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**DOCUMENTARY THEATERS:  
a flight over a sea of possibilities**

TEATROS DOCUMENTÁRIOS:  
um sobrevoos num mar de possibilidades

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**Documentary theaters:  
a flight over a sea of possibilities**

**Abstract:** Contemporarily, innumerable scenic creations are challenging the limits of the documentary genre and proposing new concepts. With the constant development of the field of Documentary Theaters, this study describes some of the documentary forms that strain the boundaries between the real and the fictional. It also shows the potential of these investigations, stimulating relevant reflections for debate and research in the performing arts.

**Keywords:** documentary theater; field of the arts; documentary theaters; research in the performing arts; contemporaneity.

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**Resumo:** Contemporaneamente, inúmeras criações cênicas desafiam os limites do gênero documentário e propõem novos conceitos. Com o constante desenvolvimento do campo dos teatros documentários, este artigo apresenta algumas abordagens documentárias que tensionam as fronteiras entre o real e ficcional. Além disso, mostra a potencialidade das investigações, estimulando reflexões relevantes para o debate e a pesquisa em artes cênicas.

**Palavras-chave:** teatro documentário; campo das artes; teatros documentários; pesquisa em artes cênicas; contemporaneidade.



## 1 Contemporary documentary theaters

The concept of contemporaneity (or all we usually call contemporary) has a close link with the contexts, events, and facts we experience and even with what simply happens in our present time. In Giorgio Agamben's words, "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it" (Agamben, 2009, p. 47). Addressing the theatrical scene evinces this concept of dissociation and anachronism the Italian philosopher pointed out as certain creations relate to traditions or resemble the works or artistic movements of the past, whereas others find different ways of relating to each other in the field in which they are inserted, proposing paths that can be followed by new discoveries and possible trends. Although not necessarily coinciding fully with their time, they constitute the panorama of contemporary works.

This pluralism (especially in the performing arts) shows a growing rise and prominence of a theatrical strand that arouses the interest of critics, researchers, artists, and spectators, called Documentary Theater<sup>1</sup>. Although featured in the theater of recent years, its embryo dates back to the 1920s, more specifically with the first theatrical documentary work ever recorded, *In spite of everything!* (1925) by German director Erwin Piscator (also responsible for its dramaturgy). He aimed to use some dramaturgical and scenic procedures to validate and sustain what stood on stage.

Taking a leap to the 1960s, German Peter Weiss resumed and refined the modality of documentary theater both in the theoretical thinking that supported his creations and in his artistic practice. One of the greatest examples can be found in the play *The Investigation* (1965), in which Weiss used documents and testimonies to address part of the trial of those who were taken to jury for what happened in the Auschwitz concentration camps. He also developed a theoretical material that reflects and points out the processes and objectives of Documentary Theater, entitled *Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre* (1968). It is worth mentioning that he believed that this strand had the necessary tools to tension the context (especially political) of his time.

An important point to be stressed regarding this line of documentary theater is that political issues and their social implications guided it. Driven by Marxist ideology, it positioned itself artistically in a well-defined party adherence, opposing injustices and siding with the most oppressed and disadvantaged. Tania Moguelevskaia (2013) explains that

based on the principle that the world is explainable and transformable, his revolutionary montage theater offered a didactic demonstration on stage, establishing causal links, highlighting contradictions, denouncing and showing the way forward (Kempf; Moguelevskaia, 2013, p. 11, free translation).

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<sup>1</sup> The studies on documentary theaters this study discusses are interrelated with the Master's thesis of author Mario Celso Pereira Junior in the Graduate Program in Performing Arts at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul under the advisory of author Prof. Clóvis Dias Massa. Available at: <https://lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/270555>. Accessed on: Mar. 13, 2024.



In a synthetic analysis, the objective of Weiss' and Piscator's documentary theater is to "oppose the disinformation maintained by the powers, condemn the guilty, foster awareness among spectators, and indicate a way to make the world a better place" (Moguilevskaia, 2011, p. 37, free translation). This way of thinking about documentary theatrical making has survived to this day. In *Rwanda 94* (2000), the Belgian collective Groupov politically engaged itself to attempt a symbolic reparation for those who were oppressed, tortured, and massacred in the barbarity known as the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. Although the dramaturgical procedures steered away from those by Weiss and Piscator, the political and contextualized commitment of the Groupov's piece resembles the treatment of those two German artists since in both cases it exposed "an authentic documentary material that is taken in relation to a global, political theme in which the interests of society as a whole are at stake" (*Ibid.*, p. 36, free translation).

However, over the years, other documentary propositions have emerged and moved away from what we can call classical or historical documentary theater. French researcher Bérénice Hamidi-Kim (2013) highlights two types of documentary theater that coexist beside each other, the first being identified as political documentary theater and the second, post-political. On the one hand, the political documentary theater proposes to denounce reality by working with scientific, historical, official, and public documents, etc. These productions "always aim for the truth, and more precisely for the unveiling of a hidden truth, as much as they stage this will" (Hamidi-Kim, 2013, p. 47, free translation). On the other hand, the post-political theater does not bare this aim, placing itself as something that presents a certain reality, bringing to the stage a documentary theater of the individual, subjectivity, feeling, the microcosm, the intimate, and the particularities of a social group. This leads to another direction for the types of used documents (notes, written and oral reports, testimonies, diaries, among others). This movement aims to expose, to describe "without an overlooking point of view, from within, the chaos of an exploded, fragmentary reality, composed of a multiplicity of heterogeneous, even contradictory and conflictual elements" (*Ibid.*, p. 51, free translation).

Lucie Kempf and Tania Moguilevskaia (2013) also discuss the emergence of such documentary pieces that steer away from those of Weiss and Piscator. They note that such propositions reinvent documentary theater rather than rediscover it. In their words: "contemporary practices have adapted to a socio-political context very different from that of the time of its 'founding fathers'" (Kempf; Mogilevskaia, 2013, p. 24, free translation). The researchers classify this wave as neo-documentary theater because the contemporaneity that accompanies it dialectically forces it to question its own methods, review its techniques, and adapt to the socio-historical-political context of today.

On the other hand, researcher Carol Martin (2010) appropriates the concept Maryvonne Saison formulated and points out that the theaters of the real constitute an evolution of documentary theater, highlighting that these gestures embrace "the cultural and technological changes that are reforming us globally and breaks away from the conservative and conventional dramaturgy of



realism that was so much a part of documentary theater in the late twentieth century” (Martin, 2010, p. 1). The author also highlights an important issue to be considered when thinking about the contemporaneity of these documentary creations, observing that “much of today’s dramaturgy of the real uses the frame of the stage not as a separation, but as a communion of the real and simulated; not as a distancing of fiction from nonfiction, but as a melding of the two” (*Ibid.*, p. 2).

However, what constitutes the act of documenting after all? What is the conceptualization that sustains this theatrical form? It is currently extremely difficult to establish a precise description of this expanding universe. Even so, some researchers help us in this task to think of clues, such as Marcelo Soler. His studies highlight three essential principles that structure and identify documentary pieces: first, the intention to document, which implies a distinct relationship with reality compared to nondocumentary works; second, the use of nonfictional data that testify to reality, thus differentiating itself from fictional productions; and finally, the importance of the viewer’s perception, whose gaze transforms the material into a documentary, highlighting the need for a documentary approach from the public toward an effective commitment to the documentary content (Soler, 2013). By delineating these three principles, his views makes the understanding of the act of documenting and the nature of documentary theater more tangible. However, contemporary propositions of documentary theater exceed these principles in documentary theaters by using the most varied types of documents, working in an indeterminate zone in which areas of fiction and reality intersect under different dosages. Paraphrasing the Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia, who, addressing fiction, considers that “fiction works with the truth to construct a discourse that is neither true nor false” (Piglia, 1994, p. 71, free translation). Documentary theaters, by acting in this shade of uncertainty between truth and falsehood, throw into it the full effect of fiction (or, conversely, what is considered as documentary?).

Such a perspective complexifies the discussion and even the identification of documentary gestures in contemporary theater. How far can one go? What are the limits of creation in the documentary field? How to orchestrate the mix between fiction and non-fiction and remain within documentary theaters today? These questions have no simple, straightforward answer. In fact, several answers may contemplate a portion of studies or these questions may have no satisfactory answer as, with the explosion of propositions, we discover ever new ideas. Nowadays, documentary theaters have shown us

that truth is contextual, multiple, and subject to manipulation; that language frames perception; that art can be objective; that perspectives proliferate; that history is a network of relationships; that things occur by chance; that the performer can be a persona and not necessarily a character in the theatrical sense; that theatre includes the quotidian; that the then, now, and soon-to-be can coexist on stage. (Martin, 2010, p. 3).

Regardless of the employed epistemological concept, the palpable conceptual expansion in the documentary field encompasses different current artistic creations, a diversity that also reflects



the context in which we are inserted: a fragmented, interconnected, plural, objective, and subjective context. All these overarching concepts coexist and express the constant evolution and development of these ways of documenting in theater. However, the accumulated multiplicity provokes the advent of sub-concepts to better describe the documentary forms that, due to their specificities, stand out within the “umbrella” concept, thus configuring a relevant issue for debate.

## 2 The field of documentary theaters: a spectrogram in the process of becoming

Thinking through images can sometimes facilitate the process of assimilating something more complex. As the subject discussed here deals with concepts in constant movement (or even in constant mutation), bringing other forms of association probably helps understanding. Thus, researcher Marcelo Soler (2015)—a playwright and director of Cia. Teatro Documentário—proposes the valuable mental construction of the idea of the field as a vast, open space without the necessary existence of a border, a fence, a demarcation of beginning, middle, and end. The arrangement of the various documentary gestures takes place in this borderless space in direct or indirect, explicit or implicit communion between them.

He then transfers this same image to what we understand as a “field of knowledge,” which “does not refer to an area with rigid contours and permeated with definitions but to a possibility of a place for reflection” (Soler, 2015, p. 16, free translation). In addition to these two associations, he offers a third interesting point about the concept of field. He seeks in the natural sciences—more specifically in Michael Faraday’s studies on physics—another way to understand the studied phenomenon. From the physical point of view, “for there to be interaction between objects in the same field, there is no need for them to be close, and forces can arise between them even if they are distant from each other” (*Ibid.*, p. 16, free translation). The final construction of his reasoning shows us that we can see the field of documentary theaters as a space free of visible boundaries and simple definitions, a place for thought, reflection, and questioning and that the interaction between those in the field neither depends on the issue of proximity nor is limited to it.

Attentive eyes may have noticed that the concept addressed here is spelled in the plural: documentary theaters. The term thus written stems from Béatrice Picon-Vallin and Érica Magris in their book *Les théâtres documentaires* (2019). Like the other possibilities above, this book aimed to encompass the multiple possibilities of documentary propositions. According to Picon-Vallin, in contemporary times, the documentary form

is conjugated according to a thousand different facets that are difficult to assemble into a repertoire as a whole. We speak, therefore, of “documentary theaters” in the plural. The dosage between document, testimony, and fiction and their treatment, themes, and methods configure the differences (Picon-Vallin, 2019, p. 16, free translation).



Thus, given the current alternatives for understanding the term, it seems an appropriate choice to describe it as the field of Documentary Theaters. Thus, this idea can trace new subparts as branches that sometimes approach and distance each other, sometimes resemble or steer away from each other.

This phenomenon of expansion into subdivisions becomes more salient when we analyze it from a spectral perspective as if to magnify it to the point we no longer see a beam but a decomposition in the form of a spectrum that splits into colors as it passes through a prism. Still in this analogy, by observing a spectrogram of light (formed by the colors of the rainbow), each shade of visible color could be associated with a subpart of documentary theaters in which the passage from one to the other is given in a subtle way, having no limiting boundary between them and maintaining a certain interaction or connection whether or not they are distant from each other. This is how pieces behave within the field of documentary theaters, a spectrum of perspectives, forms, possible paths, and fluid understandings, showing hybridity, tensions, and expectations in becoming. It is worth noting that:

Subgenres are defined according to the combination of documents, archives, interviews, and fiction, the way in which reality and fiction relate to characters, places, or narrations, the point of view adopted to address the audience - for it is the audience's gaze that also makes the documentary - and the device constructed from a variety of chosen and crossed disciplines. Some critics limit themselves to four categories, but many more can be found as they are often at the crossroads of arts and disciplines (Picon-Vallin, 2019, p. 418, free translation).

But why in becoming? As stated, the contemporary gesture of documenting in theater is very agitated and has occurred while we perceive and analyze it. In other words, everything is very recent, mutations are inevitable, experiments gestate and give birth to other subparts within the field of documentary theaters. Research in the area moves forward as we deal with an expanding phenomenon in which “such a journey [of exemplifying documentary theaters], with its entrances and multiple approaches, theatrical, historical, sociological, is necessarily unfinished since the current of “documentality” is exploding” (Picon-Vallin, 2019, p. 411, free translation). Although insistent, this task seems to remain inconclusive. Researcher Béatrice Picon-Vallin, evaluating this current, notes that “its function is, without a doubt and above all, to move limits, multiply questions and themes, remove taboos, provoke a great agitation, help redefine the functions of the public theater” (*Ibid.*, p. 417, free translation).

Even so, we find several subgenres that inhabit the field of documentary theaters in contemporary times, such as: Verbatim Theater, Community Theater or Community Theater, Docudrama, Autobiography, Lecture Theater or Conference Theater, Testimony Theater, Fact Theater, Documentation Theater, Courtroom Theater, Real Theater, Documentary Performance, Documented Theater, Scenic Documentary, Nonfiction, Performative Self-Writing, etc. As mentioned, each new search raises other terms. Nevertheless, this study brings some concepts to exemplify the materiality of this discussion.



### 3 A matter of dosage: brief examples of possibilities

The vast universe of documentary theaters shows a diverse and multiple range of approaches and proposals that challenge the margins and investigate the boundaries (and in many cases the union) between reality and fiction. In turn, some examples arouse heated discussions and generate controversies, offering perspectives that challenge norms and conventions, such as *Théâtre presque documentaire* (Quasi-documentary theater). This case is, perhaps, the most controversial because it resembles fictions based on facts. However, some theorists understand this line of creation as belonging to the field of documentary theaters, such as Marion Boudier.

In her text *Un théâtre «presque documentaire»? (2013)*, the author argues that, as problematic as it may be, some production place documents at their center, at the root of their emergence (a basic principle within the documentary field), offering Joël Pommerat's works as an example. The researcher, a playwright in Pommerat's creation process, uses the expression *presque documentaire* by Canadian photographer Jeff Wall and French playwright David Lescot. The former uses the expression to designate its ambiguity (the documentary and reconstructed parts). The latter reiterates it as writing "that quenches a 'thirst for the real' and activates 'a poetic engine'" (Boudier, 2013, p. 129, free translation). For Boudier, the question of the document or of the act of documenting in Pommerat's plays is debatable: "reality is documented and reconstructed during the writing process, but the real, never unequivocal, is rather a source of uneasiness" (*Ibid.*, p. 136, free translation). At the same time, taking inspiration in reality also serves to validate or legitimize the discourse placed on stage, a dialectical game between the act of documenting and the act of inventing, poetizing, fictionalizing.

In this case, the used non-fictional data, the indexing of the document, or the contiguity with reality "is not intended, therefore, at the spectator, as in P. Weiss's judgment theater, but at the author and his team of actors, who are in search of individual and existential truths" (*Ibid.*, p. 138, free translation). The process of creating and rewriting transforms this shattered, diluted, transformed documentary trace. According to the researcher, Pommerat says he ignores how to characterize or define his pieces. Rather than spending his time looking for the real, and that, since *Cercles/Fictions* (2010) and *Ma chambre froide* (2011), he finds himself writing "as an investigative judge reconstructing a murder scene" (Pommerat *apud* Boudier, 2013, p. 139, free translation). It is important to note that this term is quite contradictory, controversial, and even dubious. The paths opened by the particle are 'almost' as numerous and can lead to interpretations more focused on a fiction based on facts, on the pseudo-documentary, or, in this study by Boudier, the quasi-documentary.

Another term refers to a different way of working with documents: *arhivă perperformivă* (performative archive). Romanian playwright and artist Gianina Cărbunariu uses this expression. This way of researching and working focuses on the unique characteristics each document carries with it and the traces left from its production. In *Xmm from Ykm* (2011), Gianina used unconventional





material as a form of scenic text: a stenogram. Dorin Tudoran had published this document the previous year, which addresses the Romanian security archives (Patureau *apud* Magris; Picon-Vallin, 2019). A stenogram, i.e., a text written based on symbolic phonetic abbreviations to accelerate the transcription of oral speech, shows marks of the development of writing. Thus, this document was discussed, analyzed, and brought to the stage in the same way as it was published. The author states aiming to investigate the writing mechanisms of the document rather than discovering a possible ‘truth’ behind the symbols. What stood out was precisely the traces of fabrication, the repetition of information (characteristic of oral speech), the breaths of speakers, records in the archive, gaps, etc. (Cărbunariu, 2018). What is at stake is another look, another proposal to address documents on stage, prioritizing a structural character beyond the subject contained therein.

Still within the documentary spectrum, but questioned and put to the test within research in Performing Arts, is the pseudo-documentary, also known as mockumentary. It seeks to unapologetically aggregate framed fiction in a so-called documentary form or, in other words, explore procedures so that fictional data (invented for a given creation) are treated as real. For this reason, the term in English joins two words: ‘mock’ + ‘documentary.’ Regarding this union of meanings, Erica Magris and Béatrice Picon-Vallin underline that “it seems that the first meaning of ‘mockery’ dominates the audiovisual field and that the mockumentary has satirical and humorous intentions” (Magris; Picon-Vallin, 2019, p. 441, free translation). Examples of this are the films starring the character Borat, the second best reporter in the glorious country of Kazakhstan, created and played by Sacha Baron Cohen. Both films show him documenting the habits of Americans. Both its editing and some of its procedures make it resemble documentary films but its content is fictional, exacerbating mockery, humor, and satire. But what about on the stage? How does this relationship develop? We can mention the dance and theater show *Mockumentary of a Contemporary Saviour* (2017) by the Belgian Wim Vandekeybus and his company *Ultima Vez*. The creator states that the work never thought about putting the real on stage, but rather a possible future (MOCKUMENTARY, 2017). The work

deals with death, love, limbo, sex, and ritual – often inviting the audience to question their own purpose within the work, as well as in the world. It continually questions the idea of God, taking the viewer on a journey of revelation (Alexander, 2017).

According to Wim, the present comes in as a source of reflection to describe a future reality. The complexity lies in tensioning contemporary reality to expand questions about today and tomorrow, rather than prospecting events (MOCKUMENTARY, 2017). The sarcastic, mocking side is put aside to give way to the perception of a pseudo-documentary, prioritizing the procedures involved in the production of a documentary.

We also bring to the discussion a concept that differs from the others due to the genesis of the works identified as *Teatru-Document* (from the Romanian, Theater-Document). This means that, most of the time, this term is associated with pieces after they are ready since several were produced, under the context in which they were made, thus constituting Document-Theaters rather



than configuring a documentary. Lacking a very clear definition, the term expresses the applied meaning well. To elucidate this, we mention the collection *Chișinău, 7 aprilie: Teatru-document* (2010) (Patureau *apud* Magris; Picon-Vallin, 2019), which gathers four works in a single volume. Irina Nechit, Constantin Cheianu, Dumitru Crudu, and Mihai Fusu — important intellectuals from Bessarabia, the present-day Republic of Moldova (in the border between Romania and Ukraine) — created these writings. The pieces were written in the eagerness of the moment, aiming at portraying the repression of the youth demonstration on April 7, 2009, which protested against the government of the time and the possible fraud and falsification of elections (Jela, 2010).

The evident details of the day portrayed in these pieces convey the exalted feeling of young people, even if they are fictional writings based on these facts. Government authorities still have a Herculean deed to erase this day since this collection can revive memories as if they were a document, a living record of events. The anthology also has a section dedicated to the chronology of the facts and authors' comments and testimonies, whose words help to contextualize the moment in which they were inserted (Khalil-Butucioc, 2011). We understand that, in this example, the pieces were not created with the intention of documenting or of a being documentary, and yet they came to be considered and read as documentary-theaters. It should be noted that here fiction acted as a kind of scalpel of reality; with surgical precision it could open a crack in the history of those people, becoming documents of a memory in nearby erasure.

Finally, in Brazil, *Luís Antonio – Gabriela* (2011), a piece directed by Nelson Baskerville with Cia. Mungunzá, was created from biographical documents; their photographs, diaries, and interviews with family and friends belonged to the construction of different points of view about the director's transsexual sister. Baptized as Luís Antonio as a boy, Gabriela refused to hide her same-gender attraction. She was beaten by her father to 'cure' her, expelled from school and home as a teenager, and headed for a life of prostitution and drug use until her death in Spain in 2006, victim of AIDS. The piece dates back to the Brazilian military government and denounces how the violence and oppression of that dictatorship reverberates in the family structure. The scenic device contributes to this: Gabriela's story is non-linearly presented to spectators by an evident artistic polyphony whose installation employs projections, drawings, and paintings mixed with modules and numerous scenic objects articulated in a non-illusory way. Considered by the company as a scenic documentary, its dramaturgical structure consists of a series of testimonies that alternate with original songs in which the cast performs the trans body (Baskerville, 2012). Despite its evident epic character, which punctually announces the events by digital signs, amplifiers, and microphones, it still produces relatedness, moving the audience by exposing transphobia and showing what would be Baskerville's apology to his sister.



#### **4 Final remarks: as if an ending actually existed**

In sum, documentary theaters have been gaining increased prominence due to their diverse experiments and ability to provoke intense discussions in the Performing Arts. By pushing concepts to their limit; reinventing themselves; and resurrecting, hybridizing, and merging reality and invention, fiction, and non-fiction; these pieces encourage not only their audiences to reflect on social, political, historical, and artistic issues, but also the academic community to rethink concepts and broaden the horizons of research and possibilities. This evinces the complexity and plurality of perspectives that permeate documentary theaters, reinforcing the relevance of expanded, open analyses and understandings of the contiguous work of development of this artistic form in our contemporaneity.

Both the discussions on the theme and the examples this study described serve as a bridge or springboard for research on the profusion of documentary theaters. Some are closer to the origins of this thought; others are controversial and questionable but all this makes up the context of the contemporaneity of the field. Fluidity, hybridization, tension, questioning, and even boldness expand the known limits of theatrical representations and documentaries. The coexistence of these strands, which sometimes dialogue with today, sometimes with yesterday, makes the contemporaneity of forms seethe, and “precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, [documentary theaters] are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time” (Agamben, 2009, p. 46). As documentary theaters expand and dialogue with the society and the theatrical making of the time, the more we can expect new discoveries, definitions, experimentations, and concepts. Challenging our understanding, questioning boundaries, and offering new perspectives: this is what documentary theaters have to offer us.



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