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## Introduction

In the decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, young Russian playwrights revived contemporary drama with their exploration and portrayal of everyday life in post-Soviet Russia. Their work has since come to be known as belonging to the genre *Novaia drama* (New Drama), a category that can be broadly understood to include plays that were written during or after the mid-1990s and express a clear interest in navigating the complexities of contemporary life and everyday language onstage. New Russian Drama put the playwright at its centre and eschewed traditional concepts of dramatic heroes. It was, in part, these playwrights' investment in the depiction of lived experience onstage that drew Russia's first generation of post-Soviet theatre artists to their exploration of documentary theatre forms, beginning in the late 1990s. In their pursuit of realistic dialogue, Russia's New Dramatists discovered a close affinity for 'verbatim' theatre as it was introduced to them through a series of masterclasses led by delegates of London's Royal Court Theatre in 1999 and 2000. Since that time, many of the country's most innovative theatre artists have taken to using material from real-life events to explore the intricacies of injustice in the civic sphere and to create a space for the collective renegotiation of cultural narratives in twenty-first-century Russia.

Verbatim is a playwriting technique theatre-makers use internationally to respond to current events, and to give voice to otherwise marginalized

members of their societies. In its most orthodox form, verbatim involves identifying a topic or an event of social relevance and conducting interviews with those connected to the issue or event under discussion. The interviews are then transcribed, edited, and composed by the playwright into a documentary theatre text. In the UK, the term 'verbatim theatre' is often used to signify different types of plays that make an explicit claim to being rooted in real-life events, particularly those that draw on interviews, found texts, or other documentary materials for the basis of the play script. In Russia, the term 'dokumentalniy teatr' (documentary theatre) is used to describe a category of work that includes but is not limited to forms such as verbatim, living newspaper, autobiographical works, interactive theatre, and so on. The term 'svidetelskii teatr' (witness theatre) is also used in Russia, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, to describe documentary plays in which people tell their own stories onstage as well as performances in which individuals who are not actors join audiences in conversation about a particular event or topic.

This book traces the history of documentary theatre in twenty-first-century Russia. It contextualizes the form's rapid growth within the sociocultural setting of the Putin years (2000–) by conducting close analysis of specific plays from Moscow's documentary theatre repertoire in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. In doing so, *Witness onstage* argues that these years have proven a particularly generative time for the development of documentary theatre forms. It suggests that the remarkable potency of documentary theatre in Russia throughout the early 2000s developed as a result of the form's unique capacity to speak to a number of core cultural anxieties in contemporary Russia. These anxieties include questions about the evidentiary status of documents, the sincerity of testimony, and the performance of justice, as well as the country's fraught relationship to its Soviet past. In each of this book's chapters, I will demonstrate how, through its direct engagement with these four points of tension in contemporary culture, documentary theatre has come to constitute an important space for civic engagement in Russia since the turn of the twenty-first century.

The title of this book is drawn from a series of symposiums hosted by Moscow's leading documentary theatre venue, Teatr.doc. In 2012 and again in 2017, the artists at the heart of Russia's documentary theatre boom gathered in Moscow to discuss and explore the development of the form in its specifically contemporary Russian context. Both in the instance of these gatherings and in the case of this book, the title *Svidetel na tsene* (*Witness onstage*) serves to highlight the reciprocal act of speaking and listening that is key to documentary theatre practice. Use of the phrase for the title of this book is also meant to signal my involvement

in Russia's documentary theatre scene, not only as a researcher, but also as a performer and a participant. As will be discussed in greater detail below, in addition to my work as an observer and a researcher of Russian documentary theatre, I also performed in one of the productions analysed in this study. In my year-and-a-half engagement performing the role of Gerda in the Russian documentary play *Gruz molchaniia* (*Legacy of Silence*, 2010) at Moscow's Sakharov Center, I had the opportunity to witness firsthand how the form was developed and deployed in Russia after the early 2000s. Since that time, I have collaborated on projects with several Teatr.doc artists as a performer, producer, and translator, experiences that have provided additional insight into how the form is distinguished from international documentary theatre practice. With this context in mind, I begin this introduction by reviewing the significance of documentary theatre as it has developed internationally in twenty-first-century culture, before situating the study within its specifically contemporary Russian context.

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## Materials and their properties

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Russia's documentary theatre-makers are far from the only artists invested in the form's ability to address tensions in contemporary culture about truth, justice, history, and notions of identity. As Carol Martin observes, twenty-first-century theatre artists from across the globe deploy documentary theatre techniques in their efforts to challenge the dominance of media narratives and interrogate a 'global condition of troubled epistemologies about truth, authenticity and reality' (2010: 1). In her study *Theatre of the Real*, Martin offers an articulation of the parameters of the form and continues her inquiry into the nature and value of twenty-first-century documentary theatre practice. 'While there may be no universal agreement on individual terms,' Martin writes, 'there is an emerging consensus that 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' (2013: 1). By focusing on moments of rupture between theatre and 'the real' in productions from across the globe, Martin offers her readers insight into the cultural complexities of an art form that makes an overt claim to truth while simultaneously exposing its own artifice at every turn.

Beginning with Derek Paget in the 1980s, more and more scholars of theatre and performance have taken up the topic of documentary theatre, contributing seminal works such as Alan Filewood's *Collective Encounters: Documentary theatre in English Canada* (1987) and Attilio Favorini's *Voicings: Ten plays from the documentary theatre* (1995). In the introduction to their collection, *Get Real: Documentary theatre past and present*, Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson articulate how, in distinction to many late twentieth-century documentary theatre productions, twenty-first-century documentary theatre is 'often as much concerned with emphasizing its own discursive limitations, with interrogating the reification of material evidence in performance, as it is with the real-life story or events it is exploring' (2009: 3). That is to say that documentary theatre in the twenty-first century most often does not claim to represent an objective or an unbiased truth; it rather employs the form in order to confront the complexities of truth and bias in our increasingly mediated relationship to the world around us. In this sense, the resurgence of documentary theatre practice in twenty-first-century culture can be interpreted as a response to what Liz Tomlin calls the 'prevailing climate of scepticism in the final decade of the twentieth century' (2013: 114).

A desire for truth and authenticity and a kind of theatre one can believe in is also the topic of Daniel J. Schulze's 2016 study, *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make it real*. Drawing connections between documentary theatre, immersive theatre, and a genre of performance he calls 'intimate theatre', Schulze argues that together these forms are indicative of both a cultural and personal yearning for an elusive experience of authenticity in contemporary culture. Following on from the age of postmodernism, Schulze suggests, twenty-first-century artists and audiences are seeking out spaces in which an emphasis on interpersonal connection is heightened and, in a sense, unmediated. 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. As debates about 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' fill the airwaves at the time of writing, documentary theatre artists are using the form to confront the complexities of truth, authenticity, and veracity onstage.

Consideration of this body of literature on global documentary theatre practice demonstrates how the form is deployed across cultures to facilitate meaningful conversations between artists and audiences and, in this way, enable the collective renegotiation of cultural narratives. As a live-oral practice, documentary theatre offers its participants a communal space in which the archive of the past is made mutable and accessible in the present. The actors onstage embody the documentary materials, and the pasts they represent are, in this sense, made manifest through performance.

In practice however, as Martin reminds her readers, ‘much of contemporary documentary theatre is written contemporaneously with the events that are its subjects. It directly intervenes in the creation of history by unsettling the present’ (2013: 5). Through its use of documentary materials – interviews, court transcripts, personal artifacts, found texts, etc. – documentary theatre declares openly its attachment to the events of the past and deals intimately in the interpretation of that past. Documentary theatre situates itself along the path between history and memory-making. Its performance in the present echoes the past, and its representation of that past resounds in the present. Martin describes precisely this dynamic when she writes that, ‘More than enacting history, although it certainly does that, documentary theatre also has the capacity to stage historiography’ (2010:1).

In Russia, where the country’s history has for generations been largely a matter for dangerous, even lethal debate, documentary theatre’s capacity both to enact history and to stage historiography is additionally complicated. From early Soviet efforts to shape pre-revolutionary history into a narrative of Socialist inevitability, to Putin’s more recent rebranding of the Second World War as the foundation myth of modern Russia (see Wood, 2011), the country’s official modern history has been continually and inconsistently revised. Access to historical documents and archives has become increasingly restricted since a brief moment of relative transparency in the mid-1990s. The blatant forgery of official documentation and revision of historical texts throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet years has, for many, coupled the public perception of official documentation with an instinctual distrust. The perceived instability of historical narratives in contemporary Russia in conjunction with an accepted scepticism about official documentation has created a cultural climate in which the events of the past are not always tied to their historical moment but rather maintain the ability to reappear as topics of debate in the present day, thereby transforming current public perception of the past. These are some of the factors that shape the culturally specific connotations of documentary theatre in twenty-first-century Russia and are among those I will return to in my consideration of particular performances in the chapters to follow.

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## The status of documents

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Before reviewing the implications of documents and documentarism in their specifically Russian context, it is also worth pausing to reflect on

how significantly our understanding of both the word and the concept of 'document' has shifted internationally since the turn of the twenty-first century. In 1996 a short article appeared in the magazine *Wired* entitled, 'What's a Document', written by former vice-president of the Open Text Corporation, David Weinberger. The article opens with the following question, 'Have you noticed that the word *document* doesn't mean much these days?' In the past, Weinberger contends, 'a document was a piece of paper – such as a will or a passport – with an official role in our legal system' (1996: 112). Ever since the advent of word processors and their appropriation of the word 'document' as the digital file extension for files of varied content, Weinberger suggests, the word has been stretched to the point of meaninglessness. 'The fact that we can't even say what a document is anymore', Weinberger writes, 'indicates the profundity of the change we are undergoing in how we interact with information and, ultimately, our world' (112).

When looking at the 'profundity of change' as it has unfolded across culture and technology since the 1990s, few can lay claim to a more drastic shift than modern-day Muscovites. With internet usage soaring across the country, Russia's social and cultural development since the early 2000s has inextricably coincided with its access to online media sources. The proliferation of Russian New Drama and documentary theatre has developed in parallel with online advancements, the centrality of which can be observed at first glance in the name of the movement's artistic home, Teatr.doc. By using the file extension '.doc' in its name, Teatr.doc founders tie their practice to online cultures such as blogs, Live Journal, and other modes of self-publishing. As Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky point out in their article 'Reality Performance: Documentary trends in post-Soviet Russian theatre', Teatr.doc's overt, self-identified link to modern technology connects their theatrical practice to the strengthening of an 'individual's contribution to the making of news, and taking over this function from the central media' (2008: 298, n. 14).

In her pioneering study *Losing Pravda: Ethics and the press in post-truth Russia* (2017), Natalia Roudakova discusses how the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of capitalism in the 1990s came to shape the fate of Russian journalism in unexpected ways. While the collapse of Soviet censorship may have given way to certain types of freedom of expression, the lack of support from the state meant that individual journalists were largely left to their own devices in their search for a sustainable income within their field. These developments coincided with the introduction of electoral politics and resulted in an unfortunate association between politicians and the press. By the late 1990s, Roudakova argues, Russia's general population treated the field of journalism with an attitude of

cynicism and suspicion, a trend that only really began to turn with the emergence of several independent media organizations in the years following the 2011–13 wave of protests in Moscow and around the country.

In the 2017 World Press Freedom Index, Russia ranked 148 out of 180 countries. That places the country well below Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and South Sudan and only narrowly above the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and Libya. According to the US-based NGO the Committee to Protect Journalists, no fewer than 28 journalists have been murdered for proven political motives since Putin first came into the presidency in 2000. The independent watchdog organization Freedom House confirms that the Russian state or its proxies control the vast majority of the country's national television networks, newspapers, and news agencies and report that the restrictions on freedom of speech have increased significantly since 2012. Opposition journalists such as Sergei Reznik from Rostov-on-Don, for example, have been arrested and imprisoned on false charges, while individual bloggers such as Vadim Tiumentsev from Tomsk and Daria Poliudova from Krasnodar both faced substantial time in prison after writing online posts criticizing the Kremlin's role in the war in Eastern Ukraine, an issue that has been at the heart of much of the country's state-sponsored disinformation campaign since 2014 (*Reuters*, 2015; *Amnesty International*, 2016).

With these developments in mind, we might further our understanding of the complex role documents play in Russia's Kremlin-dominated media landscape, and the significance of alternative sources of information, by looking to cultural theorist David Levy's rebuttal to Weinberger's assertion discussed above. Levy contends that in fact we *can* say what a document is despite the notion's multifaceted forms in contemporary culture. 'What are documents?' Levy writes, 'They are, quite simply, talking things. They are bits of the material world – clay, stone, animal skin, plant fiber, sand – that we've imbued with the ability to speak ... Documents are exactly those things we create to speak *for us*, on our behalf and in our absence' (2003: 23). Conceiving of documents as stand-ins for ourselves and others, as things we create to speak 'on our behalf and in our absence,' offers important insight into some of the paradoxes woven into the fabric of international documentary theatre practice.

To call a performance practice 'documentary' is to imbue it with a claim to truth and to the representation of reality. The categorization carries with it the connotation of authenticity, implying that what happens on the documentary stage is somehow more 'real' than what happens on the traditional theatre stage. Documentary theatre draws on archival resources (found texts, official records, artifacts, interviews, etc.), and in doing so creates the illusion of a traceable, if not reliable, past. As Janelle

Reinelt writes, 'Spectators come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand ... If we want to understand the minimal claim of the documentary, it is simple facticity: the indexical value of documents is the corroboration that something happened, that events took place' (2009: 9–10). Reinelt's description is a succinct articulation of the value and potential efficacy of documentary theatre in performance as it is practiced around the world. However, in Russia, a country where both historical and official documents are thought especially opaque and untrustworthy, the need for corroboration becomes slightly more complex. Moreover, to call one's work 'documentary' in a culture so coloured by the work of Kremlin spin-doctors carries an especially complicated connotation.

Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky have published several key studies interrogating these issues in connection with both Russian documentary theatre and New Russian Drama, including their 2009 book *Performing Violence: Literary and theatrical experiments in New Russian Drama* and their 2010 special edition of *Russian Review*, a collection of essays on the changing nature of documentarism in Russia. In their introduction to the 2010 edition, the authors point out that many artists across the literary and visual arts have revealed a keen interest in documentary forms since the early 2000s. They suggest that the current trend toward reality-based work in Russia is reflective of a shifting attitude toward questions of truth and authenticity and, in that sense, mirrors documentary movements of the country's past, including the 'literature of fact' of the avant-garde arts journal *LEF* (Left Front of the Arts) in the 1920s, and the intense interest in memoirs from former Gulag prisoners in the 1960s. In distinction to these twentieth-century documentary movements, however, Beumers and Lipovetsky argue that Russia's twenty-first-century documentary trend dismisses the notion of an absolute 'Truth' and favours instead 'the micronarratives of "truths" – generational, sub-cultural, personal' (2010: 561).

The prevalence of so-called 'micronarratives of truth' is apparent in numerous productions in Russia's documentary theatre repertoire. For example, this trend is especially evident in director Vsevolod Lisovskii's production *Akyn-opera* (2012) and its sequel *Akyn-opera 2* (2014), in which Central Asian migrant workers share their real-life immigration histories with audiences (see Aizman, 2015). The three performers sit onstage speaking in turns about how they first came to Moscow and how their lives have unfolded in the years since their arrival. They offer candid glimpses of the discrimination many Central Asian immigrants face in Moscow and provide details of daily life as an undocumented migrant worker. Another production that exemplifies an investment in subjectivity



and personal narratives is the production *Obnimi menia* (*Hug Me*, 2014), in which actor-director Konstantin Kozhevnikov solicits input from the audience and from a professional therapist onstage in his repeated attempts to understand the intricacies of his real-life relationship history. A third example is one of Teatr.doc's most popular plays to date, the production *Zazhgi moi ogon* (*Light my Fire*, 2011). Written by Sasha Denisova and directed by Iurii Muravitskii, *Light my Fire* features six actors recounting the biographies of American rock legends Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix while also sharing narratives from their own personal histories in such a way as to spin the stories together and create a musical tapestry of life, love, and loss in contemporary culture.

These are only a few productions that highlight how documentary theatre in Russia need not always be reliant on physical documents for its primary source material. As illustrations, they show how the hallmark of the genre is not an inherent investment in the staging of physical documents. The unifying feature of Russian documentary theatre productions is rather their dedication to the representation of lived experience and an attempt at an honest expression of that lived experience as articulated through spoken text onstage. If, as Levy argues, 'Documents are exactly those things we create to speak *for us*, on our behalf and in our absence' (2003: 23), then pinpointing the substance of the 'document' in Russian documentary theatre can prove a complicated task. Levy's conception of



**Figure 1:** *Akyn-opera 2*, directed by Vsevolod Lisovskii (2014)



**Figure 2:** *Zazhgi moi ogon*, directed by Yuri Muravitskii (2015)

documents as things we create to speak for us, as testimonial evidence of the past, is a notion woven throughout this book and one that highlights the intimate connection between Russian documentary theatre practice and an emphasis on everyday language as represented onstage.

Aside from Beumers' and Lipovetsky's groundbreaking studies, referenced above, extant scholarly material dedicated to twenty-first-century Russian documentary theatre is somewhat limited. Other book-length studies of New Russian Drama that incorporate discussion of documentary theatre practice include Marina Davydova's *Konets teatralnoy epokhi* (2005) and *Kultura zero* (2018), the French edition *Les nouvelles écritures russes* (2010) by Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, and Pavel Rudnev's *Drama pamiati: Ocherki istorii rossiiskoi dramaturgii 1950–2010-e* (2018). Each of these authors suggests, in one way or another, that the first decade of the twentieth century was the most productive and innovative period for documentary theatre and New Drama in Russia; they claim that by the late 2000s the form's vivacity was already beginning to diminish. My research suggests that 2008 was in fact the beginning of a new resurgence of Russian documentary theatre practice and that, since that time, the form has been refined and developed as an explicit path to promoting civic engagement.

Several articles on the topic have appeared in the intervening years illustrating the social relevance of Russia's documentary theatre repertoire,

such as Maksim Hanukai's 'After the Riot: Teatr.doc and the performance of witness,' which appeared in *The Drama Review (TDR)* in 2017. Moscow-based American critic John Freedman has been an assiduous chronicler of contemporary Russian theatre, and until recently his writing constituted much of the only English-language analysis of the New Drama movement in Russia. Most Russian-language analysis on the topic has been generated by Moscow's theatre critics, specifically Davydova and Rudnev as mentioned above as well as Anna Banasiukevich, Elena Kovalskaia, Kristina Matvienko, and others. These authors write primarily for periodicals and together their works are the most comprehensive analysis of the form to date. In April 2015 the Russian language journal *Teatr* published a special edition devoted to documentary forms that includes articles by many of the leading scholars, critics, and theatre historians in the field, including those mentioned above. And in June 2018, the same journal published a commemorative collection of writing by Mikhail Ugarov.

*Witness onstage* is therefore one of the first full-length studies dedicated to contextualizing the rapid growth of Russian documentary theatre within its national and international historical contexts and to analysing the cultural significance of the form. Its findings resonate not only in the context of twenty-first-century Russian art and culture, but within a wider study of the efficacy of theatre as a venue for civic engagement. Through close readings of specific plays, this book focuses on what transpires within the theatre space at the time of performance. It considers the cultural complexities of each play's narratives, and the significance of each production's staging; and it questions the mechanics of the relationship between audience and performance in every play under discussion. Through its investigation into the communicative method applied by Russia's documentary theatre artists, this book illustrates how, by playing the space between that which is real and that which is fabricated, Russia's documentary theatre artists point directly to the fungible nature of history and ideology as it has developed in the post-Soviet Russian context.

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## Staging historiography

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The complexities of how Russia's Soviet past is or is not remembered in the present is a topic that has been taken up by many scholars in recent years, a trend that has corresponded to a growing international interest in the field of memory studies. Theories regarding Russia's 'memory disorder' (Ferretti, 2003) have proliferated, resulting in diagnoses ranging

from nostalgic to ironic (Boym, 2002a; Yurchak, 2008), from compulsive to melancholic (Etkind, 2009, 2013). In this study, I do not pretend to diagnose the state of cultural memory in contemporary Russia, but I do rely on an assessment shared by the scholars referenced above, a belief that the issue of the past and how it ought to be handled in the present is a source of ongoing tension and underlying conflict in post-perestroika Russian culture. As discussed above, historical narratives in Russia are regularly unearthed and undone, revived and rewritten, all in service of the current political administration. The cultural traumas of Stalinism and the meaning of the Soviet past are two issues that remain unresolved for many people in twenty-first-century Russia, a fact that lends the narratives of the past particular power in the present.

In my consideration of Russia's twenty-first-century documentary theatre practice and its relationship to the Soviet past, I place the growing scholarly discourse on the country's contemporary memory culture into dialogue with notions of embodied memory as they have been developed in the works of performance studies scholars such as Joseph Roach, Rebecca Schneider, and Diana Taylor. These writers, among others, have looked to different national performance practices in order to examine how cultural perceptions of the past can be analysed not only in texts and material objects but also through what Taylor calls 'choreographies of meaning' (2003: 20). Taylor draws her readers' attention to the transmission and transformation of cultural memory via 'gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge' (2003:19). She thereby argues that performance can function as an embodied archive through which historical narratives are communicated via physical practice and co-presence. Her study demonstrates how physical performance practices have the capacity to, in a sense, *enact* the narratives of the past that they seek to represent.

Rebecca Schneider also considers important points of connection between performance and cultural memory through analysis of historical reenactment in her book *Performing Remains: Art and war in times of theatrical reenactment* (2011). In doing so she seeks to investigate the 'possibility of temporal recurrence and explore the claim lodged in the logic of reenactment that the past is not (entirely) dead, that it can be accessed *live*' (11; original emphasis). In these works, Taylor and Schneider employ theories of enactment, in part, to argue against the notion that performance is ephemeral, and to demonstrate how the influence of embodied creative acts such as theatre, dance, and performance art linger in the public consciousness (and unconsciousness) long after their moments of exchange between artists and audiences. Moreover, both Schneider

and Taylor enlist the writings of linguist J.L. Austin and his speech act theory to illustrate the nuances of the acts of transference they seek to describe.

In his well-known publication, *How to Do Things with Words* (1975), Austin differentiates between a *constative* speech act, an utterance used to describe or indicate, and a *performative* speech act, an utterance that performs an action through the process of being spoken. His examples include: “‘I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’ – as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony” and “‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*’ – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem’ (5). In both of Austin’s examples the speaking of words performs a transformation. These distinctions are also embedded in my investigation into the active and transformative nature of Russian documentary theatre. Like Austin’s notion of performative speech acts, the plays analysed in this study are instances in which the act of speaking not only indicates or describes various aspects of life in contemporary Russia, but they also exemplify how the act of speaking can in itself constitute an instance of enactment.

My use of the word enactment is therefore drawn from the work of the authors discussed above in that I use it to indicate the transformative capacity of theatre as a verbal and physical practice. It is a notion at the heart of my analysis of Russian documentary theatre and one I will return to in the chapters to follow. I use the word enactment to refer to established notions of performance as an act of social engagement and also to highlight important similarities between Russian documentary theatre and acts of commemoration. Like all documentary theatre-makers, Russia’s theatre artists recall narratives of the past through their recitation of documentary texts in the present. In many productions, actors stand in as surrogates for historical figures or real-life witnesses, a practice that is also commonly employed in commemoration rituals. Like commemoration, documentary theatre often serves to recollect historical narratives and to mark the passage of time since the event being remembered. These are a few of the key commonalities between Russian documentary theatre and commemorative practices that will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 2. In order to lay bare my methodological approach to this material, however, I ought to draw the readers’ attention to a central point of dissonance in my comparison of Russian documentary theatre to rituals of commemoration.

To commemorate someone or something is to remember that person or that event and to remember is to mark a person or an event as absent. In the case of Russian documentary theatre, conversely, performances serve as the vehicle through which the narratives of the past are not

merely remembered but are in fact made present and accessible to the participants of the production in the present moment. That is to say that one primary difference between the performance of documentary theatre in Russia and the practice of commemorative rituals internationally is located in the role the past plays in each of these two collective processes. With this distinction in mind, I propose that the vital link between commemoration and enactment in Russian documentary theatre can be best characterized by the word anamnesis.

A multivalent term derived from the ancient Greek word ἀνάμνησις, anamnesis is commonly translated as ‘remembrance’. In contemporary parlance, the word anamnesis appears primarily in three contexts; medicine, philosophy, and liturgical studies. When used by medical professionals, the word anamnesis refers to a patient’s recounting of personal medical history. In order to assign a diagnosis, doctors elicit relevant information not only from their patients’ written medical records but also from an oral narration sometimes called a clinical interview. According to a 2016 article in the *European Journal of Internal Medicine* entitled ‘The Secret of the Questions: Medical interview in the 21st century’ (Zuin et al., 2016), the rise of electronic filing of patients’ medical records has resulted in a decreased emphasis on the in-person clinical interview for many medical professionals, a development that can lead to a decrease in accurate diagnoses. In order to obtain a patient’s anamnesis, doctors traditionally ask their patients to narrate the details of their symptoms, the timing of their onset, and any external factors patients feel could be contributing to their condition. In the context of this study, I argue that the practice of speaking and listening to the narratives shared in Russia’s documentary theatre productions can also be interpreted as a type of communal anamnesis. Artists and audiences speak their stories to one another and, through the shared practice of performance, seek to gain a greater understanding of their cultural condition.

The second meaning of anamnesis relevant to a study of twenty-first-century Russian documentary theatre practice is drawn from Plato’s use of the word in his two Socratic dialogues, *Meno* (81df-5) and *Phaedo* (74e ff). In the first of the dialogues, Socrates demonstrates to Meno his doctrine of recollection (anamnesis) by arguing that people do not gain knowledge through a process of learning but rather through the act of remembering. For Socrates, the acquisition of this remembered body of knowledge serves as proof of the existence of an immortal soul which has developed ways of knowing before becoming attached to a human body. For the purposes of this study, I suggest that the notion of a body of knowledge accessed exclusively through remembrance is akin to Diana Taylor’s argument that cultural memory can be transmitted across

generations through gesture, movement, and other non-verbal strips of behaviour. For Russia's documentary theatre artists and audiences, the practice of remembering through performance offers participants access to a body of knowledge they may not previously have realized they had. As becomes particularly apparent in my analysis of the plays *Second Act. Grandchildren* in Chapter 2 and *Pavlik – my God* in Chapter 4, the anamnestic practice of documentary theatre in performance provides a space for participants to develop alternative ways of knowing directly through the process of remembering.

The third and final use of anamnesis which comes to bear on this study derives from the word's use in the Eucharist. Appearing in both Luke 22:29 and in I Corinthians 11:24–5, the term is used in the Greek scriptures as a command for remembrance: 'Do this in memory (anamnesis) of me.' Liturgical scholars debate the scriptural connotations of the word (see Gittoes, 2008) but are in agreement that the original term incorporates certain intricacies not immediately apparent in its English translation. As Gregory Dix argued in his influential 1945 study *The Shape of the Liturgy*, words like remembrance and memorial have the 'connotation of something itself absent, which is only mentally recollected' (161). In the context of the Liturgy however, anamnesis has the sense of "recalling" or "representing" before God an event in the past, so that it becomes here and now operative by its effects' (Dix, 1945: 161). As we will observe in the chapters to follow, Russian documentary plays also have the capacity to call up an event in the past in such a way as to make it unusually operable in the present. This, I will argue, is partly a result of the sensitive role the past plays in the present in twenty-first-century Russian culture, and partly in connection to the uniquely non-illusory performance style Russian documentary theatre artists have developed.

By incorporating the notion of anamnesis in my analysis of the Russian documentary theatre repertoire, I ask readers to consider to what degree a reenactment of documents from the past can come to constitute an actual enactment of the historic moment represented, simply in the new context of the present tense. In each of the three instances described here, the term anamnesis, which underlies my vision of Russian documentary theatre as a unique space for civic engagement, provides important insight into how the process of recalling the past in the present has proven an active and transformative practice for artists and their audiences. By giving voice to documents and narratives of the past in the live space of the theatre, Russia's documentary theatre-makers offer audiences exclusive access to the past in the present. This is not to say that documentary theatre practice, or indeed any genre of theatre practice outside Russia, cannot take on anamnestic qualities; they can. However, from my experience



the confluence of cultural and aesthetic particularities of the practice as it has developed in its contemporary Russian context makes documentary theatre an especially evocative form of theatrical recollection. In other words, this book suggests that the practice of theatrical reenactment has, in fact, become an important mode for the enactment of new cultural narratives in twenty-first-century Russian culture.

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## Practice research

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The transformative capacity of Russian documentary theatre was one element of the practice I observed closely during my time performing in the Joseph Beuys Theatre/Sakharov Center co-production *Legacy of Silence* between 2010 and 2011. My work in the show gave me a chance to witness the production process, to participate in discussions about the significance of the play, and to see both artists and audiences sort through their complex relationships to the events of the past. I was asked by director Mikhail Kaluzhskii to participate in the production in autumn 2009. At that time he shared with me the two interviews he had excerpted and translated from the collection *Legacy of Silence*, conducted, collected, and published by the Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On. Rehearsals began the following winter and several staged readings preceded the official opening in 2010. Performing in *Legacy of Silence* offered me an opportunity to experience the unique performance methods of Russia's documentary theatre artists via my own embodied practice, a process I will describe in detail here as it comes to bear on my overall analysis of Russia's documentary theatre repertoire.

As a performer in *Legacy of Silence* I was given very little direction. I found it challenging to gauge the efficacy of my own performance, particularly as it was the first time I had ever performed in Russian. Though I was no stranger to non-illusory performance methods, given my previous work as a writer, director, and performer with the experimental theatre collective the New York Neo-Futurists, I found it disorienting how little attention was paid to notions of character or any portrayal of emotions in rehearsals. The process was a collaborative one, and though Kaluzhskii was the director, everyone involved in the project, including performers and production staff, participated in lengthy discussions about the staging of the show, the editing of the texts, and most other aesthetic choices regarding the overall production. As for direction, I was asked to speak the text and to be present as I did so. There were



occasional directives to pause, for example, to look up or to look away. These were generally drawn from gestures or impulses that arose during our rehearsed readings and constituted the extent of the explicit direction of my performance.

In 2014, three years after starting my academic research on the topic of Russian documentary theatre, I began work on a subsequent documentary theatre project, *Lynndie Sings the Blues*. The project was a collaboration between myself and the German director Georg Genoux. Originally from Hamburg, Genoux studied directing at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts (GITIS) under the direction of Mark Zakharov from 1999 to 2003. In 2002 he became a co-founder of Teatr.doc in Moscow. In 2008 Genoux founded the Moscow-based documentary theatre company the Joseph Beuys Theatre and has since gone on to curate and direct documentary theatre productions throughout Russia and Europe. Our production *Lynndie Sings the Blues* staged an interview with the former American soldier Lynndie England, commonly recognized as the face of the 2004 Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal. Again, I experienced the lack of direction in rehearsals to be uncomfortable. As an actor I often felt uncared for and sometimes unprotected. I was offered no opportunity to explore any 'character' motivation. There was no direction relating to the speaker's emotional journey. There was never any discussion about how the mechanics of my performance were or were not effectively communicating any message the play was intended to relay to its audiences. Genoux and I performed *Lynndie Sings the Blues* for a short run in Cambridge, UK in February 2014 and again in Sofia, Bulgaria the following spring.

In many ways, it was my experience as a performer and co-creator of *Lynndie Sings the Blues*, after two years of academic research on Russian documentary theatre practice, that gave me the chance to reflect upon my work as an actor in *Legacy of Silence* years earlier. What I came to understand at that time, through a combination of practical and theoretical research practices, is that the lack of character building in Russian documentary theatre is completely intentional. In both productions, I spoke documentary texts that were originally spoken by someone other than myself. My task was never to imitate the original speakers or to create the illusion that the words I spoke were being articulated for the first time. My responsibility as an actor in these two productions was rather to embody the texts and thereby make them physically present through the live practice of performance.

This is the dynamic I am referring to when I use the term 'non-illusory' to describe Russian documentary theatre in performance.<sup>1</sup> It is a quality of the theatrical practice that can be observed by any audience member

and is one of the elements that distinguishes how documentary theatre is commonly practised in Russia from how it is often presented in the UK and in the US. Many foundational verbatim and documentary productions with clear social themes, such as the works of Anna Deavere Smith in the US or Alecky Blythe in the UK for example, rely heavily on the characterization of the original speakers. A play's political message is communicated not only through a composition of the documentary texts, but also through the choices an actor and director make about how best to portray a 'character'. In most Russian documentary theatre productions, conversely, there are no characters, only people. Audiences and artists choose to come together to speak and to hear the texts presented onstage. They do not attempt to mimic the original speakers or generate imagined motivations for their actions or words.

As Liz Tomlin discusses in her 2013 study *Acts and apparitions: Discourses on the real in performance practice and theory, 1990–2010*, to apply traditional approaches to characterization in the context of documentary theatre runs the risk of perpetuating precisely the stereotypes a production may seek to challenge. By employing the kind of psychological characterization often seen in more representational performance practices, many documentary theatre artists end up reducing the reality of the testimonies to something more familiar and comprehensible than the complex and sometimes illogical patterns of everyday speech and thought. For example, the original speakers I represented in both *Legacy of Silence* and *Lynndie Sings the Blues* expressed views and perspectives very different from my own. In retrospect, I recognize that my desire to 'play' the roles in a more traditional sense came largely from my own aversion to accepting these figures' experiences. I had the impulse to fictionalize their texts as though they were characters that could be imagined and reimaged in such a way as to explain or justify why they made the choices they made. What I have since come to understand is that to imagine motivation would be to try to make sense of these events from the past, to explain them away into convenient logical categories, when in fact the events under discussion in these two plays are in many ways inscrutable.

Such a stripped-down style of performance, I came to understand, is what Teatr.doc's founders were referring to in the company's motto 'Teatr, v kotorom ne igraiu', a multivalent phrase in the original that can be translated as both 'theatre without the acting' and 'theatre that's not a game'. These are among the insights that my practical research working with members of the Russian documentary theatre community lends my academic research on the topic. Though I may have recognized the unique qualities of this style of performance as an audience member and as a researcher, my work as a performer in these productions offers additional

depth to my interpretation of the plays and the community of artists and audiences in which they were created. My interest in the complexities of this performance style was further sparked in 2015 in my role as a curator and producer of a Ukrainian documentary theatre event hosted by the Gallery of Russian Art and Design (GRAD) in London. The programme included works by Genoux as well as Ukrainian playwright Natalia Vorozhbyt, who studied in Moscow and has worked closely with artists from Teatr.doc for much of her career. Vorozhbyt's contribution to the event was a work-in-progress autobiographical monologue that was, at the time, in development for a planned premiere at the Royal Court.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the staged reading was performed and directed by Royal Court artists who rehearsed with Vorozhbyt the afternoon before the performance.

Observing the rehearsal, I was struck by the conversation between performer and director in which they imagined what the speaker of the monologue might have felt at certain moments in the story and discussed how best to portray the character. This conversation appeared to me particularly paradoxical in part because I had become so accustomed to the non-illusory approaches used at Teatr.doc and other Russian documentary theatre venues, but also because the original speaker who in this case happened to be the playwright was also seated in the rehearsal room. This experience in particular, made clear to me the centrality of a non-illusory performance style to Russia's documentary theatre repertoire. The power of the performances discussed in this book can therefore be located not only in the type of texts performed but, also, and perhaps primarily, in the style of performance the artists employ as they inhabit the theatre space together with their audiences.

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## Generation Doc

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In 2014, Teatr.doc was evicted from their home of twelve years, a small black-box basement theatre in the centre of Moscow that the artists at the heart of the collective had essentially built with their own hands before the theatre opened in 2002. Teatr.doc's eviction was neither the first nor the last indication of the crackdown on arts and culture in Russia since Putin retook his position as President in 2012. The 2011–13 wave of protests in Moscow and around the country played an important role in the development of Russian documentary theatre and will be discussed throughout this book and in particular in Chapter 6. Since that time,

Teatr.doc and documentary theatre practice more broadly have become strongly identified as part of and as supporting the country's anti-Putin opposition movement. This element of Russian documentary theatre, which has come to the fore particularly since 2012, is an important factor that reflects the generative nature of the form as a venue for social change. However, this book's focus is not how Russia's documentary theatre artists have stood up against an oppressive regime (although they have) nor is it a study of documentary theatre as an explicit form of political resistance (although in some cases it is). *Witness onstage* is rather a study of how particular approaches to performance in specific historical circumstances can facilitate a confluence of meaning that offers important insight into the cultural anxieties of that moment.

This is one reason that this book focuses on plays that were produced between 2008 and 2012, a period of time I believe to have been an especially evocative moment for the development of documentary theatre forms in twenty-first-century Russia. According to my 2012 interview with Pavel Rudnev, prior to 2008 documentary theatre in Russia was viewed by many as a fringe activity and something with little relevance to daily life. 'It's just barely in the last three to four years that [Russian documentary theatre] has become any kind of major, top establishment', Rudnev claims. 'Before that everybody thought we were some kind of underground experiment that nobody needs' (Rudnev, 2013). The year 2008 marked a turning point for Russia's documentary theatre artists. Many of the plays to come out of Russia's documentary theatre repertoire at this time took on a newly political tone and yet were not so swiftly identified as a form of protest, since Putin's renewed attack on freedom of expression had not yet come into full effect.

Another reason for the relative success of documentary theatre in contemporary Russia specifically since 2008 is connected to a generational shift of both artists and audiences around that time. One of the most common early critiques of Russian documentary theatre was the assertion that it did not qualify as theatre. According to Rudnev in my 2012 interview with the critic cited above, this popular opinion grew out of a pervasive Soviet notion that art ought to present life as it 'should be', a sentiment introduced and enforced under the Socialist Realist diktat of the Stalin era. This view on what function art was meant to play in society introduced strict guidelines as to what did or did not qualify as art, in the traditional sense. In Rudnev's assessment, the greater the percentage of artists and audience members who enter the theatre without this Soviet-influenced preconception of what art or theatre 'should be', the greater the possibility for experimentation. Of course this generational shift does not apply to all theatre artists and audiences but, as subsequent post-Soviet generations

come of theatre-going age, notions of what does or does not qualify as 'theatre' or 'art' are changing.

Rudnev's hypothesis was certainly proven accurate in my interview with playwright Nina Belenitskaia, one of the youngest writers to have joined the Teatr.doc collective in its early days. Belenitskaia first came to Teatr.doc at the age of 20, when the theatre was in its second season. When I asked her whether or not she considered the work she saw at Teatr.doc to be 'theatre', Belenitskaia responded by saying that at the time Teatr.doc was, to her mind, the *only* theatre and that in her opinion, any productions lacking Teatr.doc's signature, stripped-down style qualified as something other than theatre. 'For me the question wasn't whether or not it was theatre', Belenitskaia explains. 'In fact for me it was quite the opposite I had a whole other experience. Teatr.doc became, to my mind, the main theatre and for me anything that didn't resemble Teatr.doc wasn't theatre' (Belenitskaia, 2013).

Here Belenitskaia is primarily referring to the visual aesthetics of Teatr.doc productions which generally have no sets or costumes or, occasionally, a very sparse stage design, a design choice that follows the non-representational style of performance described above. The visual appeal of Teatr.doc's bare-bones, 'poor theatre' aesthetic is closely connected to the ethos of Russian documentary theatre as a space for the construction of community. Russia's documentary theatre artists eschew the use of footlights or other stage devices that purposefully separate the audience from the performance space. They do not attempt to suspend their audiences' disbelief but rather acknowledge the constructed nature of their theatrical practice. In doing so, Russia's documentary theatre artists manage to mirror and thereby reveal the seams of key constructions in contemporary Russian culture.

In his 2005 study, *Virtual Politics: Faking democracy in the post-Soviet world*, Andrew Wilson discusses how the legacy of Soviet political practice has continued to shape Russia's cultural policy into the twenty-first century. He illustrates the manufactured nature of the Kremlin's 'political technology' and shows how Russia's political elite dominate the country's media platforms and consciously use their supremacy in the press to construct the public they require to remain in power. Wilson writes that in Russia, 'Politics is "virtual" or "theatrical" in the sense that so many aspects of public performance are purely epiphenomenal or instrumental, existing only for effect or to disguise the real substance of "inner politics"' (2005: 47). The country's statecraft is closely tied to its promotion of Putin as a powerful leader, characterized by the staging of his regular media appearances in which he displays both his physical prowess and his deep commitment to traditional values. As the president of the country appears

in magazines and on television re-routeing the migration patterns of endangered Siberian cranes (*Reuters*, 2012), for example, or recovering ancient Greek vases from the floor of the Black Sea (Goscilo, 2013: 201), Russia's theatre artists conversely have sought new ways to root their work in the reality of their actual experiences.

Each of these aesthetic, political, and generational shifts has informed the selection of material I included in this book. The productions discussed in the following chapters have been chosen for their capacity to illustrate variations in the form as well as commonalities within the genre. Their content and styles vary, and yet they all address the four core cultural tensions that I set out at the beginning of this introduction: questions about the evidentiary status of documents, the performance of justice, the sincerity of testimony, and the complexities of Russia's difficult relationship to its twentieth-century past.

Though the emergence of Russian documentary theatre is traditionally traced back to the introduction of verbatim as initiated by the series of Royal Court workshops in 1999–2000, this book's first chapter seeks to refocus the form's own particular heritage, considering how the work of Russia's twenty-first-century documentary theatre artists draws on the example of the country's twentieth century theatre artists and their distinct investment in blurring the boundaries between lived experience and its theatrical representation. Situating Russia's contemporary documentary theatre practice within its national and international historical context, Chapter 1 presents a framework within which to consider why the form has come to prominence in the first two decades of the new millennium in Russia and explores how it operates in its particular cultural and temporal space.

Each of the following chapters conducts close analysis of one or two specific productions from the country's twenty-first-century documentary theatre repertoire. Chapter 2 considers the consequences of Russia's complex memory culture as depicted in the two productions *Legacy of Silence* (2010) and *Vtoroi akt. Vnuki (Second Act. Grandchildren)* (2012). Both productions were created and directed by Mikhail Kaluzhskii in collaboration with director Georg Genoux in the first instance and writer and curator Aleksandra Polivanova in the second. Produced by Moscow's Sakharov Center, these two plays were the first documentary productions to draw audiences into explicit dialogue about the Gulag and Stalinism. By placing the growing scholarly discourse on Russian cultural memory into dialogue with notions of embodied memory developed in performance studies, Chapter 2 illustrates how, through the presentation of historical narratives, Russia's documentary theatre artists offer audiences renewed access to the past via their performance in the present.

Chapter 3 investigates how the notions of justice and testimony come to bear on Russian documentary theatre practice through analysis of a series of productions that use either real or imagined trial transcripts as the basis for their performance texts. This chapter focuses in particular on the 2010 and 2012 versions of the play *Chas vosemnadtsat (One Hour Eighteen Minutes)* in which playwright Elena Gremina and director Mikhail Ugarov incorporate elements of Russia's suspect judicial history in order to implicate their audiences in an active process of witnessing and judging. The play uses verbatim and constructed texts to stage an imagined trial of the prison and medical staff involved in the final days of Russian attorney Sergei Magnitsky, who was arrested on false charges in 2008. Magnitsky was held in pre-trial detention for close to a year. While imprisoned he was denied critical medical treatment, and, as was later revealed, was brutally beaten in the hour preceding his death. With consideration of *One Hour Eighteen Minutes* at its centre, Chapter 3 investigates the interdependent nature of reenacting the past and the performance of justice in the Russian documentary theatre repertoire.

Chapter 4 extends this exploration of the relationship between memory, justice, and belief in Russia's documentary theatre repertoire through analysis of a 2008 production of the autobiographical play *Pavlik – moi Bog (Pavlik – my God)*. In her play, Nina Belenitskaia uses the legend of the all-Soviet pioneer hero Pavlik Morozov as a vehicle through which to explore the resonance of history and mythology in one's experience of everyday life. This chapter proposes that, by utilizing a familiar literary trope and playing on the culture's history of temporal and spatial mutability, *Pavlik – my God* applies the practice of reenacting narratives of the past in order to stage the enactment of historical narratives in the present. It illustrates how the play instigates a process of exposure through which the intimate interlacing of past and present, mythology and reality, is brought to the fore. In its attempt to untangle the threads of national and personal histories, *Pavlik – my God* exemplifies how Russian documentary theatre encourages audience members to question their own presumptions about the past and, in doing so, the nature of belief in the present.

Chapter 5 follows the threads connecting the book's previous chapters by demonstrating how practices of everyday corruption in post-Soviet Russia undermine the notion of belief in contemporary culture. It analyses Talgat Batalov's play *Uzbek* (2012), an autobiographical solo-show about Batalov's experience as an Uzbek migrant at the age of 19. Untangling the themes of the play, Chapter 5 illustrates how, by artfully playing the space between sincerity and irony, *Uzbek* draws out the paradoxical nature of official documents in contemporary Russian culture and, in this way,

addresses the precise complexities of the form in which it is performed. Chapter 5 suggests that *Uzbek* is, in part, a staging of inquiries into the nature of documentation in contemporary Russian culture. In this way, the chapter demonstrates how Russian documentary theatre artists ask their audiences to consider the contradictory status of documents as material testimonies that represent the untrustworthy aspects of official discourse in post-Soviet culture and, simultaneously, as influential arbiters of individual experience. Memory, justice, and belief are the threads that make up the material of Batalov's play, while humour, satire, and sarcasm are alternately woven throughout its performance. Through detailed discussion of Batalov's play, this chapter observes a convergence of each of the principal topics at the centre of this study.

Chapter 6 analyses the series of events that have taken place since Teatr.doc was first evicted from their original performance space in 2014. A twisted narrative that includes a falsified bomb-scare, multiple investigations by the Ministry of Culture, several more evictions, and numerous other instances of bureaucratic bullying by Moscow city officials, the history of Russian documentary theatre took a distinctly political turn after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. Partly as a result of these proceedings, Teatr.doc has gained national and international notoriety as 'Russia's most daring theatre company' (Ash, 2015), a reputation that has influenced the atmosphere in which the work is created. This chapter not only recounts the trials Teatr.doc has faced since the company's initial eviction, it also explores how these events relate to the emergence of certain structures of feeling in Russia in the early 2000s.

As these chapter summaries indicate, the plays analysed in this study are not presented in chronological order. Instead, the chapters are organized in such a way as to allow the themes and styles of each production to speak to the readers and to one another most effectively. The structure of this book and the order of its chapters are presented in this manner to draw clear parallels between the productions discussed, and to gain greater understanding of the way individual productions relate to one another and the sociocultural circumstances in which they were produced.

Despite the variations in subjects and styles within Russia's twenty-first-century documentary theatre practice, *Witness onstage* argues that documentary theatre as a genre necessitates a direct engagement with the events of the past. By inquiring into the communicative method of select performances, I explore how the individual productions discussed operate within their specific cultural and historical contexts. I show how, by performing the events and texts of the past, the theatre artists at the centre of this study offer their audiences the opportunity to engage



historical narratives anew and reconsider how such narratives of the past come to bear on their experiences in the present.

Through in-depth consideration of Russia's documentary theatre repertoire, this book inquires into the nature of the exchange between audience and performance. In it, I ask what it is about documentary theatre that so captured the imaginations of Russia's first post-Soviet generation of theatre-makers and what is at stake in the form's performance of the past in the present. I investigate how the form speaks to the nature of Russia's developing memory culture and, lastly, I ask, what can the practice be said to perform within the context of contemporary Russian culture? It is with these questions in mind that this book begins its investigation of Russia's documentary theatre repertoire and the insight it offers into the interdependent relationships between memory, justice, belief, and sincerity in twenty-first-century culture.

### Notes

- 1 The term 'non-illusory' is borrowed from the rhetoric of the American experimental theatre ensemble the Neo-Futurists, a group with which I worked as a performer, writer, and director in New York from 2004 to 2006.
- 2 The monologue was later staged as the first part of the full-length play *Bad Roads* at the Royal Court Theatre, directed by Vicky Featherstone and premiered at the Jerwood Upstairs in November 2017.