



**PERSPECTIVES ON THE HISTORY AND PRESENT OF  
DOCUMENTARY THEATER**  
**New perspectives from South America**

PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE A HISTÓRIA E O PRESENTE DO TEATRO DOCUMENTAL  
Novas perspectivas a partir da América do Sul

PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE LA HISTORIA Y EL PRESENTE DEL TEATRO DOCUMENTAL  
Nuevas miradas desde América del Sur

Pamela Brownell

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5380-5169>

Ernesto Valença

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5419-9383>

## **Perspectives on the history and present of documentary theater.**

### **New perspectives from South America**

This issue of *Revista Ephemera* presents its readers with a thematic dossier on Documentary Theater. Articulated by researchers from Brazil, Chile and Argentina, it aims to introduce new approaches to the diversity of experiences involved in this influential field of contemporary theater—which is constantly growing in terms of artistic productions and interested spectators—and to contribute to the visibility and better understanding of the vitality that documentary research has had in theater in our region for decades. The guiding proposal of this dossier is to continue to broaden the discussion on how documentary theater can be defined and what the constitutive processes of its history are, with a particular focus on its current implementation on South American stages.

Promoting this expansion seems important to us since, despite the great heterogeneity of this field of scenic creation and the consequent multiplicity of approaches and investigations that it has become the object of—particularly in recent years, when numerous critical works of great value have emerged—, our narratives about the trajectories of documentary theater are still often associated with a few references that are already well recognized, leaving a very wide range of experiences, both past and recent, to be investigated, which could at least feed this discussion with a greater variety of examples and, quite possibly, also challenge established perceptions about the genealogies and intersections that define the development of this trend(s) in different times and places.

In this sense, at first, a general critical consensus can be delineated that identifies documentary theater as a genre that emerged in Europe in the early 20th century and was consolidated and widely disseminated internationally in the 1960s. Then, after losing its centrality in the international theater scene, this genre (re)emerged strongly at the beginning of the 21st century with an effervescent proliferation of documentary experiences that opened a new chapter in history with their unique characteristics. In this journey, the first prominent figure is undoubtedly Erwin Piscator, who promoted resolute experimentation by using archive material as an element of scenic creation to encourage a closer relationship between theater and social reality and broaden its potential for political intervention (Piscator, [1929] 1957). Another essential figure is Peter Weiss, who, with his work *Die Ermittlung* (1965) and, above all, with the circulation of his *Notes* (Weiss, [1968] 1976), strongly encouraged the consolidation of a movement that used documentary and testimonial material as a source for dramaturgical creation. Between these two, as well as between much of the documentary production of the canonical period and more recent practices, it is possible to recognize the importance of the proposal of Brechtian epic theater as a communicating vessel, which was a very influential matrix in the development of documentary theater at different moments. Some of the main Latin American references from this first expansive moment of documentary theater are



Augusto Boal and Vicente Leñero. The latter explicitly used the term “documentary theater” to refer to his dramaturgical work, which began with the play *Pueblo rechazado* (Leñero, [1968] 1985).

For the most part, the documentary pieces from this first model were based on the transformation of documentary material into dramatic text (more or less properly adjusted to the form of *drama*, depending on the case) which was then taken to the stage by a professional cast. On the other hand, when the new documentary boom began to take shape on the international scene by the turn of the century, some of its most obvious characteristics were the presentation of archive material directly on stage and the very involvement of nonprofessional interpreters (non-actors), considered to be true “living documents,” direct bearers of their stories and testimonies on stage. This opened up the field of documentary theater to the discussion of a wide range of topics, from situations belonging to a broad collective spectrum, such as catastrophes and social conflicts, to personal and family issues, with a strong (auto)biographical nature, which is another distinguishing feature that led this stage of the genre to be labeled as *new documentary theater* (Hernández, 2017. Kempf; Moguilevskaia, 2013). These and other changes seen in the new documentary practices—many of which have, of course, followed more general developments on the contemporary scene—result in a kind of displacement, or even suspension, of fiction as a central element of theatrical creation, permanently generating bordering zones between reality and fiction, which is why these practices also represent a fundamental part of what has been studied as *theater(s) of the real* (Martin, 2013. Desgranges, 2013). Some of the key names in this phase are the German collective *Rimini Protokoll*, the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué and, in Latin America, the Argentine directors Vivi Tellas (whose *Biodrama* project is an essential reference in the field) and Lola Arias, as well as the Mexican collective *Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol*, among others.

We believe that this summary of the history of documentary practices effectively shows the changes in visibility that documentary theater has had in most places and the main characteristics that identify its different stages. However, we also understand that as research progresses and this story is placed in dialogue with other similar expressions, the linearity of this process becomes more complex and other characters that can also be recognized in leading roles within this story begin to emerge. This dossier aims to capture such diversity and contribute to the development of knowledge and reflection on documentary theater in its various moments and variants, analyzing its specific features and differences, but also its possibilities for continuity. The idea was to bring together the results of research that addressed these and other related themes, such as the tense relationship between theater and the concept of document (which is also shared with the field of history), the different ways of thinking about documentary theater as political theater, reflection on the individual and individuality in documentary theater, the act of revealing stories that are generally seen as marginal or distant from the grand narratives, the relationship between personal and national history, and the procedures and crossings of language that appear in documentary staging, within the framework of investigations into documentary experiences carried out in both the most central and most peripheral areas of the theatrical field.



Unlike 20 years ago, when many of us began to take an interest in this phenomenon thanks to the renewed boost that documentary theater was getting in the field of practice, today we have at our disposal a wide variety of studies in individual or collective books and articles, as well as various compilations of work and interviews, among other publications, that provide an excellent starting point for further reflection on the history and theory of documentary theater from now on. The studies by Paola HERNÁNDEZ (2021), Julie WARD (2019), Davi GIORDANO (2014), Marcelo SOLER (2010), Silka FREIRE (2007) and Pedro BRAVO ELIZONDO (1982) are of particular interest to our studies, as they address the Latin American scene and explore relevant aesthetic-political cases and perspectives. It is also worth adding to this list books such as those by Ileana DIÉGUEZ CABALLERO (2007) and Francisco GARZÓN CÉSPEDES (1978), which do not deal primarily with documentary theater, but include analyses of pieces and specific testimonies on the subject. Outside of this specificity, if we expand our horizon to the different manifestations of the biographical, autobiographical, or fictional biographies genres and include literary, cinematographic, or media culture studies, the references to be covered become almost limitless. Narrowing it down to those who deal more explicitly with the scenic documentary issue in its different stages, we should also highlight the work of Erica MAGRIS and Béatrice PICON-VALLIN (2019), from the North American and European backgrounds, Lucie KEMPF and Tania MOGUILEVSKAIA (2013), Carol MARTIN (2010), Alison FORSYTH and Chris MEGSON (2009), Will HAMMOND and Dan STEWARD (2008), José Antonio SÁNCHEZ (2007), Attilio FAVORINI (1995), and Alan FILEWOD (1987), among others.

This dossier is based on this existing bibliography and in no way intends to replace these important references in the history of documentary theater. In fact, when we consider the dossier as a whole, we notice that some of the great protagonists of this story, such as Peter Weiss or Vivi Tellas, are almost absent if not for a few contextualizing mentions. This does not mean that we underestimate their relevance. Rather, they are artists to whom we have dedicated our research and who we have described here as unavoidable figures. However, far from considering these absences as something that should be fixed, we feel that they are a healthy testimony to the fact that we are effectively moving beyond these previously established foundations in this field of research. Furthermore, as coordinators, it is not our intention to insert our own interpretation of the phenomenon and its aesthetic and political implications into this dossier; as these are aspects that we have already addressed in other papers dedicated to our own lines of research (Brownell 2021, 2018. Brownell; Hernández, 2017. Valença, 2023. Valença; Schinelo, 2022). Instead, as we have already stated, our aim is to open up space for the exchange of new perspectives that contribute to the further development of this theoretical and historiographical field in a broader view from the South (Richard, 2014).

The regional focus of the dossier is in line with a series of meetings that have brought together researchers from different countries with the aim of advancing knowledge on the subject. We can start by mentioning the very starting point of this editorial proposal: the convergence of



ideas we had within the post-doctoral program at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires, caused by a common interest in contemporary Argentine and Brazilian documentary theater. It is also particularly important to mention the project *Mapa colaborativo del teatro documental latinoamericano*<sup>1</sup>, which this year will promote the chapter *Brasil* as part of an agreement between the Universidad Nacional de las Artes, in Buenos Aires, and the Memorial da América Latina, in São Paulo<sup>2</sup>.

As we begin to present the articles that make up the dossier, we can identify a first set of texts that participate in the historiographical discussion that allows us to reconstruct the different processes and protagonists that drove experimentation in the field of documentary practices in theater. Thus, we begin the dossier with “Documentary Theater: a flight over a sea of possibilities” by Mario Celso Pereira Junior and Clóvis Dias Massa, a work that explicitly dialogues with several of the theoretical references mentioned above and which, as its title suggests, offers a panorama of different aspects and moments in this trajectory, emphasizing the diversity of the field that is condensed into the plural expression *documentary theater*. Also based on a more historical perspective is the second article, “Documentary Theater: in search of its historical matrices and theoretical foundations” by Ana Carolina Angrisani, which focuses on the resolute call for political agitation that motivated these experiments in their founding phase and examines how a trend of *agit-prop* expanded in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s and remains in force today.

The third article in the dossier, “ Pull a little thread: Isidora Aguirre and documentary theater as a methodology of aesthetic and political flow during the sixties,” by Cristian A. Aravena, represents a particularly innovative contribution at the historical level, since it allows us to bring to light an artist—and the detail of her being an artist is no small matter when we talk about visibility and historiographical discussion—who was an important reference in Latin America in her time, but who is not usually included in the contemporary debate on the emergence of documentary theater in our countries. This is Chilean playwright Isidora Aguirre, who is an undisputed reference in theater in her country, but whose contribution to the history of documentary theater is usually overlooked. This is an important omission in light of, among other factors, the trajectory that Aravena’s article follows, as it reveals that Aguirre’s work took a clear documental turn *before* the emergence of canonical references of the period, such as those by Weiss and Leñero.

---

1 This collaborative project is based at the *Instituto de Investigación y Experimentación en Arte y Crítica* (IIEAC) of the *Universidad Nacional de las Artes* and is part of the work of the study group *Cultura de Datos*, coordinated by Rafael Cruz Sousa, and of *PICT Herramientas digitales para la investigación teatral: un mapa del teatro documental latinoamericano*. The map is in the initial stages of development, but it is hoped that by 2025 it will be able to provide a record of a significant number of documentary theater experiences carried out in different Latin American countries from the 1960s to the present day. It can be accessed on <https://mapadelteatrodokumental.net>.

2 Another initiative for international collaboration in this sense was generated around the publication of the first documentary pieces by Vivi Tellas, including critical essays by numerous researchers from different institutions and countries (Tellas, 2017). Another academic space that has favored encounters between people researching documentary theater experiences, either as the center of our work or as cases addressed in the context of studies dedicated to other topics, is the *Grupo de Estudios sobre Teatro Contemporáneo, Política y Sociedad en América Latina*, directed by Lorena Verzero and based at the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani (IIGG) of the Universidad de Buenos Aires.



The dossier then presents a second set of articles which, despite also contributing to the historicization of different documentary experiences, focus on the critical analysis of specific and more recent performances, articulating their reconstruction and contextualization with an intersection of diverse perspectives from theater studies, political philosophy, and other approaches. In all cases, these are experiences carried out in southern South American countries (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay).

The first article in this set is “The theatricality of the security system and life as power: towards a delegated documentary theater. Inquiries about Chácara Paraíso (2007) by Lola Arias and Stefan Kaegi,” written by Denise Cobello, a specialist in the study of Arias’ work (Cobello 2021, 2023). This article focuses on a piece that was fundamental in laying the foundations for the subsequent prolific scenic documentary production of this artist, who is, as we have said, one of the most recognized regional references in the field. This piece consists of an experience carried out during a first period of collaboration with Kaegi, a member of *Rimini Protokoll*, which included police officers in the city of São Paulo. The article explores this collaboration between the two artists and approaches its result mainly from a biopolitical perspective based on the concepts of territory, life and testimony.

Next, in “Desecrated archives: forms of performance in *Mi vida después* (2009) and *Antígona oriental* (2012)”, Noelia Morales presents a comparative analysis between another one of Arias’ stagings—perhaps the most resonant of them—and a work by the Uruguayan playwright Marianella Morena, directed by the German artist Volker Lössch, which is also a central antecedent for thinking, among other things, about how documentary practices in the 21st century have opened up new possibilities for bringing to the stage testimonies linked to the traumatic recent past of the last dictatorships in the South America. The text highlights what the bodies, stories and modes of action of the performers in both plays bring to the stage, drawing on some of the approaches proposed by Giorgio Agamben regarding *archive* and *testimony*, among other perspectives.

The next article in the dossier is “*Para Rocío Jurado*, a very brief insurgent scene – Writing gestures so that the memory of an underground country comes to the surface and retouches its resistance,” written by Fabrício Trindade Pereira based on a performance directed by Pereira himself and starring the cross-dressing actor José Alberto In Concert (1952-2023). Based on the trajectory of this artist, the article not only recovers, but seeks to pay homage—as the performance itself does—to the performative activity developed for decades in historically marginalized spaces of socially accepted cultural circuits, in this case in Minas Gerais. To further reflect on these practices of cultural and sexual dissidence, as well as on the gesture of reclaiming them from the stage, the article creates a link with experiences and concepts developed in the 1960s, related to the notion of *guerrilla art*, and analyzes how different documentary passages in the play depict tensions connected to the link between personal and collective, to debates of historical and political construction, and to dissent in relation to the heteronormative, institutional and cultural paradigms in force.





In turn, the collective work “Family, memory and society: Reflections on the scenic experiment O bosque” by Hayaldo Copque, Érica Rodrigues dos Santos, Fernanda Silva Souza, and Lorrayne Gabriela da Silva Bomfim also brings us closer to these intersections and tensions from another autobiographical and documentary scenic experience, this time articulated with a critical approach to the notion of family and to many of the values and mandates that are socially organized around it, which are particularly central to the political and religious discourses of the contemporary conservative far-right in Brazil (as well as in the rest of Latin America and the world, with the unique nuances of each area). The performance includes three personal solos—performed respectively by Souza, Bomfim and Rodrigues, who wrote the article together with Copque—and makes it possible to illustrate three different strategies for approaching memories and personal archives in a scenic-documentary way. Based on a creative exploration of the image of a family tree, the performers and authors approach different edges of their family histories, placing them in dialogue with different related theatrical backgrounds and with various perspectives of social and gender theory.

This more theoretical and critical section of the dossier, centered on the analysis of specific experiences of recent documentary theater in the region, concludes with “How to build with rubble: an interview with Vinicius Calderoni,” by Guilherme Carréra. This interview discusses the creation of *Museu Nacional – Todas as vozes do fogo* (2022), a musical by the Barca dos Corações Partidos company, with dramaturgy and direction by Calderoni, based on the fire at the São Cristóvão Palace in Rio de Janeiro, which destroyed almost all of the collection of the museum in 2018. The questions and answers in this dialogue, with a marked analytical tone, articulate the reconstruction of the creative process and the type of documentary work in this piece with more general reflections on both theater and its possibilities for discussing social facts and problems, as well as our cultural tradition and the link between museum and society.

Lastly, the epilogue of the dossier is the article “Opting to document, or the forces that move us towards documentary theater,” by Marcelo Soler, who has been a reference for years in the study of documentary theater in Brazil from the point of view of both theory and practice (Soler, 2010). The article consists of a more general essay that starts with a reflection on the founding gesture of the documentary genre, thinking beyond what is specifically theatrical, and that discusses very relevant examples of scenic experiences in the region, some of them curiously recurrent in the previous analyses; cases that to a large extent promoted and were responsible (intentionally or not) for the expansion of interest in the documentary genre among South American artists.

To conclude, we can only thank the authors of these valuable articles for their participation in the dossier and for their great willingness to evaluate and edit it. We would also like to thank Revista Ephemera for the opportunity to coordinate this project and for inviting our colleagues in the region to reflect on this topic together, allowing us to problematize the link between theater and the social, personal and historical reality of our region, in relation to multiple aesthetic and political



conceptions. Lastly, we would especially like to thank the readers of this dossier. We hope that the perspectives shared here can fuel your own questioning and that we can continue to collectively expand the reflection on documentary theater in its different stages and manifestations, especially highlighting the very diverse expressions that have had and continue to have space on the stages of South America.





## References

- BRAVO ELIZONDO, Pedro. *Teatro documental latinoamericano I y II*. México: UNAM, 1982.
- BROWNELL, Pamela. Acerca de lo político y lo histórico en el teatro documental contemporáneo: algunas experiencias de Argentina y Chile. *Latin American Theatre Review*, v. 52, n. 1, p. 43–64, 2018. Disponible en: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2018.0024>.
- BROWNELL, Pamela. *PROYECTO BIODRAMA*. El teatro biográfico-documental de Vivi Tellas y lo real como utopía en la escena contemporánea. Buenos Aires: Antítesis / Red Editorial, 2021.
- BROWNELL, Pamela; HERNÁNDEZ, Paola (coord.). Introducción. In: BROWNELL, Pamela; HERNÁNDEZ, Paola. *Biodrama*. Proyecto Archivos: experiencias y proyecciones en la escena teatral, en V. Tellas. Córdoba: FFyH-UNC, 2017. p. 7-36.
- COBELLO, Denise. *Cartografías de lo performativo*. Reconfiguraciones del teatro biográfico-documental en la obra de Lola Arias desde el archivo, el testimonio y el género. 2024. Tesis (doctorado). Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de las Artes, 2024.
- COBELLO, Denise. El Actor-Documents: Rasgos de una poética que tensiona los límites entre presencia y representación. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença*, v. 11, n. 2, Artículo 2, 2021.
- DESGRANGES, Flávio. Editorial. Dossier: Teatros Do Real: Memórias, Autobiografias E Documentos Em Cena. *Sala Preta*, v. 13, n. 2, p. 1-2, 2013. Disponible em: <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2238-3867.v13i2p1-2>.
- DIÉGUEZ CABALLERO, Ileana. *Escenarios Liminales*. Teatralidades, performance y política. Buenos Aires: Atuel, 2007.
- FAVORINI, Attilio. *Voicings*. Ten Plays of Documentary Theater. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1995.
- FILEWOD, Alan D. *Collective encounters: documentary theatre in English Canada*. University of Toronto Press, 1987.
- FORSYTH, Alison; MEGSON, Chris (ed.). *Get Real*. Documentary Theatre Past and Present. Croydon: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- FREIRE, Silka. *Teatro documental latinoamericano: El referente histórico y su (re)escritura dramática*. La Plata: Al Margen, 2007.
- GARZÓN CÉSPEDES, Francisco. *El teatro latinoamericano de creación colectiva*. La Habana: Ediciones Casa de las Américas, 1978.
- GIORDANO, Davi. *Teatro Documentário brasileiro e Argentino: O Biodrama como a Busca pela Teatralidade do Comum*. Porto Alegre: Armazém Digital, 2014.
- HAMMOND, Will; STEWARD, Dan (ed.). *Verbatim Verbatim*. Contemporary Documentary Theatre. Londres: Oberon Books, 2008.



HERNÁNDEZ, Paola. El nuevo teatro documental del siglo XXI. Fundamentos teóricos de Latinoamérica, en Jorge Dubatti. *Poéticas de la liminalidad en el teatro II*, Lima: ENSAD, p. 153-164, 2017.

HERNÁNDEZ, Paola. *Staging Lives in Latin American Theater: Bodies, Objects, Archives*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021.

KEMPF, Lucie; MOGUILEVSKAIA, Tania. *Le Théâtre néo-documentaire: résurgence ou réinvention?*. Nancy: PUN-Editions Universitaires de Lorraine, 2013.

LEÑERO, Vicente. *Teatro documental*. México: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1985.

MAGRIS, Erica; PICON-VALLIN, Béatrice (dir.). *Les Théâtres documentaires*. Montpellier: Deuxième époque, 2019.

MARTIN, Carol. *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*. Londres: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

MARTIN, Carol. *Theatre of the Real*. Nueva York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

PISCATOR, Erwin. *Teatro Político*. Buenos Aires: Futuro, [1929] 1957.

RICHARD, Nelly. *Diálogos latinoamericanos en las fronteras del arte*. Santiago de Chile: Ed. Universidad Diego Portales, 2014.

SÁNCHEZ, José Antonio. *Prácticas de lo real en la escena contemporánea*. Madrid: Visor libros, 2007.

SOLER, Marcelo. *Teatro documentário: A pedagogia da não ficção*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2010.

TELLAS, Vivi. *Biodrama*. Proyecto Archivos. Seis documentales escénicos. In: BROWNELL, Pamela; HERNÁNDEZ, Paola (coord.). Córdoba: FFyH-UNC, 2017.

VALENÇA, Ernesto Gomes. Estrutura de sentimento no teatro documentário e no teatro de agitprop: experiências no Brasil e na Argentina. *Urdimento: Revista de Estudos em Artes Cênicas*, Florianópolis, v. 3, n. 48, p. 1–25, 2023. DOI: 10.5965/1414573103482023e0204.

VALENÇA, Ernesto Gomes; SCHINELO, Letícia Pavão. O processo documental no espetáculo *Mi Vida Después*: a transformação da vivência em experiência. *Urdimento: Revista de Estudos em Artes Cênicas*, Florianópolis, v. 2, n. 44, p. 1–23, 2022. DOI: 10.5965/1414573102442022e0204. Disponível em: <https://revistas.udesc.br/index.php/urdimento/article/view/21766>. Acesso em: 4 abr. 2024.

WARD, Julie A. *A Shared Truth*. The Theater of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.

WEISS, Peter. Notas sobre el Teatro-Documento. In: WEISS, Peter. *Escritos políticos*. Barcelona: Lumen, [1968] 1976.



## **Academic Biography**

### **Pamela Brownell**

Researcher, educator and theater critic. PhD in History and Theory of Arts (UBA). Holds a teaching degree in Arts (UBA) and a bachelor's degree in journalism (UNLZ). It is a faculty member of the course Teoría y Crítica del Teatro (FFyL-UBA). Brownell is a postdoctoral fellow at CONICET in the Instituto de Investigación y Experimentación en Arte y Crítica (IIEAC-UNA). CONICET/ Universidad Nacional de las Artes, Universidad de Buenos Aires.

E-mail: [pamela\\_brownell@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:pamela_brownell@yahoo.com.ar)

### **Ernesto Valença**

Professor of Theater Pedagogy at UFOP. PhD in Arts from the Escola de Belas Artes at UFMG (2014), and holds a master's degree from the same institution. He's got a teacher's degree in Performing Arts from Universidade de São Paulo- ECA/USP (2002).

E-mail: [ernestovalenca@ufop.edu.br](mailto:ernestovalenca@ufop.edu.br)

## **Copyright**

Pamela Brownell e Ernesto Valença

## **Copyright of the translation**

Sofia Schwabacher and Leonardo Maciel

## **Licenciamento**

Este é um artigo distribuído em Acesso Aberto sob os termos da Creative Commons 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.pt-br>

