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ARCHIVOS PROFANADOS:
formas de actuación en *Mi Vida Después* (2009) y *Antígona Oriental* (2012)

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Abstract: In this paper we will focus on the plays *Mi vida después* (2009) by the Argentine artist Lola Arias and *Antígona Oriental* (2012) by the Uruguayan playwright Marianella Morena. To do this, we will take as one of the possible axes of analysis, the comparative study of archives and their links with the forms of performance based on the concept of desecration by Giorgio Agamben (2013) and the reappropriation carried out by Lía Noguera (2019) in the field of arts.

Keywords: documentary theater; archives; desecration; performance; testimonials.

Archivos profanados:

formas de actuación en *Mi Vida Después* (2009) y *Antígona Oriental* (2012)

Resumen: En este trabajo nos centraremos en las obras *Mi vida después* (2009) de la artista argentina Lola Arias y *Antígona Oriental* (2012) de la dramaturga uruguaya Marianella Morena. Para ello, tomaremos como uno de los ejes posibles de análisis, el estudio comparativo de los archivos y sus vínculos con las formas de actuación a partir del concepto de profanación de Giorgio Agamben (2013) y la reapropiación realizada por Lía Noguera (2019) en el campo de las artes.

Palabras claves: teatro documental; archivos; profanación; actuación; testimonios.



1 Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the performing arts are increasingly more interested in the use of documentary materials on stage. Such works that ground their search in the investigation of the real (Brownell, 2021), from the configuration of a “hybrid terrain of creation between the theatrical and the performative” (Sánchez, 2007, p. 17), use archives as one of the main constructive axes for their creation.

Although these practices draw aspects from and dialogue with artistic expressions that began in the European continent¹, the new documentary theater of the 21st century (Hernández, 2017) moves away from its predecessors insofar as “it detaches itself from contestatory politics to review the role of the document, challenging its supposedly truthful basis, and calling into question the archive itself” (Hernández, 2011, p. 116). Taking this as a starting point, we propose to continue delving in that direction to think over the poetic-political potencies (Rolnik, 2008) that documentary stage practices produce today.

As far as *archives* are concerned, Michel Foucault’s analysis in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1979) becomes an unavoidable reference, since his study shows that archives are technologies of power in modern and contemporary societies. Likewise, the ideas of Giorgio Agamben (2009), who follows this line of thought and proposes to place them “as a system of relations between what is said and what is not said in each act of speech, between the enunciative function and the discourse on which it is projected, between the outside and the inside of language” (p. 7), are unavoidable (p. 7). We also resume the postulates of Jacques Derrida (1997) and Georges Didi-Huberman (2007), in which they note the unfinished and punctured condition of archives. In this article we propose a focus on the open character of these materials. The aim is to observe whether, the *interweaving* of each work with other elements of staging and specifically with acting, could be establish one of the lines of development of current Latin American documentary.

In artistic experiences the *archive* is not opposed to the *repertoire* in a binary way, as argued by Diana Taylor (2016). Understanding the former as what “exists in the form of documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, compact discs, all those items supposedly resistant to change” (p. 49), and the latter as acts of embodied transference; the author states that both constitute different transmission systems that, in several opportunities, work and mutually enhance one another. In documentary stage practices this becomes especially relevant due to the encounter between archives and bodies that takes place in the actors and actresses. They are, simultaneously, archives of their own lives and repertoire of their performance or, in other words, living archives (Pinta, 2013; Lepecki, 2014) of stories inscribed in the very territory of their bodies.

As in contemporary works of other artistic languages, the target is no longer the production of new documents but the creative intervention of the existing archive (Aguilar, 2020). Therefore,

¹ For example, the political theater of Erwin Piscator (1976), the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht (2004) and the documentary theater of Peter Weiss (1976).



if this raises a difference in how these materials were worked in previous periods, we must think about the actuality of their aesthetic uses in the theatrical field. For such, we resume the theoretical relationship established by Lía Noguera (2019) based on the concept of desecration (Agamben, 2013), in which the author discusses what Latin American theater does with the rewritings of Greek tragedies. Noguera starts from the distinction that the Italian philosopher establishes between the terms *consecrate* (*sacrare*) and *desecrate* to articulate it in the field of the arts. Following Agamben, we find that in the Roman Empire they considered as sacred everything that was subtracted from everyday use to be given to the gods; the act of desecrating, in turn, was the one that allowed returning things to everyday practice by deactivating what was placed in the sacred order. In this framework, the author proposes that the *game*, as an incongruent use, allows passing from the sacred to the profane, freeing humanity from the sacred dimension. We thus retrieve this idea to consider it in the relationship: new documentary theater, archives, and performance. We argue that *desecration*, as a political operation that neutralizes the devices confiscated by power, is constituted as a procedure through which these scenic practices dispute new meanings to the use of archives. The game thus devises unpublished creative appropriations of these materials, and produces acting forms deeply linked to the desecration of archives.

We will focus specifically on the plays *Mi vida después* by Lola Arias (Argentina, 2009) and *Antígona Oriental* by Marianella Morena (Uruguay, 2012), as two representative cases of the new Latin American documentary theater. For the comparative analysis, we will take testimony (Agamben, 2009) as a common element present in the performances of the two casts and try to think about the existing acting practices in both stagings.

2 Acting in a comparative key

2.1 The Argentinean case

In 2009, the Argentine artist Lola Arias premiered *Mi vida después* at the Teatro Sarmiento of the Complejo Teatral de Buenos Aires. This work was the last commission of the Biodrama cycle curated and promoted by Vivi Tellas, a space through which different referential artists of the local scene have performed². Maybe because of the wide resonance³ produced by this show within the

2 For a general description of the Biodrama Project, see the book *El teatro biográfico-documental de Vivi Tellas y lo real como utopía en la escena contemporánea*, by Pamela Brownell (2021).

3 It was performed in Buenos Aires for four years, and was presented in 30 theaters worldwide for approximately 10 years. Among the most important international festivals in which it participated are: International Summer Festival Hamburg; Theater Spektakle Zurich; Theater am Kirchplatz (TAK) Lichtstein; HAU Berlin; FITAM, Festival Internacional Santiago a Mil, Santiago de Chile; FIDAE, Festival Internacional de Montevideo; Theatre de la Ville, Paris; Festival Internacional de Teatro de Rio Preto; Brighton Festival, Brighton and Bienal Internacional de Teatro, USP, Sao Paulo; among others.



national and international theatrical field, it remains a source of interest and reflection for a large part of the scientific community to this day (Brownell, 2009; Verzero, 2010; Angilletta, 2012; Tosoratti, 2012; Pinta, 2013; Cobello, 2021; among others).

Mi vida después is the first part of a trilogy⁴ that explored a common theme. In the three works by the artist, the point of view is placed in the eyes of the children and family life stories are reconstructed from several types of documents. Here, the protagonists are three actors and three actresses⁵ born between 1972 and 1983, who assume their own biographical fragments and those of their mothers' and fathers' youth. These stories highlight the diverse ways in which their life paths are crossed by the context of the last civil-military dictatorship, a fact of Argentina's recent past that led this generation to accrue questions, doubts, and gaps. Thus, returning to the personal and national past in this play implies delving into the intimacy of their memories, assuming the political gesture of bringing them to a present that insists on imagining other forms of the future.

The repertoire of documents used in the staging consists of costumes, photographs, letters and audio recordings. Through them, actors and actresses articulate a narrative in which they challenge their veracity and unveil doubts and contradictions (Verzero, 2010) about their own lives. There is a broad consensus that tangible archives, as bearers of a specific materiality, allow accounting for some data on the situation of their time and geography. Moreover, since they refer directly to their producers, they offer us the possibility of placing ourselves in a specific space and time. It is in this sense that the fabrics and tones of the fashionable garments; the black and white or sepia of the photographic images; the manuscripts with meticulous calligraphy and the characteristic words of an era heard through the timbres of voice, reveal the documentary capacity of the archives from their indexicality. The sensibility and care with which these materials are scenically approached brings reminiscences of the object ethics (*ética objetual*) developed by Shaday Larios within her documentary object theater (2016), which despite not working directly with autobiographical objects, proposes a field of knowledge and ways of doing that explores the existing interconnections between the many temporalities that inhabit them. Above all, in what concerns the power of these materials to unveil overlapping layers of information and meanings producing an interweaving in the community. According to the author:

When something has power, it vibrates, it is vibrant matter (in Benet's terms). The capacity of agency that an object has is also its power, that is, its intrinsic capacity of action to prompt sociocultural action. It triggers some collective resonance (Larios, 2016, p. 4, our translation).

4 The other two works of the trilogy are *El año en que nació* (2012) and *Melancolía y manifestaciones* (2012).

5 Technical specifications: Actors: Blas Arrese Igor, Liza Casullo, Carla Crespo, Vanina Falco, Pablo Lugones, Mariano Speratti and Moreno Speratti da Cunha; Dramaturgy and production: Sofía Medici; Music: Ulises Conti with the collaboration of Liza Casullo and Lola Arias; Choreography: Luciana Acuña; Scenography: Ariel Vacaro; Video: Marcos Medici; Lighting: Gonzalo Córdova; Costumes: Jazmín Berakha; Research advisor: Gonzalo Aguilar; Photos: Lorena Fernández; Technical production: Gustavo Kotik; Text and direction: Lola Arias (written based on original material brought by the actors and with their collaboration).



In this play, the power of the objects acquires an evocative character: memories, thoughts and desires circulate from them, allowing re-readings about the past. That is why we can think that the family bond and the affective dimension that unites the inanimate with the lives of the actors and actresses operates by opening questions where the gaps of archives are found. And it is in such emptiness, in these crevices, that the *interweaving* takes place, that the bodies of the actors and actresses inhabit another form of the intangible: the scenic presence and the different ways in which they articulate the performance.

According to Pamela Brownell (2009), the work of the actors and actresses goes through different performative levels depending on the variety of scenes proposed by the staging. In this sense, she distinguishes four ways in which they are approached:

[...] testimonial (when one speaks of one's own in the first person); remake (when the children take the place of the parents, *reenacting* their circumstances in the first person); representation (when the *characters* of the other's story are embodied) and action (when what is done is not in function of narrating or recreating those stories, but of constructing moments of *pure performance*)" (Brownell, 2009, p. 5, our translation).

These practices, based on the autobiographical self (Verzero, 2010), move between the real and the fictional according to the different uses of archival materials. In other words, depending on the function and the point of view they adopt in each scene, the link they establish with the document allows them to generate a singular propositional field for each of the performances.

In the case of the *testimonials*, in which the story dives into the dawn of the biographies that are staged, a distance appears between what is told and the affections of the body. Although some of them are linked to traumatic aspects of their lives, exhuming the affections emanating from the archives does not prevent them from continuing developing the scenes. On this point, we should return to Denise Cobello's study (2021) on the poetics of Lola Arias. In her research, the author names as actor-document the actors and actresses who, being professionals of the performing arts, "bring to the stage their nature, their physical materiality; their body and their voice as documents of their autobiography" (our translation, p. 12) generating a presence that oscillates between presentation and representation. From this point of view, we recognize that the work of this group of actors and actresses ensues from artistic training and previous experience in the professional field, backgrounds that have shaped paths with a repertoire of performing techniques available at the moment of stage practice. We thus observe that this quality of oscillating between the possibilities of performance enables a zone for the bodies to explore the archival materials without being captured in a spectral dimension. From the performing transitions they go through in the scenes, we can see uses of the documents in which different degrees of *desecration* can be observed.

An example of this is the scene in which the actress Liza Casullo testifies about her history based on the description of some photographs while stopping in places that challenge her because of their emptiness, as questions reverberate without answers. Such is the case of the lit cigarette that



her mother holds between her fingers in the image of her gestation or the irony that, in the album of her parents' wedding, their Montoneros peers appear with their faces covered by their arms for fear of being identified. Their presence and gestures are alluded to, we can only imagine them through the voice of the actress who pauses in that detail. What we do see in the projected photo is a kiss of her mother and father. On this one, the actress puts the focus on the contact between their lips: "what does it feel like to kiss someone with mustache that big?" (Arias, 2016). Although the word is organized in a previous dramaturgy, we are interested in shifting the observation to her body: it is where a way of being on stage that builds a way of acting unfolds. But this has the particularity of being molded from what the documents, in this case the photographs, reveal as cracks: the fracture of each archive and what cannot be completed is found in their *interweaving*. Thus, in the emptiness and in what remains open, Liza Casullo profanes the archive and inhabits that tension without letting herself be carried away by the emotions that could emerge from the memories, formulating a performance far from the canons of fiction and in close connection with the reality that takes place.

Other degrees of desecration can be observed in this very scene, such as when an image is projected showing her mother, Ana Amado, with the journalist César Mascetti in the Telenoche news program. While the actress addresses the contradiction between her mother's professional and militant lives, the other actors and actresses perform actions that, in Brownell's terms, are understood as pure performance: they dress her in a blazer and skirt, incorporate a chair, lift her up, sit her down, arrange the image on the overhead projector so that her position coincides with the place her mother occupied in the photo and bring her a table and some papers. The point we want to get to be when Liza Casullo, accompanied by a light movement that puts the spotlight on her face, produces a change in her voice tone, immediately after, she goes from *testimony* to *remake* and reads news headlines just as Ana Amado did at that time. The scenic device is also at work: the actress's face darkens to give way to the projection of her mother's face on hers and the other actors and actresses throw pieces of clothing over her head, which accumulate and intervene on her body, the photographic archive and the scene composition. This concatenated mutation demonstrates a very precise criterion in terms of stage direction, as we notice another desecration of the actress taking place on her personal archives. Liza Casullo moves from a presentational performance to a performance that represents her mother through new uses of the documents proposed by the staging. As in childhood games in which children put on their parents' clothes and perform in front of the mirror, here the solemnity of the documents is deactivated and a new dimension of the use of a body that is, at the same time, archive and repertoire, document of a family history and performance of one's own life, is restored to the present.



2.2 The Uruguayan case

Three years later, at the Teatro Solís in Montevideo and with the production of the Goethe-Institut of Uruguay and other local institutions, the play *Antígona Oriental* (2012) was premiered, written by the Uruguayan playwright Marianella Morena and directed by the German artist Volker Lösch. The director, specialized in the operatic genre in Europe, lived his childhood in the Rio de la Plata city and his trajectory includes shows made up of professional and non-professional actors and actresses. In addition to the performances in Uruguay, the work was invited to participate in numerous Latin American and European festivals⁶, generating a growing interest within the press and scientific community (Shuffer, 2020; Morales, 2022; Saura-Clares, 2022, among others).

The project was partially driven by the dissatisfaction caused in some sectors of the population by the plebiscite that Uruguayan society had voted in 2009 in favor of the Law on the Expiration of the State's Punitive Claims. This law, which has been in force since 1986, excludes from prosecution civilians and military personnel involved in crimes against humanity committed during State terrorism. Despite having been declared incompatible by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice, in the two opportunities in which it was submitted to popular consultation on whether Articles 1 to 4 should be annulled, the majority of citizens voted against changing it. his theatrical proposal is situated in this social, political and legal context, bringing to the stage women whose life experiences were marked by the violence exercised by the Uruguayan State apparatus.

The play is based on the *Antigone* by Sophocles, and from there it establishes links with testimonies of former political prisoners, daughters, and exiles of the last civil-military dictatorship. In this aspect, and unlike *Mi vida después*, there is a preceding tragic structure that organizes the scenes and raises the possibility of a dialog with the country's recent past. The cast⁷ presents a mixture of two actresses and four actors, all professional, who play the characters of Antigone, Ismene, Creon and Hemon, and 19 women with no prior acting experience, who represent the chorus. Our analysis will focus on the latter. In previous works, we have described the concept of

6 Among the countries covered by the work are Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain and Germany.

7 Technical specifications: Actors: Sofía Espinosa, José Pedro Irisity, Sergio Mautone, Victoria Pereira, Bruno Pereyra, Fernando Vannet; Chorus: Anahit Aharonian, América García, Ana Demarco, Ana María Bereau, Cecilia Gil Blanchen, Carmen Maruri, Carmen Vernier, Graciela San Martín, Gloria Telechea, Irma Leites, Laura García-Arroyo, Lilian Hernández, Ethel Matilde Coirolo, Mirta Rebagliatte, Myriam Deus, Nelly Acosta, Nibia López, Tatiana Taroco and Violeta Mallet; Set and costumes design: Paula Villalba; Original Music: Rafael Antognazza; Lighting: Martín Blanchet; Assistant Director: Luciana Lagisquet; Journalistic Research: Mariángela Giaimo; Body Preparation: Carolina Besuievsky; Regency: Diego Aguirregaray; Vocal Training: Silvia Uturbey; Translators: Renate Hoffmann and Sonja Jänkel; Photography: Gustavo Castagnello; Graphic Design: Carlos Ardohain; Audiovisual: María Trabal; Content Collaboration: Carlos Liscano; Communications and Press Assistance: Mavi Pouso; Costume Design and Set Assistance: Cecilia Bello and Elisa Uriarte; Communications and Press: Laura Pouso; Executive Production: Gustavo Zidán (Department of Culture - Municipality of Montevideo); Dramaturgy: Marianella Morena and Direction: Volker Lösch.



tragic-biographical acting (Morales, 2022) as a specific matrix of these actresses that is traversed by tragedy as both a genre and a life experience. The concomitance and the acting contamination between the characters of Greek tragedy and their biographies is as a possible articulating axis to think about how these actresses are able to act in their biographies. From this, we will continue to think about the layers of desecration that are imprinted in the archives and their relationship to acting practice.

As far as the archival materials are concerned, this staging does not work with documentary objects but focuses exclusively on *testimonials*—and an important note is many of them were told for the first time during the creative process of the play. We may thus think that, in face of the lack of interest expressed by Uruguayan citizens, *Antígona Oriental* offers a representational framework that recovers them. As Didi-Huberman (2014) says, staging may be represented by mechanisms to expose and make visible archives of those underexposed in historical representations. From this point of view, the archives of this work embody a dispute over the memories of recent Uruguayan history to the extent that they give existence to what, until now, had not taken place within society.

This particularity also fosters a different way of being on stage to that of the Argentine case in the sense that it is not based on a repertoire of acting techniques. The stage direction proposes different procedures for those who are not professionally engaged in acting, establishing crossings through their tragic characters. The degrees of *desecration* observed are thus linked to the ways in which the actresses in the chorus give voice to the testimonies. Here, the action of telling their stories is articulated with a word and a body that appears as an unfinished document of that experience. On this, Óscar Cornago (2012) reminds us that actors as witnesses can only speak as a function of not being able to say. Following Agamben (2005), the author says that testimonials hold a limitation in which persists what can no longer be expressed and belongs to a past time. Cornago states that “the witness is, first of all, a body-confession, what interests us is their pure presence, the account of life written on their body, the marks that this past left on them” (our translation, p. 59). Thus, women who are witnesses of their history, and actresses in this documentary work, show a centrality in the word and in the body that is different from that of professional actors and actresses. In this case, they seem to not seek a distance between the memories that are brought to the present and the affective transits that they unearth; rather, they take those emotions to build other ways of acting.

Still in the first scene that serves as prologue, we witness a presentation of their biographies. Passages about the illegal detentions they suffered, the family conflicts they provoked and the dreams of revolution that, in many cases, still accompany their lives, make up a multiple and heterogeneous story. On stage, the nineteen women, together with the actress who plays the character of Antígona, occupy the space as a *frieze*, revealing the diversity of their corporeality. The fragments of stories do not distinguish authorship: from subgroups formed by several of them, they utter their texts in the first-person singular. This past belongs to one but also to all of them. Without trying to



homogenize the particular, individual traits are blurred to unite them in a group stage presence. And it is in this personal story that is amplified in a public and collective voice that we observe a gesture of desecration of the archives in close connection with the performance. An example of this can be observed in this same scene from the synchronic and polyphonic ways of speaking. In these small subgroups that vary in their composition, the actresses alternate choral ways of telling their testimonials. However, the vocal procedure that begins to break the continuum of their words are the gaps or cuts they introduce generating silences. There, the voices work on the musicality of speech and operate on the rhythm through intonations, accentuations and pauses that do not respond to grammatical norms or to everyday orality. Thus, in this fracture of sound and in what is not finished to be told, appear zones that open between the word and the body that allow the irruption of poetic leaps. At the same time, this modality becomes a hallmark throughout the play, even in the scenes in which exchanges with the tragic characters take place. Such is the case of the one that follows at the end of the presentation, in which Antigone has the first dialog with her sister Ismene. Antigone is on the stage among the women of the chorus and Ismene is sitting in an armchair among members of the audience. From that physical distance and without distinguishing between the real of their testimonials and the fiction of the tragedy, the group of women responds to Ismene. There are no watertight compartments in the ways of acting each part: the fragments of their lives are stained with the tragic of the characters, and the characters are another setback of the tragic of their lives. Those fissures through which emptiness and silences have slipped through thus reverberate in the affections that emerge in each of the personal stories and in the parliaments of the chorus. Another desecration takes place: the body and the word of the testimonials, the collective performance of the repertoire and the expressive contamination of the tragedy open the game to dispute the sacredness of the archives during creation.

3 Final reflections

This paper seeks to continue the studies that focus on contemporary documentary theater, mainly Latin American, to think about the dialogs and effects that occur between the uses of archives on stage and acting practices. Although the premieres of the plays analyzed here took place three years apart, it is possible to understand them as part of the documentary boom of this century that we have already mentioned. In this sense, *Mi vida después* by Lola Arias and *Antígona Oriental* by Marianella Morena were useful empirical models for this purpose. One of the topics that provides evidence of this is the acting work that unfolds with the *testimonials* present in both stagings, and the different degrees of desecration we observe in the use of archival materials. So, if, as we explained above, the existing entries in the archives propitiate areas of research and experimentation with the other elements of the staging, we may affirm that the acting dimension is fundamental within them. The play as a specific resource of desecration that multiplies the



folds and possibilities of the archives. This is the basis on which we detect the irruption of acting procedures in contemporary documentary theater.

Likewise, we are interested in highlighting the importance of the recovery of memory within the scenic field. There is a growing consensus that artistic practices are configured as a production of avid knowledge for the study of our societies. In this regard, we note that the modality situated with what each work works on the forms of performance establishes a direct link with the social and political situation in which productions are developed. This allows us to understand both stagings in the terms that Hugo Vezetti (2007) defines as social memories. The author says that these memories trigger public actions on the past generating “a framework of recovery and meaning in the present and a horizon of expectation towards the future” (our translation, Vezetti, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, we consider that going back to the analysis of these plays allows us to constitute in action the exercise of memory. Particularly in Latin America, negationist discourses and practices are still in force. Forty years after the return of democracy in Argentina and almost 39 years in Uruguay, we are faced with the challenge of how to continue building memory, truth and justice in a present challenged by multiple social, political, and economic factors that deepen existing inequalities. Maybe, insisting on the transforming power of sensitive practices will help us find the tip of a ball of yarn that will allow us to build common grounds for democratic coexistence. Our affections may hold a place in the archives in a feasible way to create other more livable futures.



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