices, as performers increasingly appeared on stage as themselves. Sometimes this happened through necessity, as in the case of *Coming Out!: A Documentary Play About Gay Life and Liberation* (1975), which had a cast of amateur actors because professionals were reluctant to identify publicly as gay for fear that it might harm their employment prospects (36–38). On other occasions, professional performers appeared as themselves in autobiographical works, such as Spalding Gray in *Rumstick Road* (1977). In both instances, the presence of “real people” enhanced the aesthetic of authenticity.

The mention of *Rumstick Road* brings to mind the third shift, which is the increasingly central role media played in performance. Far from rejecting media, Martin argues that theatre of the real embraced it: personal photographs were often produced, reproduced and projected in performance; film footage was projected on screens and hanging bed sheets; and recordings of phone calls played. Part of the reason this became possible is because the *mise-en-scène* had been reconceived as another “character” on stage rather than background, as happened in JoAnne Akalitis’s *Southern Exposure* (1979) (38–45). Taken together, these two chapters begin to theorise what we might call a theatre of multiple or intersectional realities, which is to say performances that combines one or more of “real events,” “real people,” “real sites,” “real tasks,” and occasionally “real pain.” The second achievement of these chapters is to reconfigure the relationship between documentary theatre and the American avant-garde—so often theorised separately despite significant overlaps. This overlap also characterises the final chapter, which considers the work of The Builders Association and the International WOW Company.

In the middle three chapters, Martin examines the representation of “Jews and Jewishness” as well as the Holocaust and the Israel-Palestine conflict (89). Here theatre of the real emerges, like theatre more generally, as an ideologically neutral medium or machine: at its best, it can “make a generative and critical intervention in people’s prejudices and the limitations of public understanding” (120); at its worst, it can “mimic, instead of interrogate, public discourse” (122) and in doing so “oversimplify, inflame prejudices, and support one-sided perspectives” (120). In order to make this point, Martin analyses eight productions: Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation* (1965); Emily Mann’s *Annula (An Autobiography)* (1977); Lenny Sack’s *The Survivor and The Translator: A Solo Theatre Work about Not Having Experienced the Holocaust, by the Daughter of Concentration Camp Survivors* (1980); Anna Deavere Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror* (1993); David

Hare's *Via Dolorosa* (1998); Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner's *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005); Hotel Modern's *Kamp* (2006); and Lawrence Wright's *The Human Scale* (2010).

Martin only deals with *The Investigation* briefly, focusing on its reception history in particular. When it debuted, critics attacked it for reproducing the bureaucratic language of the perpetrators, for numbering rather than naming the witnesses and thus disappearing the victims and silencing the survivors yet again. Lastl, they dismissed its "artless ... anti-theatrical[ity]" (Cohen, cited 91). More recently, however, critics have praised the play precisely for its refusal of theatrical conventions such as character and for "blur[ring] the boundaries between reality and its representation, between documents and their interpretation, between authentic persons and stage characters" (Cohen, cited 91). What might this mean for the reception of contemporary theatres of the real?

For her part, Martin endorses *Annulla (An Autobiography)*, *The Survivor and the Translator*, *Kamp*, *The Human Scale* and, despite some reservations, *Fires in the Mirror*. In *Annulla (An Autobiography)*, Emily Mann contrasts her life as the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor with that of an actual survivor, whose name appears in the title. Whereas Mann's grandmother has "lost her language," having forgotten her first (Polish) and never fully mastered her second (Yiddish) and third (English), Annulla speaks seven languages, a legacy of moving from country to country as she and her family avoided the Nazis. Mann herself, of course, has the English but lacks the experience to contribute to the conversation except to stage herself "as an autobiographical interrogator of others' stories" (100). Martin praises the play for this "juxtaposition of ... one who remembers from experience against one who cannot collect enough experience to remember" (102). She also admires its refusal of "proper narrative order and structure," its demonstration of "how difficult it is to get coherent memories that result in an entire story," and its allusion to "the ambiguous status of memory" (100–01). Though she is less enamoured with its realist aesthetic, she still admires its attempt to speak about an event that has been deemed unspeakable (102).

Similar themes emerge in Martin's appraisal of Lenny Sack's autobiographical one-woman show *The Survivor and the Translator: A Solo Theatre Work about Not Having Experienced the Holocaust, by the Daughter of Concentration Camp Survivors*. Martin reads its melange of Polish and English as "an attempt to recover language and experience through acts of translation" (94). She also praises Sack's "doubling of voices and identities ... confusion of narratives, and ... conflation of memories" as well as the way she both "entwines her identity with her grandmother's" but also "separate[s] herself from her" too (96–97). In contrast, Martin has mixed feelings about Anna Deavere Smith's famous *Fires in the Mirror*, made in the wake of the Crown Heights riots. In Chapter 4, she criticises Smith for "mark[ing] the Jews of Crown Heights as 'other'" and Jewishness more generally as "enigmatic to outsiders and binding to [insiders]" (105). In Chapter 5, however, when comparing it to *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, Martin praises Smith for "redeem[ing] and respect[ing] all the voices even the ones that are prejudicial against blacks, prejudicial against Jews" adding that "[t]he moral imagination of Smith's plays embraces the accounts of all the people she interviewed even as the stories they told contradicted and accused one another" (139). In other words, while Smith's play may contain some stereotypes, overall it performs openness and inclusiveness.

While the work of Mann, Sack and Smith shares an interest in personal history, Lawrence Wright's solo *The Human Scale*, which examines the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, takes a slightly different approach, one that is more reminiscent of Weiss. Indeed, Martin positions Wright as the contemporary inheritor of Weiss's aesthetic not once but twice. She states: "Like Weiss, Wright situates the Holocaust as a specific and horrific event against the Jewish people and also as

the creation of humans, a Golem capable of arising from any race or religion" (116); and again, "Like Weiss, Wright ... [does] not try to convey the feeling of history through the experience of an individual as much as he [seeks] out the rationale for history's justification" (118). In contrast to Smith's stereotypes, Martin finds "no codes signifying the Jewish people or Jewishness as inscrutable, surreptitious, or even special" in Wright's work (116) and overall, she admires its "formidable exegesis ... [and] nuanced history of both Israelis and Palestinians, including atrocities, small and large, committed by both peoples" (114).

Two other solos, *Via Dolorosa* and *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, are, for Martin, far more problematic. She faults Hare's travelogue about his time in the Middle East for several reasons. Unlike Sack and Mann, Hare makes no attempt to include or speak the "multiple languages of contemporary Israelis," preferring to speak in English only (113). Within that speech, he "leaves little room for caesura, for the pauses where we may struggle with the sense of things and, perhaps, consider the ways in which meaning may not be entirely within reach" (107). Unlike Smith, Hare does not attempt to embody, and thus perhaps to empathise with, the people he portrays, instead "giv[ing] us only his British voice even as he couches that voice in the views of others" (107). Unlike Wright, he does not attend to the complexities of the conflict and "says little about radical Islam in relation to Palestinians" (112). The Israelis fare little better, portrayed by Hare as "crazy, passionate, dramatic Jews" in a way that "traffic[s] in stereotypes" (111–12). Finally, instead of acknowledging his own implications in the situation, he ignores "the devastating effect of Britain's own colonial past in the Middle East" and "poses as a grand secular guy" somewhat above the fray (111–12). *My Name is Rachel Corrie* makes all these mistakes and more, with Martin singling out "[t]he play's problems of authorship, the opacity of the work of its editors, and the Internet discourse surrounding it" (121). Like Hare, Corrie together with Rickman and Viner "eliminat[e] the diversity of both Israeli and Palestinian points of view" and thus "sustain already clashing historical and political narratives" (138–39). Furthermore, the play does not consider that "Corrie was as ideologically situated as the driver of the bulldozer" or that she "was not the only civilian to lose her life in Gaza" (139). In short, both *Via Dolorosa* and *My Name is Rachel Corrie* "ignore history" (112) and could be characterised as performances of ignorance rather than insight.

The outlier in this discussion is Hotel Modern's *Kamp*, the only production that does not depend on testimony and the only one that dares to represent the concentration camps. *Kamp* combines the live and the virtual in a single performance. The live performance involves a cast of puppets, manipulated by visible puppeteers, enacting a day and night of activity on a model set of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The set is not to scale, since it could not fit on any regular size stage, but nonetheless functions as a form of "architectural testimony in the form of a fantastic and surreal town" (81). The virtual performance involves a live feed of this performance projected onto a large screen at the back of the theatre. In this way, "[w]hat is collectivized and perhaps dehumanized live is powerfully individuated on film. The film is a close-up of the live, and both the live and the film take place in front of the spectators" (76). The overall effect is to position spectators "as accomplices as well as witnesses because they see what is going on from an omnipresent point of view" (84). Through its almost totally silent, miniature reenactment of camp life, *Kamp* becomes "a performance of cultural memory without testimony" (87). Similarly, Martin says of Hotel Modern's "puppet film" *History of the World – Part Eleven* that it is "a documentary but without documents ... [a] mirror of both known and invented reality that gives form and image to sights seen and unseen" (71). The implication is that no single medium can represent trauma by itself: films must become theatrical and theatre must become filmic.

This section of the book opens several possibilities for further investigation and discussion. First, it is worth noting that at least six of the shows examined here are solos. It would be interesting to clarify whether this is a function of scarcity, i.e. these were the only performances available to Martin; of selection, i.e. these are the ones that most interested her; or of genre, i.e. this solitude is in fact a feature of this particular subgenre of theatre of the real. If so, why is the figure of the solo witness so compelling? Further, does this solitude prevent performances from modelling the intersubjective, intercultural dialogue they presumably want to encourage? It is also noteworthy that the plays Martin is most critical of are both by English authors and editors. Perhaps the discussion could be usefully triangulated by analysing performances of *Via Dolorosa* in other countries, where actors *played* Hare *playing* himself (as in the production I saw in Sydney). Lastly, it would be interesting to hear from Palestinians themselves: here Hare and Corrie speak on their behalf, but as Martin acknowledges, their representations are problematic.

Reading across the book as a whole, numerous other insights emerge. In particular, I was struck by the pervasiveness of the “reveal” as a theatrical gesture of the genre. Towards the end of *Rumstick Road*, Spalding Gray plays the tape of a telephone call with his mother’s *real* psychiatrist (50). In *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, the play finishes with an image of the *real* Rachel (135). In *House/Divided*, the projections include footage of the *real* Alan Greenspan (161) and *The Human Scale* starts and finishes with images of the *real* Gilad Shalit (114, 117). It is an intriguing habit and one that flies in the face of theatre and performance studies’ own insights into the problematic politics of visibility (Phelan). For her part, Martin seems to prefer politics and performances that refuse such simplicity and certainty and try to destabilise our agreed reality, whether by accident (as in the first chapter) or by design.

In summary, *Theatre of the Real* provides a new name for a genre of theatre that has resisted them, rescues older performances of the real from oblivion and enlivens them with thick description and deep theorisation. It also describes and analyses several contemporary works in careful detail, including autobiographical, intermedial, immersive and virtual performances. This combination of genres and media yields intriguing insights into the operations of presence and co-presence in contemporary life and art. Whatever the medium, Martin’s ideal performance of the real would avoid stereotypes, combine elements of testimony and reflexivity, and destabilise language, subjectivity, and memory. If “theatre of the real intervenes in our understanding of the world through the particular distorting mirror of theatre” (112), then *Theatre of the Real* intervenes in our understanding of the genre through the particular clarifying mind of Martin.

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