

Staging Lives in Latin  
American Theater



# Staging Lives in Latin American Theater

*Bodies, Objects, Archives*



Paola S. Hernández



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## Introduction



# The Real Onstage

## New Modes of Documentary Theater

On a large white wall in a small theater in Bogotá, Colombia, a graffiti artist draws the lines of someone's face. With sharp, quick, black strokes, details begin to emerge. We watch silently as we take our seats. The sound of the paint being applied at the end of the long pole he uses to reach to the top of the high wall, along with the movements of his artistic, careful hand, mesmerizes us all. No one seems to be interested in reading the program notes; no one is making small talk. The effect of a face slowly revealing itself onstage makes us aware that whatever we are about to watch already has the air of a live event. It is 2016 and the play, *Baños Roma* by Mexican collective Teatro Línea de Sombra, envelops us in theater, document, and event.<sup>1</sup> We will eventually learn the name of the person whose face has emerged, José Angel "Mantequilla" Nápoles, and that the story behind that face documents a perspective on the life of an old boxer who then lived in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, long forgotten by society. Photographs and other documents of his past reveal the highs and lows of an athlete once revered as a hero, but it is his painted face that gives us a sense of presence.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, and a few years before *Baños Roma*, Argentine theater artist and curator Beatriz Catani identified a turn or a shift in how artists understood their work in relation to the political context of an acute economic crisis, specifically the one in 2001 that left many Argentines below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, and in reference to the end of *Menemism*, a decade-long government characterized by adherence to the neoliberal ideals of the Washington Consensus and material excess, another Argentine director, Vivi Tellas, stressed that after two decades of simulations and simulacra, "art needs to find a new way to relate to the real."<sup>3</sup> Artists thus employed documentary techniques as a way to explore issues stemming from real events. In doing so, they destabilized fictional settings, and highlighted the possibilities of how the theater could engage with real events in a more direct way, relying less on traditional realism. Catani and Tellas took this moment to explore how to use real events to envision and stage their

work, taking advantage of the fact that theater, as a live event, already has the privilege of presenting documents in situ. Groups such as Teatro Línea de Sombra and independent artists like Tellas and Catani found provocative ways of working with the real in the imagining and creation of live events.

In his celebrated 1968 manifesto about documentary theater, Peter Weiss contends that “documentary theatre shuns all invention.”<sup>4</sup> Twenty-first-century documentary theater could not fall further from this declaration. Contemporary artists seek to fuse fiction and facts, personal and public narratives, creating a new approach to both official archives and documents. *Staging Lives in Latin American Theater: Bodies-Objects-Archives* analyzes the role of the real in contemporary theater and performance of the twenty-first century in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, as exemplified by the Argentine artists Vivi Tellas and Lola Arias, the Mexican collective Teatro Línea de Sombra, and the Chilean playwright and director Guillermo Calderón. Here I explore the real through the stories, objects, and personal artifacts that performers (both trained and untrained) bring to the stage. In part, the real is evoked by the performers who tell their own stories of the past, using their bodies as documents or as mediums through which other stories get retold and reenacted. This exploration of the real also urges us to rethink how theater’s personal objects-turned-props—such as letters, videos, clothing, and photographs—generate a sense of authenticity, inviting audiences to discover new perspectives or interpretations of the past. The stories I discuss here are either autobiographical or biographical, and some are more testimonial than others, but they all engage the real in retelling personal life stories. I propose that the affective hold of the real, orchestrated through site specificity, autobiography, the innovative use of people with no formal acting training, personal documents, video, and photographs, may affect spectatorship, transform private and public memories, modes of participation, and the kinds of truth claims theater can make. Consequently, I argue that playwrights, performers, and artists use the real to highlight the liminality between fact and fiction, and question discourses of authenticity as well as the veracity of the “archive” as an object of truth.

Scholars Alison Forsyth, Chris Megson, Carol Martin, Jenn Stephenson, Cecilia Sosa, Jordana Blejmar, and Brenda Werth, among many others, have identified a renaissance of documentary practices in Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Latin America. I link this renaissance to both the affective turn and the emergence of the autobiographical in contemporary documentary theater. Specifically, I study the ways in which staged biography or autobiography produce affective bonds with audiences, taking as my case studies stages across Latin America. In my analyses, I show how the staging of personal stories resonates with audiences in a uniquely powerful way. Throughout the book I recall Tellas’s explanations of the emergence of the real on Latin American stages, and I elaborate on their formulations to argue that the need to examine the “real” or the authentic is a way to respond to many other forms of simulacra and virtual experiences of our times.

I use the term “archive” to refer to how material objects—photographs, videos, and documents such as witness reports, legal briefs, and letters—come to life on Latin America’s documentary stages. I explore how these material archives are recodified by live performance in the present; how the dimension of an object’s meaning can be expanded and reinterpreted onstage; and how onstage interpretations of physical objects help to generate an affective relationship between actor and the audience. The idea of the archive is not just what remains, but rather what can be reshaped and even reenacted. I am less interested in the notion of the archive as an inventory of the past and am more interested in understanding how archives themselves help us rethink a performance. In this respect, documentary theater introduces objects from the past and turns them into props and manipulates those objects through the experience or immediacy of performance. It is, perhaps, in Peggy Phelan’s perception of performance as “a strict ontological sense [that] is nonreproductive” that *Staging Lives* finds a productive field to dialogue, because documentary theater always seems to credit or at least function with the archive, making a strong commentary on the role of what remains. Phelan’s assertion that “performance’s being . . . becomes itself through disappearance” is central when thinking about performance’s ephemerality.<sup>5</sup> In other words, how do documents persist despite the ephemeral sense of performance? How does the weight of these objects-turned-props help us understand that while performance maybe ephemeral, documentary theater inhabits the lines between fact, fiction, and the material and the ephemeral, prompting scrutiny and rethinking of their value in the present time?

Yet my attention shifts toward the life of objects as agents that blur that binary between animate and inanimate, and how objects become central *actants*. As Jane Bennett defines it, an actant is “a source of action; an actant can be human or not, or, most likely, a combination of both.”<sup>6</sup> I am particularly interested in envisioning how objects as *actants*, as archival objects that bring in the weight of historical meaning with them, possess “particular frequencies, energies, and potentials to affect human and nonhuman worlds.”<sup>7</sup> In documentary theater, where objects become props, questions about authenticity, affect, relationality, and history arise. Thus, exploring objects-turned-props as actants, with their own agency, allows me to delve deeper into the meaning of documentary theater as an archival space that performs. In this respect, I concur with Rebecca Schneider’s concept of new materialisms and “the agency of objects and the forces of materialization [that] have increasingly blurred the borders modernity had built up between the animate and the inanimate.”<sup>8</sup> Documents and objects become part of the script and are actants in themselves as well as in the hands of the actors that use them. Theater practitioners have relied on this live relationship between objects and props, the real and the staged. It is precisely within this tension that objects-turned-props become their own entities, with agency and historical value that put forth the documentation of the play at stake.

What is at stake, however, when documentary theater revives the archive? How is the past entwined with the present? The relationship between performance and archive, as Diana Taylor states, is indeed between the two entities she defines as “the archive of supposedly enduring materials . . . and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> Her point of view deals directly with the political, cultural, and juridical consequences of evidence and information that gets lost due to the lack of documentation. If a large part of the evidentiary archive in Latin America has been lost or disappeared, she asks, and if performance’s ephemerality is not credited with transmitting vital knowledge, then whose stories, memories, and traditions get retold?<sup>10</sup> While her study does not refer specifically to documentary theater, she underscores how the manipulation of the archive, along with its mediation, reinterpretation, and embodiment, can shed new light on understanding the past.<sup>11</sup> This is precisely where the new documentary theater of the twenty-first century positions itself: at the crossroads between fact and fiction and through the possibilities of creating and rethinking documentary materials. It is not the fact that this theater revisits historical characters with a fresh perspective. The artists studied in this book do not just examine historical figures with a new lens; they search for meaning beyond the importance of well-known names and instead turn to everyday stories—often retold by witnesses such as war veterans or children of the disappeared—that illustrate history’s lost, forgotten, or unacknowledged experiences.

Within the study of documentary theater, it is also helpful to consider Rebecca Schneider’s formulations about the archive in relation to performance. The archive, consisting of objects such as records, legal documents, and even bodies, also produces a sense of loss or confusion. She challenges the binary between the remains (what the archive constitutes) and the disappearance of performance (theater), with a provocative observation: “The archive itself becomes a social *performance* of retroaction.”<sup>12</sup> In documentary theater, artists and playwrights borrow the objects from the past to bring new understandings to present life and expose the ways in which testimony, reenactments, and embodiment onstage transform the archive, which in turn might lead to new rules or conditions in the present: for instance, a lifting of previous amnesties, new prosecutions on state-sponsored torture, or more humane treatment and policies that protect rather than persecute migrants.

The central importance of objects-turned-props relies on how objects from the past contain their own meaning and are reimagined in the present. It is because of the potential of the stage and the intervention of the actors and people not formally trained in the theater that objects become documentary, and as such, they establish specific links between memory, community, and historical context. As Andrew Sofer contends, “Stage props become a concrete means for playwrights to animate stage action, interrogate theatrical practice, and revitalize dramatic form.”<sup>13</sup> Props, then, are tools “acquir[ing] independent signifying force.”<sup>14</sup> As they are triggered by actors, props become

alive. However, what type of different meaning does an object that carries a certain sense of authenticity from the past outside of the theater relay? The presence of authentic objects used as props indicates a different relationship to the stage. In a recent study about how documentary objects are their own entities of the past and present, Shaday Larios introduces the theory of catastrophe as a way to underscore the semiotic value of the objects' representation and their resignification through the creation of a "third poetic space."<sup>15</sup> In this new reformulation of objects, some have survived catastrophic events, such as dictatorial governments, disappeared people, or the remains of dead migrants, but they are all part of a material culture that allows for theater to engage with the spectral connection of what they carry. All the chapters in this book relate to the existence and reliability of objects onstage. In some cases, as with Lola Arias, actors wear the clothes that once belonged to their now disappeared parents. Or, in the case of Vivi Tellas, her plays allow for people with no formal training in the theater to build their stories through a close, affective connection to personal objects. After all, documentary theater relies on the materiality of archives and objects that bring in their own sense of participation. The goal of introducing objects onstage is not to make the object look alive but, rather, to understand the logic of the object within the nature of the story onstage.

### Documentary Theater and Its Precedents

The new conception of the real in twenty-first-century Latin American theater that I examine in this book departs from a twentieth-century tradition of European and Latin American documentary theater. Taking into account the historical trajectory of the European-style of this genre is important for understanding how documentary theater evolved and was received in Latin America in the twentieth century. With the creation of the short-lived Proletarian Theater in the early 1920s, Erwin Piscator endeavored to "aim to forget about 'Art' and build an ensemble on the basis of common revolutionary convictions."<sup>16</sup> Piscator's technological innovations were central to the beginnings of what would become documentary theater. He used moving images, photographs, and projections to denounce police repression and to make his audience aware of the political context of the time. In other words, Piscator adapted what was called an "elastic montage" by which he used images (posters, news clippings, and manifestos) through different projectors so that the visual impact of political events could be brought in to the theater.<sup>17</sup> His pursuit of what was known as "Total Theatre," designed by Walter Gropius but never built, envisioned a theater in the round surrounded by acoustic and mechanical devices. His documentary technique, with heavy political overtones, was to be directed at the bourgeoisie so his theater would be considered revolutionary. The legacy of his "epic dramas,"

which Bertolt Brecht would later develop further as epic theater made use of episodic scenes, montage, projections, and a lack of method acting. Piscator decried a Stanislavskian acting method, claiming that the actor was part of a team or collective, “one who draws his whole strength from his involvement in the common cause. In course of time, his attitude will produce a new form of acting.”<sup>18</sup> However, as Meyerhold pointed out, Piscator’s ideas about acting never came to fruition, and it was not until Brecht that “the concept of epic, ‘gestic acting’ evolved.”<sup>19</sup>

Piscator’s pioneering documentary techniques paved the way for Brecht’s epic theater. Brecht viewed Piscator as a “master builder” and “a contributor to that ‘great epic and documentary theatre.’”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Piscator’s innovative approach to technology, his conception of the role of politics in the theater, and thus the creation of a revolutionary theater marks the beginning of what Brecht would further develop in his epic theater. In 1968, influenced by Piscator and Brecht, Peter Weiss wrote “Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre,” in which he stipulates the goals of documentary theater, what constitutes this type of genre, and how it can awaken society to understand the hidden political agendas of the media. Committed to the political and the need to document global sociopolitical events, such as the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Che Guevara, massacres in Indonesia, and preparations for the Vietnam War, documentary theater revealed itself to be a powerful genre.<sup>21</sup> For Weiss, documentary theater both denounced and made use of the political nature of theater and served as a venue for keeping the public well-informed. For him, manipulation of the archive was less central; the goal was to utilize the documentary mode to fulfill a specific political function, mainly that of denunciation of the mass atrocities of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> His use and theorization of documentary theater held media accountable for ignoring certain events while highlighting others. This is evident in *The Investigation* (1965), a play where his predilection for employing the tribunal structure to re-create documentary theater is prevalent. Here the audience could understand the dramatic tension as well as the authentic nature of the documents.

Later, Hans-Thies Lehmann argues that the theater of the latter half of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first is “post-Brechtian,” by which he means a “theatre which knows that it is affected by the demands and questions for theatre that are sedimented in Brecht’s work but can no longer accept Brecht’s answers.”<sup>23</sup> Lehmann coins the now-acclaimed term “postdramatic theater” to describe a theater that inherited Brecht’s “consciousness of the process of representation” but makes a point to leave behind “the political style, the tendency towards dogmatization, and the emphasis on the rational.”<sup>24</sup> Certainly, Lehmann’s description of postdramatic theater has been a productive contribution to considering how theater can reclaim and reconceptualize the real, by “treading the borderline . . . by permanently switching . . . between ‘real’ contiguity (connection with reality)

and a 'staged' construct."<sup>25</sup> In line with Lehmann's postdramatic theater, new approaches to the real onstage are less interested in engaging the political and are more focused, instead, on studying the nuances of historical reinterpretation through a new lens.

Even as Lehmann refers to how documentary theater can be considered a predecessor of postdramatic forms by enhancing its dramatic techniques with authentic legal documents and court proceedings as props, he contends that documentary theater nevertheless falls into the trap of the dramatic. He notes that in "documentary theatre little depends on the outcome of the process of investigation or that of arriving at a verdict."<sup>26</sup> I would argue, however, that many playwrights and artists in Latin America have found a way to make documentary practices be more than just dramatic plays. Depending on how playwrights engage documentary practices in their work, plays have the potential to become more than theater, and the mere dramatic. For example, Argentine playwright Lola Arias, Chilean playwright Guillermo Calderón, and the Mexican theater collective Teatro Línea de Sombra develop methodologies to documentary theater that transcend the dramatic, have a concrete social impact, and sometimes even result in changing the law.<sup>27</sup> This book shows the significant ways in which new documentary theater of Latin America has departed from the European documentary tradition, showcasing how artists in Latin America have brought about a profound way to postulate new ideas about their own documentary practices and beyond.

In Latin America, a more traditional documentary theater creation in the collective reached its peak during the 1960s and '70s as Augusto Boal developed the foundations of what would later become the "Theatre of the Oppressed," a theatrical doctrine that proposed a more personal and revolutionary look toward theater.<sup>28</sup> Historical reflection in documentary theater was also promoted by Vicente Leñero in Mexico, who wrote his highly acclaimed play *Pueblo rechazado* (*Rejected People*) in 1968. The playwright states that theater provided an ideal vehicle for him to document the violent events that took place that same year.<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that this particular piece premiered only three years after *The Investigation* (1965) by Weiss, calling attention to possible connections, or influences, that European theater had on Latin American productions.<sup>30</sup> During this period, there was also an increase in the number of collective groups that sought to interrogate their surroundings by means of documentary theater. Works such as those produced by the Teatro Experimental de Cali (TEC), directed by Enrique Buenaventura (1955); the group La Candelaria, founded and directed by Santiago García (1966); the Peruvian groups Yuyachkani, directed by Miguel Rubio (1971); Cuatrotablas, directed by Mario Delgado (1971); the Teatro ICTUS in Chile (1955); and el Escambray in Cuba (1968), among others, encouraged the development of a theater rooted in the collaborative expression of social concerns.<sup>31</sup> This theater attempted to create a space from the margins, offering seldom-heard voices a way to express themselves through

a critically engaged dramaturgy. Pedro Bravo Elizondo notes that the documentary theater of the 1960s and '70s intended to establish a place for collective forms of testimonial theater.<sup>32</sup> This genre was also highly concerned with the historical and accurate representation of facts. However, as Silka Freire claims, some of these collective groups that worked with documentary techniques saw their work as an alternative way to promote information that the media was not providing, allowing for a change in perspective and knowledge of history.<sup>33</sup> The groups above had a strong political commitment and worked tirelessly to achieve a theater that resisted commercial interests, one that would allow for experimental and creative approaches to flourish.

### New Pathways of Documentary Theater

The long history of documentary theater shows that it is clearly not a new genre; however, younger generations of theater practitioners draw on the ambiguities present in this long tradition to reflect critically on the process of production and reception of their work. As Jenn Stephenson claims, “The core distinction between millennial theatres of the real and their more traditional documentary predecessors lies in profound postmodern, post-structuralist doubt.”<sup>34</sup> Today, the use of documentary techniques has proven to be both contagious and prolific in Latin America. It has provided artists and theater collectives with a new creative paradigm for exploring a wide array of topics, from private and personal issues to charged political and traumatic public events. The “theater of the real,” in Carol Martin’s words, is indebted to the documentary theater that emerged in the 1920s, expanded in the 1960s, and reached enormous popularity in the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11. *Staging Lives* turns the lens to Latin America—where the strategies of truth-telling as an effective intervention in the present have been developed to their full potential through the manipulation of technology and new access to media. Latin American theater and performance have had a major impact in reshaping, through the manipulation of the document, what truth-telling means, and thus have demonstrated how our perception of the present is shaped by the ways in which we recount and document history. Martin stipulates that the study of this type of theater of the real, or documentary theater of the twenty-first century, goes beyond the document and its historical referent. It provides a new approach to the reinterpretation of history—one with the potential to expose the “truth that many times conflicts with other narratives.”<sup>35</sup>

*Staging Lives* demonstrates how documentary theater of the twenty-first century analyzes political issues through the use of creative and imaginative new strategies. I draw on Martin’s approach to this theater as one that both “acknowledges a positivist faith in empirical reality and underscores an epistemological crisis in knowing truth.”<sup>36</sup> *Staging Lives* proposes that Latin

American artists who engage with documentary theater push the connections between the judicial system and the stage in a more direct way, using a tribunal method onstage to question what or how documents have influenced people's lives. Lola Arias and Guillermo Calderón's works examine the fictional and political dimensions of testimony onstage while showing, too, examples of staged testimony that have real legal implications outside of the theater in recovering the truth about the past. They each present personal stories as archives that later become instrumental in influencing the law. In Arias's example her work allows one of the performers to make a legal case against a father who was a perpetrator during the Argentine military dictatorship. For Calderón, the law and its interpretation are essential to his vision of documentary theater.

The archive possesses the "unknowable weight" of the past, as Jacques Derrida suggests, and casts doubt on the future as a ghostly image. He explains that the "archive is only a notion, an impression," and he considers it the very concept of the future of the conditions of the archive.<sup>37</sup> How does the theater, in presenting an archive of the past, grapple with this "unknowable weight"? How do witnesses of atrocity contend with the political and traumatic past, and how do second-generation children remember and retell their stories? Contemporary Latin American documentary theater reflects on the notion famously put forth by Jean Baudrillard that simulation has replaced truth and the referent.<sup>38</sup> These artists reassess the role of documentary theater by turning the lens toward an ironic, sometimes even humorous perception of how the real is just another strategy for destabilizing the archive. Documentary theater artists, then, create their own aesthetics, their own fluid relationship to how archives are and may not be part of the repertoire. Taken collectively, and as detailed in this book, these Latin American theater practitioners pose questions about the value of the archive by appropriating new practices that blend fact and fiction. How can witness testimony both become more persuasive in this new theater of the real and at the same time more subject to scrutiny as fiction and fact blend in the telling of stories onstage? How do artists find new ways to revive and energize the past in the present?

*Staging Lives* explores how this new approach to theater addresses the fragility and imperfection of memory deriving from traumatic experience. It also focuses on the provocative use of real archives to understand history and the present through the manipulation and interpretation of documents. In the works of the playwrights and artists, I am interested in analyzing the communion between the notion of Derrida's "authorized deposit" and theater, as well as the blurry lines between the concrete and historically situated with the ephemeral art of performance, imagination, and creation. While the idea of the real is foundational for this type of artistic genre that draws from interviews, videos, hearings, and photographs, also central to this research is a consideration of how the process of editing, selecting, and organizing this material develops into artistic practice. Thus, even though documents appear

to demand factual legitimacy, the editorial process of selection undertaken by these artistic practitioners is not always transparent, thereby emphasizing the duality between what is real and what is represented as such. Broadly speaking, in these works, the impact of the archive lies in its liminality between factual and fictive, public and private. Documentary theater in Latin America has evolved from its traditional European roots over the years into an exploration of the autobiographical, taken up by a new generation of theater makers in Latin America who present documents self-consciously and sometimes ironically to draw attention to how the legitimacy of testimony is constructed and questioned.

To document is to archive. Yet to perform the archive is to bring the document back to life. The use of autobiography onstage accompanied by personal objects, including letters, audio or video recordings, photographs, clothing, or the actual presence of a witness-as-actor, contribute to the archive, whose authenticity is constantly celebrated and questioned through performance. One effect of the autobiographical element has been to give agency to those other voices that are rarely heard or considered on the stage, such as undocumented migrants or refugees. It is at the intersection between self and others, between objects and documents, that the real onstage is exposed and interrogated. On the other hand, there seems to be a need to reconsider the archive not as something from the past but instead, as Derrida insists, as the “question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of responsibility for tomorrow.”<sup>39</sup> This temporal projection of the archive with a future and its possibilities allows contemporary artists and theater practitioners who use documentary techniques to express their work not as a repository of the past but as a method to imagine possible futures. The autobiographical mode, in linking past lives to the present and future, is crucial for both narrating the past and envisioning the future.

### The Autobiographical Stance

The role of the autobiographical onstage has a direct relationship to how lives are part of a document and how the reality of someone’s life enhances the aura of the story. The autobiographical has been an important trend in a world where we are surrounded by reality shows, personal blogs, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, selfies, and a “culture of me or I” that obsesses with the personal.<sup>40</sup> Autobiographical stories help us understand the “other” in front of us and may even help us relate to or to empathize with their stories. They also hold the promise of truth-telling, of something simple and possible in a world of virtual realities. However, it is also clear that the need to stage autobiographical stories foments the interaction with a human face, an opening for marginalized voices to have a space, to be seen or heard. According to Jill Dolan, when staged, autobiographical plays “reveal performativity” and

provide a subtle way to examine questions of identity, subjectivity, and memory.<sup>41</sup> In fact, autobiographical plays can be profoundly political by using the first-person narrative as part of a national identity as well as an affirmation of how their lives might or might not fit within the hegemonic parameters. By promoting the “I” as the central point of departure, works “use the facts of a personal story to make us rethink the concept of *self* and the relationship of *self* to other.”<sup>42</sup> Among other things, they serve to make lives central, no matter how mundane the stories might be.

In the theater, the embodiment of the actor’s own story, the physicality of his or her body combined with first-person narration serves as a powerful mechanism for truth-telling. The majority of the stories told in first-person meet the criteria for what Philippe Lejeune, in his writing about narrative, calls the “autobiographical pact,” by which “the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical.”<sup>43</sup> He studies the notion of possible ambiguity in the way this genre creates room between how it is read (or performed) by creating an “illusion.” He adds that “the autobiographer incites the reader to enter into the game and gives the impression that an agreement has been signed by the two parties.”<sup>44</sup> Though Lejeune conceived of his pact specifically in relation to literature, I find it useful when applied to theater because of the fruitful space he creates by calling attention to the possibility of artistic simulation in autobiography. It is precisely his awareness of the “real” manifestations of this autobiographical pact that documentary theater provides. More concretely, he posits that “the paradox of the literary autobiography, its essential double game, is to pretend to be at the same time a truthful discourse and a work of art.”<sup>45</sup> This “pact” or this “game at pretending” to be part of a truthful genre and simultaneously allowing for fiction to be part of this equation positions contemporary documentary practices in a rich and productive terrain. In other words, autobiographies “are *referential* texts. . . . Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. It is not ‘the effect of the real,’ but the image of the real.”<sup>46</sup>

Yet the use of the autobiographical mode in the theater complicates how stories are performed and perceived. For instance, there is the constant duality between what the theater does as a fictional setting and what the autobiographical brings to the stage with its promise of authenticity. The reliance on the autobiographical mode for some of the playwrights tends to reinforce this ambiguity and expand the gray zone into a multisemiotic field of possibilities, what Susan Bennett defines as “a frenzy of signification.”<sup>47</sup> When a documentary mode is utilized, either through photographs, videos, or letters, the mere fact that the objects are presented as “documentary” gives them authentic aura. And as Bennett states, no matter how much editing, cutting, adaptation, or selection of these objects is done, when we see the bodies onstage, we give them the agency of truth.<sup>48</sup>

In this book, artists use a variety of performers to retell their stories. Names and last names are frequently used in documentary theater as a

technique for strengthening claims of authenticity and as a meaningful tribute to the individuals. Even if we have actors in front of us, many times, their names are an important part of the story, something that cannot be negated or changed. This also brings up an important point about many of the works that deal with documentary material that can only be staged with the same people or cast unless the play is modified accordingly. As Lola Arias states, “In documentary projects the actors are irreplaceable,”<sup>49</sup> therefore stories are ingrained in and within the personal. There is no denying the central role the body of a performer, or actor-witness can have when the autobiographical mode is implemented. Not only do their objects-turned-props onstage add agency to their stories, but it is within their own body-as-archive that produces other possibilities of understanding about how new documentary theater creates a sense of truth and agency.

### Affect and the Audience

As bodies and objects take a central role in how stories are documented onstage, there is a tension or, in Nicholas Ridout’s words, a “vibratorium,” a kind of “radiation” by which the performance can transmit affect between actors and spectators.<sup>50</sup> I am indebted to Ridout’s idea of a vibratorium as a way to explore and understand audience emotions and reception because he links how theater can be a central point of departure to experience an “energy exchange” that is part of a feeling, an aura that cannot be represented.<sup>51</sup> Influenced by Teresa Brennan’s study of the transmission of affect, Ridout contends that the theater, as a sensory threshold, has the ability to bring the audience together in a “momentary communion.”<sup>52</sup> In a similar vein, Jill Dolan describes what she terms “utopian performatives”: “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.”<sup>53</sup> Documentary theater practices offer the audience a unique opportunity to experience utopian performatives, where facts and fiction intermingle.

Modes of belonging and the exploration of the intimate worlds of ordinary people are key to how contemporary documentary practices have evolved. Thus, affect studies propelled by how emotions are felt in the theater, how the transmission of affect can detonate other feelings, and how new forms of intimacy and belonging can create new sites of performance that highlight conviviality and community are central. Throughout the chapters, there is a connecting thread that delineates how personal stories relate to the audience in a more direct fashion. I am especially interested in studying how the personal connections that documentary theater invigorates a closer, affective

relationship to the audience's subjectivity. In this type of theater, a sense of connectedness to a witness or a survivor of a traumatic war, or even a biography of a peculiar person, can register a particular kind of empathy. For this reason, I am mindful of how ideas such as Dolan's utopian performances, Brennan's transmission of affect, and Jill Bennett's extraction of affective encounters from emotional identification question and highlight the relationship between art and affect. My intention here is to look at the processes of theatrical practices that allow for stories—some traumatic, some nostalgic, some humorous—to negotiate meaning through affective engagement.

### New Documentary Theater

The concept of a new documentary theater derives from a genre that has its roots in political theater from the 1920s and after but takes new directions and develops new lines of interrogation, ones that tackle history, social issues, and politics from the end of the twentieth century into the twenty-first. This tendency toward searching for and utilizing documents or authentic materials, perceived as having historical, political, or personal value, remains part of new documentary theater, just as it characterized Piscator's historical model. However, although this new documentary theater demonstrates continuity with the idea that archival materials undergird the structure of a piece, it examines how fiction, editing processes, and the selection of materials showcase liminality and the blurry definitions of documentary versus fiction. This has resulted in a theater style that assures a certain level of legitimacy surrounding the events portrayed, while also showcasing the creative liberties that are part of generating theater. Even though the interest in social justice remains strong, some new documentary theater manifests itself in relation to political concerns with less urgency than the one of the 1960s and '70s. That is, this new documentary theater has created a space in which private and personal stories are welcome, the autobiographical tale, the "I" as the centerpiece, a connection forged between the person and their relation within and beyond the sociopolitical context.

More concretely, we can think of new documentary theater in the following ways:

It works with advanced technology, via multimedia effects (video replay, superimposition of images, sonic stimuli, the computer-generated sound or image); this theater achieves an added layer of creative or fictional creation.

It utilizes documents (interviews, letters, photographs, newspapers) as part of the archive to delve into not only political topics but also topics that are social and personal in nature. The importance of the documents resides in the way they are manipulated, how they

become open to alternative meanings and possibilities to question their presumed inherent authenticity.

It welcomes new forms of acting, often brought onto the stage from a perspective of a nontrained actor, who does not belong to the theater world. This blurs the line between person, performer, and witness, putting greater emphasis on the value of the autobiographical story line and less on actor methods or scripts.

It blurs lines between commonplace reality and creative inspiration from the world of fiction, prompting uncertainty about the value of documentation as representative of “authenticity.”

It emphasizes an autobiographical mode, in (re)telling one’s personal stories, in situating them within a broader political and historical chronology.

It centralizes on self-referentiality as part of constructing a fictionalized version from documented sources.

It distances itself from the seriousness of historical documents in a way that invites humor, doubt, and play and/or even chance as possible outcomes.

It embraces the aesthetic value of creation. In many circumstances, documents and archival materials are transformed into props, in part, recodifying their value and signification.

This series of descriptions, which is definitely not exhaustive, illustrates to some extent what Latin American artists wrestle with when conceiving these plays. It also proposes the extent and prolific terrain that allows artists to create. The emphasis on the duality between fact and fiction evokes a new space for pondering and staging new possibilities and new theories about the past, the present, and the future. Thus, objects, bodies, and archives are animative in this new space; their codified value as evidence from the past plays with the many possible interpretations and manifestations in the present.

New documentary theater calls attention to the fact that there is no original object or event that one can go back to, since its authenticity can be questioned. The ephemeral nature of theater initiates a journey of twists and turns, an approximation to theater that is rooted in supposed originals or authentic elements, but consciously fuses the past with an imagined future. According to Martin, “Documentary theatre emphasizes certain kinds of memory and buries others,” while, at the same time, re-creating documents onstage, the aspects that Diana Taylor considers part of the repertoire (gesture, movement, sensations, proximity), which need to be activated by other bodies, or different time periods.<sup>54</sup> The intended effect is to create a separate articulation that conjures the original source via the staged events of the

present. In this sense, new documentary theater foresees ways of creating fiction from the ambiguity and friction that arise in bringing documents to the stage.

Under this configuration, Latin American artists have developed a variety of ways of imagining “theater of the real.” Autobiographical theater, for example, has been a strong representative of how documentary modes inhabit stages, as well as a kind of theater that is deeply connected to re-creations. In the words of artist Lola Arias, this approach is what she first conceived of as “remakes,” a form of re-creating the past in order to produce new perceptions by means of embodying the documented events from the present toward a future that she now calls “reenactments.” Speaking specifically about *Mi vida después*, Arias affirms that the play “maneuvers at the edges of what is real and what is fiction, the meeting between two generations, a re-make as a way to revisit the past and change the future, the crossroads between a country’s history and personal experience.”<sup>55</sup>

According to Allison Forsyth and Allison Megson, “Much documentary theatre has functioned to complicate notions of authenticity with a more nuanced and challenging evocation of the ‘real.’”<sup>56</sup> Creative initiatives of twenty-first-century documentary theater draw attention to the search for the “original” and subsequently manipulate it onstage, emphasizing notions of recycling and/or copying a copy. Artists such as Vivi Tellas, Lola Arias, Federico León, Mariano Pensotti, Beatriz Catani (Argentina), Guillermo Calderón, Manuela Infante (Chile), Mariana de Althaus, Sebastián Rubio, Claudia Tangoa (Peru), and groups like Mapa Teatro (Colombia), Lagartijas tiradas al sol, Teatro Ojo, or Teatro Línea de Sombra (Mexico), are excellent examples of theater makers who manipulate original documents to offer a new take on events, or, at times, so that the audience learns about social issues that have an impact on people’s lives, including their own.

The fluidity between what is artificial and what is real, what is documented and what is imagined, results in a gray area that many of the above-mentioned artists have chosen to mine as fertile terrain for their work. In this ambiguous zone, artists play with a theater that capitalizes on a document’s authority while also imbuing it with sense of artifice. As I note in chapter 1, Vivi Tellas has called it the “Umbral Mínimo de Ficción” (UMF; Minimal Threshold of Fiction): a unity of poetic forms that she creates to signal these moments in which “reality itself seems to become theater” as a way of thinking about how this kind of theater works in a liminal space:<sup>57</sup>

The UMF is a mechanism that allows Tellas to conceptualize her interest in *looking for theatricality beyond the theater*—expressions that she utilizes to describe the driving force behind this stage of her work—leaving the dichotomy of fiction-nonfiction and entering spaces of intersections and uncertainty to explore a new center of attention: people and their worlds.

(El UMF es una herramienta que le permitió a Tellas conceptualizar su interés por *buscar la teatralidad fuera del teatro*—expresión que utiliza para describir el motor de esta etapa de su trabajo—saliendo de la dicotomía ficción—no ficción y adentrándose en espacios de cruce e indefinición para explorar lo que constituye el centro de su atención: las personas y sus mundos.)<sup>58</sup>

As previously noted, one of the most powerful aspects of new documentary theater has been the increase in autobiographical productions and the tendency to put the first-person experience at center stage. In some cases, in the work of Tellas, for example, people draw on their own autobiographical archives and generate “shared experiences” through the telling of their own life stories.<sup>59</sup> Her interest in documenting the lived experience of the everyday person reinforces the autobiographical nature of her work. Tellas interweaves theatrical practice and narrative in her presentation of their stories. Some recent documentary theater is motivated by the desire to create productions where the possibility of risk or failure exists. For Tellas, seeking theatricality in “the real” is a way to reveal fragility and a lack of guarantees; it is her own political position to expose this.<sup>60</sup> The probability of failure enters into staging from various sources: from the inclusion of people who are not formally trained actors, those whom Tellas calls “interpreters,” to having animals or children onstage, or even the simple act of working with the “interpreter” to express emotion and expose personal stories.

*Staging Lives* is informed in part by personal interviews with playwrights and directors whose voices and perspectives are central to the analysis of the plays, as well as by my own interpretation of their work. At times, I depend on theater programs, videos of the plays or rough drafts of texts. However, I have been privileged to see live versions of almost all the plays included here. Specifically, I offer a new lens for reading documentary theater of the twenty-first century through the work of artists from Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. I study how artists generate a more nuanced approach to dealing with and manipulating the documentary mode in their practices. In many cases, their own theorization of the possibilities of this genre rejects, transforms, or expands on what their European counterparts have done in the past. But these artists ultimately forge their own paths in exploring the real onstage from a Latin American perspective.



I have chosen to study specific artists who engage with the real and the new documentary theater techniques in order to tell a wide range of stories belonging to children of the disappeared, convicts, or migrants who cross the Mexico-U.S. border, everyday people and people whose voices are often not heard. The variety of my choices is a conscious selection to display the

expansive panorama of new documentary theater. To this end, each chapter is organized as a case study and each requires a distinct analysis to understanding of the political, social, and contextual framework. There are also some conscious omissions, such as the Mexican collective *Lagartijas tiradas al sol*, which has recently been carefully studied by Julie Ann Ward in *A Shared Truth: The Theater of Lagartijas tiradas al sol* (2019), and the Colombian theater group *Mapa Teatro*, whose work has also been thoroughly analyzed by Diana Taylor and Ileana Diéguez, among others.<sup>61</sup> The case studies I have chosen traverse four specific manifestations of documentary theater: autobiographical stories of everyday life that are not explicitly political; first- and second-generation approaches to traumatic biographies; socially committed explorations of human rights; and the aftermath of the left-wing militia movement during and after Salvador Allende. Each chapter showcases the unique ways in which artists engage with their work—some use film or video installations as another approach to documentary, while others work with a more didactic and in-person event as a social and political commitment. But all chapters work with the idea of how actors and audiences relate their personal stories through intimate and affective relationships.

Chapter 1 studies the concept of “biodrama,” coined by Argentine director Vivi Tellas, and its influential impact on Argentine and Latin American theater. As a trailblazing artist, curator, and director, in her work Tellas opens the possibility of understanding documentary theater through the personal lives of everyday people, claiming that every person is and has an archive. Her search for the Minimal Threshold of Fiction clearly defines a gray zone that is political by the mere fact that she provides her audience with stories of regular people through the theater, forcing the lives of everyday people onto the stage. In particular, I pay close attention to her work as a playwright and director in *Proyecto Archivos* (2003–2008), where her ideas about personal archives are central. I focus on three plays: *Mi mamá y mi tía* (*My Mother and My Aunt*, 2003); *Tres filósofos con bigotes* (*Three Philosophers with Moustaches*, 2004); and *Escuela de conducción* (*Driving School*, 2006). Each of these plays offers an intimate look at how family, friendship, and educational institutions are central in our lives. While each of them is distinct, *Mi mamá y mi tía* makes an important claim about the private versus the public lives of people as the director cast her own mother and aunt. With this intention, Tellas highlights the intricate lines between family, theater, public, and audience.

Similarly inspired by documenting personal stories, chapter 2 focuses on the work of renowned playwright, curator, visual artist, and director Lola Arias. Her own concept of “remakes” places a central role on reenactments and their powerful use on how people retell stories through their own perception and reception of facts. While every chapter in this book uses photographs as a main object of manipulation, it is in Lola Arias’s works that photographs take an active role, one that offers a variety of interpretations. In particular,

I analyze two major projects: the trilogy that consists of *Mi vida después* (*My Life After*, 2009), *El año en que nació* (*The Year I Was Born*, 2012), and *Melancolía y manifestaciones* (*Melancholy and Demonstrations*, 2012); and a three-part project designed around stories of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War (1982), referred to as “the Cycle of War” and comprising a video installation titled *Veterans* (2014), a play titled *Minefield / Campo minado* (2016), and a documentary film titled *Theatre of War* (2018). Through the different genres, Arias makes the Malvinas/Falkland Islands veterans’ stories known. All of these performances deal with personal stories; how the autobiographical point of view can be doubtful; the first- and second-generation approach to memory and postmemory; and how humor can be a useful tool when speaking of political turmoil and traumatic stories.

Chapter 3 takes a pronounced political stand on immigration and human rights. The focus shifts toward Mexico and the work of theater collective Teatro Línea de Sombra (1993). I specifically study the impact of a socially committed group that brings difficult and timely topics to the stage by speaking directly about immigration issues, femicides, and human rights atrocities. Their productions are not only artistic but also work in conjunction with and in relation to their committed social and political agenda. Within Teatro Línea de Sombra’s extensive repertoire of work, this chapter focuses on two key plays and one site-specific installation: *Amarillo* (2009), *Baños Roma* (*Roma Baths*, 2013), and *El puro lugar* (*Nothing but the Place*, 2016). *Amarillo* highlights distinct notions of migrants, the aftermath of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, and the understanding of the (in)visible traces left behind by those who do not make the journey to the other side. On the other hand, *Baños Roma* grounds the story in Ciudad Juárez, a border town overcome by criminal gangs, drug trafficking, and *maquiladoras*. In this barren town, women disappear, houses are abandoned, and only those who are left behind tell the story of a weakened community that is no longer alive. *El puro lugar* takes audience members to revisit a site-specific place of violence in Xalapa, Veracruz. TLS works on building a memory intersectionality between previous acts of violence that interconnect Xalapa with specific atrocities that took place in 1924, 1981, and 2015.

The final chapter sheds light on the role of political discourse through two specific topics: ex-torture sites as memorial museums and the aftermath of left-wing militia groups formed during the Pinochet era (1973–1990). The focus is on three different plays by Chilean playwright Guillermo Calderón that deal directly with issues of memory politics and truth and reconciliation in the transitional years from Pinochet dictatorship to democracy and beyond. I contend that while Calderón’s plays employ some factual information, the archive and history are irrelevant at times, forcing the audience to enter a liminal space where they are confronted with their own perception of historical truth. The site-specific aspect of *Villa+Discurso* (2011) triggers mediation of social spaces by encompassing places with a haunting history between

what happened there, as a former torture site, and what it has turned into a new park of memory. The site becomes the object-turned-prop that haunts the play. This chapter also explores how two interconnected plays—*Escuela* (*School*, 2013) and *Mateluna* (2016)—inquire into the authenticity of legal documents, the justice system, and the theatrical modes of telling a story in order to make a political statement against a wrongly accused ex-militant. In the short conclusion, I quickly mention Federico León's *Las ideas* (2015), a play that upstages the real almost as an afterthought. By questioning the role of the real onstage through a humorous postulation of what is like to create a play, León pushes us to rethink the weight of the document and the actual role of the real onstage.

Together, the chapters in this book consider the extent and the limits of objects, archives and bodies through the process of theatrical interventions. They embrace new modes of utilizing archival documents as theatrical props that become a point of departure for considering the meaning of the past and the interpretation in the present. My aim is to make evident that new documentary theater techniques have been molded in order to give a sense of factuality. In this forged factuality, facts are central but bear the possibility of fiction when they are created, distorted, or imagined.