

# NEW BULGARIAN UNIVERSITY

## SOFIA

Theatre Department

THEATRE BASED ON A TRUE STORY: Document and Fiction in Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre

### ABSTRACT

For the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

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The dissertation was discussed and proposed for defence under the procedure of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria by the Theatre Department at New Bulgarian University, Sofia, at a meeting held on 24 March 2026.

The dissertation has a total volume of 191 pages, of which 139 pages are the main text. Structurally, it includes: an introduction, an exposition in three chapters, conclusions and final remarks, a bibliography of 10 pages containing 84 sources (59 titles in Cyrillic and 25 in Latin script), and an appendix consisting of documented interviews with the artists whose work is the object of this study.

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# I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION

## 1. Research Problem, Significance and Relevance

The research problem is the construction of theatrical reality from factual material (documentary, journalistic and autobiographical). The study asks how the document is integrated into the dramaturgical and stage language of a performative work.

The subject of the research is the relationship between document and fiction in contemporary performance based on a true story, as well as the authorial presence of the director and the actor in theatre based on a true story.

Chronologically, the dissertation concentrates on twentieth century European theatre, while the analysed stage examples are from the first quarter of the twenty-first century in Bulgaria.

The object of the study consists of performances from Bulgarian independent and institutional theatre. In the order in which they are discussed, these are: The Hague; The Vagina Monologues; Archaeology of Dreaming; Cinderella Ltd.; Bad Children; Nocturne; The Room of Pleasure Is Empty; Invisible 1; and 100% Plovdiv. Three productions are drawn from the author's own professional experience: Nordost. A Tale of Destruction; Bluebeard - A Marriage Without a Fairy Tale; and A Body Thrown at an Angle toward the Horizon. The study also examines the author's teaching experience with the introduction of neo-documentary theatre methods into actor training.

The titles listed above are projects by the following artists and theatre companies: Galin Stoev; Gergana Dimitrova and the 36 Monkeys Organization for Contemporary Alternative Art and Culture; Irina Goleva and the Association Based on a True Story; Blagoy Boychev and Replica Theatre; Yuliana Sayska and Emergency Theatre; Neda Sokolovska and the Vox Populi Documentary Theatre Studio; Vasilena Radeva and Panic Button Theatre; and the University Theatre at New Bulgarian University.

The selection of specific theatre companies and directors does not claim to be exhaustive. It is made in accordance with the intention to examine in greater depth a small number of essentially different examples of finding a stage language for documentary facts.

Relevance: Theatre based on a true story is one of the most dynamically developing contemporary theatrical genres. In recent years it has gained increasing popularity in the Bulgarian theatre environment. The coexistence of art and its socio-historical time - peaceful or otherwise - has always been a reason for numerous scholarly discussions, studies and achievements. Because of its fleeting nature as an event happening live, theatre is most strongly dependent on, but also semantically nourished by, its locality and its present moment. The concrete examples from the Bulgarian institutional and independent stage examined in this dissertation belong to some of the most current global tendencies in theatre today.

## 2. Aims and Tasks

The dissertation aims to examine the presence or absence of conflict between the concepts of document and fiction as they relate to theatre based on a true story. It also studies the concrete ways and forms of their interaction in the different subgenres of neo-documentary theatre, whose development and popularization have been observed in Bulgaria in recent decades.

To achieve this aim, the dissertation sets several key research tasks:

- 1. To clarify basic concepts in the field of the performing arts connected with theatre based on a true story in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries;**
- 2. To present the author's own research into theatre based on a true story on the contemporary Bulgarian stage;**
- 3. To analyse the staging methods of selected Bulgarian artists and the stage language of their performances;**
- 4. To conduct and record conversations-interviews with Bulgarian artists whose work with document and fiction is the object of this study;**
- 5. To share and further develop the author's own directorial and pedagogical methodology for integrating documentary material into performance.**

The main aim of the dissertation is not to analyse the creative result and its public reception, but to study the creative approaches of artists who build their own authorial stage language when working with documents and facts.

## 3. Research Thesis

The main thesis of the dissertation is that translating documentary facts into theatrical language requires both creative inventiveness and a bold sweep of imagination, as well as ethical responsibility toward the sensitivity of the subject and the authenticity of the documentary material. When these conditions are present, the boundaries between document and fiction in theatre based on a true story may be either deliberately emphasized or consciously blurred.

## 4. Research Methodology

The research methods include: reference to specialized literature, books by authors, articles and statements in the media; a detailed interview-conversation with each of the Bulgarian artists examined; analysis of specific performances with a focus on the translation of documentary material into stage language; and practical work with students in the genre of neo-documentary theatre, including the collection of documentary material, the creation of an authorial concept and dramaturgical material, and its stage performance.

In examining three of the principal methods for creating neo-documentary theatre - a performance based on a play with a documentary basis, devised theatre and verbatim theatre - the dissertation relies on the authors' own accounts of their creative intentions and working processes. The focus is on the artists' creative search in producing theatre based on a true story, not on the specific results alone. The statements of theatre practitioners and experts are selectively introduced into the dissertation discourse according to its concrete need for information and interpretation on a given question.

The problems examined in the dissertation can be useful to all who work with theatre based on a true story, as well as with the relation between fact and fiction in this type of theatre. More specifically, they can enrich the knowledge and experience of students, professional directors and artists in the field of documentary theatre and contemporary neo-documentary techniques.

A broad range of sources in theatrical and literary theory, publications and authorial opinions by Bulgarian and foreign researchers in documentary and neo-documentary theatre have been studied and systematized in order to form the theoretical part of the dissertation.

In the study of contemporary neo-documentary practices in Bulgarian theatre after the year 2000, the concepts, statements and concrete staging procedures of the creators of the productions discussed are analysed. The dissertation text also includes the author's personal impressions, as well as an auto-reflexive analysis of part of the author's professional experience that falls within the subject of this dissertation.

At the basis of this dissertation lies the search for the author's own orientation in the field of active representatives of theatre based on a true story in Bulgaria, and for situating within that field the author's personal practical experience, already acquired or forthcoming, as director and teacher of acting.

## **5. Limitations**

This text offers only a brief historical overview of documentary theatre in Europe in the twentieth century and is limited to mentioning several well-known artists and companies creating neo-documentary theatre abroad. The dissertation does not study contemporary theatrical genres such as forum theatre, playback theatre, theatrical reconstructions of actual events, lecture theatre and other theatrical forms that also work with documentary material. Many Bulgarian artists and their productions based on true stories are not included in the subject of the study because of its structural and temporal limitations. The spectator reception of the analysed performances is touched upon only briefly, since in this context collaboration with the spectator is important mainly from the viewpoint of authorial intention.

## **II. STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION**

The structural elements of the dissertation are as follows:

### **Introduction**

### **Chapter One - Conceptual Clarifications**

- 1. The Concepts of Document and Fiction in Documentary Theatre**
- 2. Uses of Documents in European Theatre. Some Examples from the Twentieth Century**
  - 2.1. Theatre Based on a True Story or Documentary Theatre**
  - 2.2. Epic Theatre**
  - 2.3. The Document in Postdramatic Theatre**
- 3. Contemporary Documentary Theatre**

### **Chapter Two - Bulgarian Theatrical Practices Based on True Stories in the First Quarter of the Twenty-First Century**

- 1. Performances Based on Dramaturgy in which Documents Are Used. A Study of the Relation Between Play and Stage Language**
  - 1.1. Galin Stoev in Three Pulsations of Geopolitical Time**
    - 1.1.1. The Vagina Monologues - the White Swallow of Neo-Documentary Theatre in Bulgaria**
    - 1.1.2. Archaeology of Dreaming - Confession as Document**
    - 1.1.3. The Hague - a Political Phantasmagoria Based on a True Story**
  - 1.2. The Dramaturgical Use of the Fairy-Tale Element in a Performance Based on a True Story - 36 Monkeys and Cinderella Ltd.**
  - 1.3. Replica Theatre and Close Contact with the Spectator**
- 2. Devised Performance**
  - 2.2. Autobiographical Performance or Stage Auto-Fiction**
    - 2.2.1. Based on a True Story - the Actor as a Stage Projection of the Self**
    - 2.2.2. Emergency Theatre and The Room of Pleasure Is Empty**
- 3. Field Documentary Work - Verbatim Performance**
  - 3.1. The Verbatim Method for Creating Performance**
  - 3.2. Vox Populi Documentary Theatre Studio and the Voice of the People in Bulgarian Independent Theatre**
- 4. Making Theatre Politically**

## **Chapter Three. Theatre Based on a True Story, Seen Through the Author's Own Directorial and Teaching Practice**

### **1. Productions in Professional Theatre**

#### **1.1. Nordost. A Tale of Destruction**

#### **1.2. Bluebeard - A Marriage Without a Fairy Tale**

#### **1.3. A Body Thrown at an Angle Toward the Horizon**

### **2. A Study of Neo-Documentary Techniques in Teaching Practice**

## **Conclusions and Final Remarks**

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### **III. BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE CONTENT OF THE DISSERTATION**

The introduction defines the problem of the frequent underestimation of neo-documentary practices in the institutional understanding of dramatic theatre. It asks whether addressing problems and phenomena from social and political reality reduces or even neutralizes the artistic and aesthetic value of theatre. Questions such as, "How does theatre reflect a rapidly changing social, political and economic context?" and "How, by making theatre, does the artist comprehend and articulate personal, political and social crises?" emphasize the relevance of the topic. The theoretical and practical significance of the dissertation is justified. The author's main thesis, aim and research tasks are presented.

The empirical study of theatre based on a true story is conducted in parallel with the theoretical study, from the position of a practicing theatre director and teacher. The author has professional theatre education and nearly twenty years of experience in Bulgarian independent and institutional theatre. To substantiate the aims and tasks, the author constructs a theoretical scheme in three main chapters, each with separate subsections.

In Chapter One the specificity of the use of several theoretical concepts is clarified from the viewpoint of the selected research focus. Facts connected with documentary theatre in the twentieth century are discussed. The hypothesis is advanced that in the strongly turbulent social and political environment of the past century, caused by the two world wars and by the subsequent Cold War and division of the world into Eastern and Western blocs, the rapid development of documentary and political theatre was entirely logical and, in a sense, historically predetermined. The chapter concludes that through the use of documentary material, some of the major theatre practitioners of the twentieth century sought to state their social and political position. One of the important aims of theatre based on a true story is to ask and offer its own version of questions such as "Why?", "How?" and "Until when?", not simply to inform about "what", as news and media do.

## **Chapter One. Conceptual Clarifications**

The contextual framework is outlined, within which the concepts *document* and *fiction* are included in the subject of the research. The text attempts to clarify the similarities and differences between the terms documentary theatre and theatre based on a true story. It briefly presents the development of documentary

theatre in Europe. It examines how documents and real facts influence or determine the stage language of theatrical works. Contemporary types of theatre that can be related to the field of documentary theatre are listed.

## 1. The Concepts of Document and Fiction in Documentary Theatre

The concepts *document* and *fiction* are introduced from the viewpoint of their use in contemporary stage language. In the current age of information war, where many "truths" fight for the trust of the individual and fake news is a powerful tool for manipulation and the spread of negative emotions such as fear and hatred, the way documents are created and examined has a key role not only on the judicial, political and economic scene, but also on the theatrical stage itself. In theatre, the "human factor" of the document is especially evident: its role as testimony to an event or a person.

Some contemporary analysts answer the question of what a document is by saying that the document is equivalent to fact. Because every document has an origin - it is necessarily created by a particular person who reflects in it a particular view of what happened - this opinion cannot be applied in the present study. Part of the subject of the dissertation is the question of how a given document is interpreted and inserted into the context of artistic, stage reality, and how a subjective view can acquire documentary validation through verification and/or trust in its truthfulness.

Fiction, in this research context, is not treated as the opposite of the document, but as a mode of artistic organization that allows documentary material to become stage material. In performances based on a true story, the boundaries between document and fiction are often deliberately blurred. This enables a plausible representation and artistic interpretation of both dramaturgical materials, although they differ in origin.

The homogeneity that leads to the absence of direct opposition between document and fiction in performance based on a true story is the main hypothesis from which the inclusion of documentary testimonies in a performative construction is examined. In most cases, documentary dramaturgy does not strive to achieve the traditional empathetic model of reception through self-identification leading to sympathy, co-experience and catharsis. The introduction of the document into the space of the dramaturgical text shifts the focus from the material carrier and its concrete language of narration toward the aestheticization and socialization of layers of common human experience.

Documentary facts and reports present information from a distance, without emotion, yet they demand moral engagement. Documents do not represent reality; they problematize it. By being separated from the time, space and context in which they were created, they may even appear meaningless because we are unable to recognize and identify them or to layer them with our subjectivity and imagination. Making sense of documentary reality may develop in several temporal relations. In relation to the past, it is the path of memory and recollection. In relation to the present, there is rather an evaluative view of otherness, a sign of difference oscillating between our immediate reality and a present somewhere else. In relation to the future, the work as a whole acquires a documentary, preserving value.

## 2. Uses of Documents in European Theatre. Some Examples from the Twentieth Century

### 2.1. Theatre Based on a True Story or Documentary Theatre

This section explains why the brief introduction to the use of the document in European theatre concerns mainly documentary theatre, although the object of the dissertation is theatre based on a true story. The difference between these two concepts is defined according to the time of their emergence, characteristic features and practical use. The two forms overlap in their essential feature: both are theatre based on real events and facts. They differ, however, in the degree of factual reliability of the content, in the freedom of the artistic approach, and in whether they blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. There are also differences in how they seek to engage their audiences.

Patrice Pavis (1996) argues that documentary theatre is a dramatic form of the theatre of modernity. At the basis of this type of theatre is not the presentation of a fictional story written in a play, but the attempt to stage actual historical or current events. It is often associated with a political, critical or ethical position and uses real documents to argue that position. Its aim is to provoke critical thinking, raise social awareness and generate discussion among spectators.

Theatre based on a true story is also grounded in a real existing fact, but that fact may serve only as inspiration for the artistic work. This type of theatre often prioritizes the construction of an interesting narrative and/or emotionally effective images over factual accuracy. It too is based on detailed preliminary research into the topic, the chronology of events and the genesis of the phenomenon, but authentic documents need not necessarily be integrated into the performance. The term theatre based on a true story began to be used only decades after the emergence of documentary theatre in Europe. With regard to the use of documents in theatrical performance, Chapter One briefly mentions several facts, figures and methods from the history of documentary theatre in the twentieth century.

### 2.2. Epic Theatre

After the First World War, especially among German-speaking authors and theatre practitioners, there arose a desire to blur the boundaries between art and reality in theatre and thus to give this art a more significant social and political position. The pioneers of documentary theatre were Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who defined their theoretical and artistic directions respectively as political and epic theatre. In essence, however, the ideas of these theatrical innovators mutually enrich one another.

In his productions, Piscator used authentic documents, such as fragments of public political speeches, articles, newspaper excerpts, appeals, official data, photographs, documentary film footage, diaries and audio archives. These "pieces of reality" were not included merely as background to the dramaturgical action, but were actively woven into it and into the scenography. The purpose of this documentary device was to provoke critical reflection in the spectator and to connect the spectator directly with the historical or contemporary events presented.

Piscator was one of the first theatre practitioners to understand and formulate in his theoretical writings the strong historical need for a specific theatre connected with current social reality and based on facts and documents. Together with the architect Walter Gropius, founder and director of the Bauhaus, Piscator designed

a theatre building that was extremely modern for its time in its kinetic idea and technical equipment, intended for what they called total theatre: a theatre that would involve the spectator as a direct participant in the action. Although Piscator did not obtain funding for this ambitious architectural project, in most of the spaces where he staged performances he introduced parallel, simultaneous stage actions. This device, which later influenced many landmark performances based on true stories, he called the global stage.

The driving force in Piscator's work was the need to find a dramaturgical language that could combine a view of the microcosm of the working person of his time with a view of the macrocosm of political and economic world events. His artistic courage in embedding authentic documents into fictional plots initiated another powerful trend in European theatre: the director's free adaptation of an already existing dramatic or prose text. Piscator claimed that he discovered this collage-like directorial approach out of necessity, already at the beginning of his professional path, because of the lack of contemporary dramaturgy adequate to the social, political and personal problems of the twentieth-century human being.

Among the writers invited by Piscator to work on the stage adaptation of *The Good Soldier Schweik* was Bertolt Brecht. Brecht, already a supporter of Piscator's theatre, encountered Piscator's directorial method practically and, on the basis of that collaboration, further developed his idea of epic theatre. From Piscator's direction he borrowed specific ways of introducing documentary material onto the stage, such as the use of geographical maps as scenographic elements, the presentation of statistical data, and the integration of projected film excerpts into performances.

Brecht's famous alienation effect aimed to break theatrical illusion and provoke critical thinking in the spectator instead of emotional absorption in what happens on stage. Among the stage means by which Brecht achieved this effect were minimal, sparse scenery whose changes occurred before the eyes of the audience; textual signs, banners, slogans and projections that commented on the action or gave it context; interruption of the plot by music and songs that commented on the events and characters; sharp, direct lighting that kept the spectator aware of watching an artificially created stage life; and actors changing roles or costumes in front of the audience in order to emphasize the theatricality of the event.

Brecht combined these staging devices into a characteristic stage language dictated by his own epic dramaturgy. He defined his dramaturgy as anti-Aristotelian. He did not wish to immerse the audience in the illusion that real life was happening on stage. The main figure in his plays is rather a "non-tragic hero" (after Walter Benjamin), which is why there is no room there for Aristotelian catharsis. One of the most characteristic features of this dramaturgy is its didacticism. Walter Benjamin argues that the success of these didactic plays was due to a great extent to the way the actor plays in them: the actor's task in epic theatre is to demonstrate, through his or her acting presence, that he or she is cool-headed and calm. The spectator too must remain cool-headed and calm. The actor in epic theatre should not play the role by incarnating the character, but should be able to step out of it and sometimes address the audience directly in order to preserve a critical attitude toward what is being presented.

The means of epic theatre have substantially influenced contemporary theatrical language and, to different degrees, continue to be applied by directors worldwide in productions of very different themes, both inside and outside the field of theatre based on a true story.

The rise of documentary drama in Germany contributed greatly to the increased interest in documentary theatre in Europe in the 1960s. Authors such as Peter Weiss, Rolf Hochhuth and Heinar Kipphardt created works inspired by recent historical events, such as the Holocaust, or by processes related to the recent past but

unfolding in the author's present as political decisions and legal proceedings. Courtroom dramas such as Weiss's *The Investigation* and Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* are key examples of the use of documentary materials in dramaturgy and of innovative forms in stage language. The aim of this type of drama is to raise important ethical questions of its time and provoke its reader or spectator, thereby increasing the degree of socio-critical perception of reality and art.

### 2.3. Documents in Postdramatic Theatre

The dissertation briefly focuses on postdramatic theatre because a large part of the phenomena in theatre based on a true story are defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann as postdramatic theatre. The use of documentary materials by artists in postdramatic theatre often has an ironic or parodic purpose, or functions as reference material for personal use. Documents are considered to be more as part of the texture of the performance than as determinants of its narrative, insofar as a postdramatic performance can be narrative at all. Documentary fragments are most often presented on stage according to a collage principle, together with other textual and visual fragments. They do not construct a linear story about a past event and are not a premise for the realistic credibility of dramatic action.

Documents become part of the introduction of a pluralistic language into the performance, presenting different voices and their positions, and building a specific chorus of individual monologues. They are used mainly for their performative rather than historical potential.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, documentary materials connected with that event, raising themes such as historical and individual memory, collective and personal identity, social and political division, became constituent parts of many memorable postmodern works in European theatre over the last three decades. The dissertation advances the hypothesis that from this historical threshold onward, European theatre blurs the boundaries between objectively historical documents and subjectively biographical documents - personal memory of historical events. By combining, and thus putting into dialogue, materials from public and personal archives in their dramaturgical scenarios, many contemporary companies seek to provoke spectators toward personal interpretation, critical thinking and even rejection of the official historical narrative.

Postmodernism as a whole problematizes the status of fact and its relation to history, as well as the question of how documentary sources are deployed - whether they can be objective and neutral, or whether the process of narrativization inevitably introduces interpretation. A postmodern artefact working with the past must above all be open to the present. In postmodern society, the crisis of language is discussed, and Jean-Francois Lyotard connects the postmodern with the decline of grand narratives and the boom of small stories. The resulting skepticism toward textual documents or historical sources leads to heightened interest in the genre of oral history. Oral narratives contain an attempt to face language in its entirety: not only the language of the educated but also of illiterate people and dialects; not only official language but also forbidden codes, which also have the right to leave a document of their existence.

Oral history, having crossed the boundaries of the social sciences, often becomes a tool of groups or communities pushed to the periphery - minorities and ethnic groups, feminist and gay movements and others - interested in constructing their own version of their identity. In postdramatic theatre there is a tendency to turn toward materials based on sensitivity, emotions and the "direct" transmission of personal experience. Increasingly, a historical fact is interpreted through biographical memories and documents from the personal archives of contemporaries drawn into the performative world of the theatrical work.

This way of interpreting documents, as well as creating new ones, usually audio or video interviews, is also characteristic of an important method of constructing theatrical reality: verbatim theatre. Although the emergence of verbatim technique (from the Latin, literally "word for word") dates from the mid-1960s, this type of documentary theatre is still gaining popularity in Bulgaria.

### 3. Contemporary Documentary Theatre

From the second half of the twentieth century, and especially over the last three decades, works that can be related to the field of documentary theatre or to the broader genre umbrella of theatre based on a true story have taken the most diverse stage forms and quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Almost all of them have moved considerably away from what might be defined as historical or classical documentary theatre. The French researcher Berenice Hamidi-Kim distinguishes two principal types of documentary theatre: the first can be identified as political documentary theatre, and the second as post-political.

The contemporary wave that rediscovers, or rather rethinks and redefines, documentary quality in theatre, while moving significantly away from Piscator's and Peter Weiss's views of documentary theatre, is classified by theorists under the term neo-documentary theatre. Its creators often question the very methods of using the document in performance, discover new ways and techniques for integrating it into stage language, and adapt it to today's socio-political context. These aspects make the concept neo-documentary theatre almost identical with theatre based on a true story. For this reason, in the present dissertation the two terms are used interchangeably.

The enormous variety of documents used in contemporary neo-documentary theatre, some of which could not fit the idea of an official document but have the right to be called testimonies, and the diverse ways in which they inhabit performative reality, make the genre of documentary theatre today impossible to define through a single definition encompassing all of its manifestations. Beatrice Picon-Vallin and Erika Magris therefore propose that the contemporary name of the genre should be used in the plural: documentary theatres. They can be distinguished according to the different degree of documentary quality, testimony and fiction they contain, or according to the method by which, on the basis of facts, they build their stage language.

Chapter One therefore traces several historical steps of documentary theatre and also notes the variety of different approaches in the broad universe of contemporary theatre based on a true story. This universe has boundaries that are permanently expanding. At the same time the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred. What remains relatively constant is the aim of turning the performative space into a place of active co-participation and enabling the spectator to reflect on the world and on the self. This aim underlies the motivation of most theatre-makers in Bulgaria who work with documentary material.

Chapter Two examines the activity of a representative group of these artists and analyses the ways in which they transform facts from social, political or intimate reality into stage language.

## **Chapter Two. Bulgarian Theatrical Practices Based on True Stories in the First Quarter of the Twenty-First Century**

### **1. Performances Based on Dramaturgy in Which Documents Are Used. A Study of the Relation Between Play and Stage Language**

The first angle from which the search for a stage language for documentary facts in contemporary Bulgarian theatre is examined is the creation of a performance based on a dramatic work. In this case the text already exists, written by a specific author, and its stage presentation is part of its dissemination. Such plays usually address themes directly connected with violence, discriminatory and genocidal practices and so on. This type of dramaturgy aims not only to speak about trauma but also to reconcile with it.

#### **1.1. Galin Stoev in Three Pulsations of Geopolitical Time**

Galın Stoev's international directing practice of more than thirty years includes numerous projects based on different classical and contemporary texts. Three of his emblematic productions based on plays with a documentary basis enter the focus of the dissertation. The aim is to examine how a director with a pronounced affinity for dramatic fiction, and with an unrestrained imaginative range, translates the document and the play based on a true story into stage language. This part analyses the relation between fact and fiction in *The Vagina Monologues*, *Archaeology of Dreaming* and *The Hague*, providing information on the social and theatrical contexts in which they were created and on the director's motives for staging these texts.

##### **1.1.1. The Vagina Monologues - The White Swallow of Neo-Documentary Theatre in Bulgaria**

The dissertation emphasizes the importance of this performance for the entry of documentary dramaturgy into the Bulgarian theatrical stage and for the bolder use of direct contact with the spectator - speaking aside - as a means of breaking theatrical convention. The play chooses the code of the monologue, which allows dramaturgical speech to be directly addressed and to demand a response to the problems publicly voiced. An interesting dramaturgical move is the inclusion of stories that are documented reactions by spectators after certain presentations of the play. Eve Ensler's text also engages through its feminist thematic charge, with documentary testimonies purposefully created and selected in relation to that charge.

The theatrical rather than political provocation for the director in staging the play may have contributed most to softening the didacticism of the dramaturgy. This probably also determined the choice of actresses with such powerful theatrical presence and rich psycho-physical means. The performance is staged in the style of a talk show, and its main acting instrument is the human voice, emphasized by large headset microphones placed before the actresses' mouths. The perfectly mastered stage speech and the virtuosic play of voices of the three actresses, with well-conducted semantic and emotional amplitudes, guide the spectator through various borderline situations and histories of violence.

Despite the high level of artistry and acting technique, Galın Stoev's staging of *The Vagina Monologues* reveals the artistic team's serious respect for the documentary material, which seems to have restrained the director from fully unleashing his staging fantasy. The documentary nature that shapes the play's feminist

message made its staging in Bulgaria in 2000 a courageous and very intelligent provocation to the Bulgarian audience, still part of a society with a strongly patriarchal consciousness.

During the long life of the Bulgarian production, actively seeking new audiences, its team performed a kind of public educational activity. The dissertation mentions this activity in relation to a very important aspect of creating theatre based on a true story: its added value for the development of democratic civil society. The text returns to this aspect in almost every Bulgarian theatrical example it discusses, because stimulating and maintaining discussion and public debate about problems "swept under the carpet" and questions tabooed in the community is essential for the preservation of democracy. Democracy is the only form of government in which the artist's free expression is possible, and such expression is in itself at the core of neo-documentary theatre.

### **1.1.2. Archaeology of Dreaming - Confession as Document**

What is of interest for this study is how, while dealing with one of the most fictional, subjective and subconscious phenomena - dreaming - this dramatic text can be viewed as a kind of document of a socio-historical period. In it, a sense of dissatisfaction, loss and hopelessness finds expression in mass drug addiction among young people from the former Eastern bloc. Ivan Vyrpaev wrote the text on the basis of observations and conversations with close friends and acquaintances about their life on heroin. The documentary quality of the performance lies mainly in the genesis of the text and in the invisible pull of the untold real stories of the prototypes of the characters.

Two seemingly irreconcilable extremes coexist in this dramaturgy: radical formalism and the almost documentary nature of emotions. What interests the director in staging this text is how pure poetry can be made out of material "taken from life". The blurring of boundaries between documentary quality and fantasy, between the authenticity of language - the monologues sound like real testimonies or confessions - and the poetic freedom of the staging form, is one of the major inspirations in the author's own professional path.

The reality aesthetic - real-time experience - in Galin Stoev's staging approach can also be related to the concept of performative, energetic theatre (after Lyotard). A performance such as *Archaeology of Dreaming* aims not at literal but at associative impact on the spectator. Its documentary quality is not limited to factual material or a specific true case, but reaches the level of generalized testimony about a marginal society at a specific socio-historical moment. Paradoxically, poetic expression is sometimes the best form of translating real facts into stage language.

### **1.1.3. The Hague - A Political Phantasmagoria Based on a True Story**

This play is a very interesting example in the field of theatre based on a true story because it was written and staged while the events it describes were still developing and while the figures involved still acted on the political stage. Galin Stoev noted that in his work he had never before witnessed a moment in which theatrical tools could be present here and now, including in political reality, so vividly and with such exposed nerves. The political topicality of the play constituted the great creative provocation for Stoev to stage it in Bulgaria in 2023.

By paying special attention here to the director's creative need to work on a highly topical social issue, the author tests a hypothesis: that the internal driving force for creating theatre based on a true story, both today and in the twentieth century, is the desire for a given truth about a current political and social context to reach a broad range of people and affect them by raising their civic activity. Stoev shares that during rehearsals he tried to understand what he was doing while doing it, guided by a strong sense of the right direction without being able to translate and explain it fully to the actors. He nevertheless managed to infect the troupe with his sense of mission and of the social responsibility of the artist.

For the purposes of the study, several moments in *The Hague* that combine documentary material and fiction are examined in detail, providing a close view of the stage language of this performance based on a true story. Special attention is also given to the scenographic solution in view of the abstract approach to space in a text so factual and painfully current. Both the director and the scenographer Boris Dalchev discuss the choice of the stage environment. The three productions by Galin Stoev situate him as an artist working also in the field of neo-documentary theatre. The section concludes that despite the political statement that can be discovered in each of the analysed productions, the major challenge for Stoev in staging these texts remains predominantly artistic in nature. In reality, this is the nature of every attempt to translate documentary material into stage language.

## **1.2. The Dramaturgical Use of the Fairy-Tale Element in a Performance Based on a True Story - 36 Monkeys and Cinderella Ltd.**

This part first mentions some basic characteristics of using fairy-tale narrative and fairy-tale characters in theatrical artefacts with topical socially significant issues. It examines the relations of the characters to the "hero myth" after Joseph Campbell and the use in the performance of Campbell's universal structure for building a narrative in the context of socially significant themes from contemporary reality. The working thesis is that the dramaturgical use of the fairy-tale element in theatrical projects based on true stories helps to build a unified plot out of different factual and fictional elements. This approach also illuminates archetypal behavioural models in contemporary life stories and often adds visual and aesthetic value to the stage language of a performance.

The desire to communicate with the spectator on different levels and in different languages is one of the qualities of *Cinderella Ltd.* by 36 Monkeys, in which a Bulgarian, an American and a German of Italian origin perform simultaneously in three different languages. The view of this production introduces into the dissertation a new dramaturgical nuance in theatre based on a true story: the dramaturgical combination of documentary and biographical facts with mythological and fairy-tale motifs.

There is a kind of stage mystification in this work by 36 Monkeys, consisting in the transformation of autobiographical moments of the actors into the narratives of three female characters who are played by the actors themselves, all men. This is an alienating, self-ironic theatrical device that presents recognizable facts from the everyday life, psyche and psychosomatic symptoms of contemporary people in the spirit of fairy-tale invention.

The main conclusion from this practical example is that the use of fairy-tale motifs in theatre based on a true story is not in contradiction with the topicality and documentary basis of the theatrical project. On the contrary, it often sharpens the critical discourse and brings a different, vivid perspective to the thematic focus of the work. Another essential conclusion is that the embedding of a fairy-tale narrative becomes a kind of dramaturgical backbone of the postdramatic performance, understood here with emphasis on fragmentation

and on the combination of different textual materials. In this genre freedom of contemporary performance, the fairy-tale plot functions as a kind of glue for the separate dramaturgical parts. The dramaturgical body of such a performance can contain autobiographical elements, documentary facts, movement scenes, visual provocations, poetic impressions and much more.

The intended psychological effect of added value for the spectator should not be underestimated when a serious social, public or political problem is presented in fairy-tale form. The fairy-tale often has a therapeutic and reconciling effect in relation to the painful problems of the day, because of its stable suggestion that whatever difficulties the heroes pass through, the end will still be good.

### **1.3. Replica Theatre and Close Contact with the Spectator**

This part of the dissertation which focuses on the relation between play and stage language ends with a look at the work of the Replica Association and its performance based on a true story, whose idea and dramaturgical basis is Mihaela Michailov's play *Bad Children*. For his production of the play, director Blagoy Boychev makes an authorial dramaturgical compilation. To selected monologue fragments from the original play he adds interviews with teachers and students conducted by the team, a journalistic text by Maria Kassimova, and even elements of the personal history of the actress performing in the production. The aim of this free stage adaptation is to update the social problem of the play and relate it directly to the Bulgarian context.

The strong emotional impact of the performance is due to a purposeful compression of the distance between the true case and the actual spectator. The added dramaturgical situation in the production is the staging of a live broadcast in a small television studio. The spectator is also located in the studio as part of the paying audience of this television format. This directorial decision substantially contributes to the spectator's sense of urgency and involvement in the conflict under discussion. This engagement also concerns the direct or indirect participants in the conflict whose statements take place live in the broadcast.

What is interesting for the study is the deliberate exclusivity of stage time, constructed in a markedly theatrical language in which fact and fiction equally win the audience's trust thanks to the exceptional inner plasticity and charisma of the lead performer. The author examines staging moments from this project as material for studying an inverted use of familiar devices for creating conventional and documentary reality.

The analysis of *Bad Children* ends the part of the dissertation that deals with the director's search for a stage language for an already existing dramatic text, a play based on a true story. As a conclusion from the analysed theatrical styles, different though they are, it may be stated that real facts and documents in this type of production are filtered and translated into theatrical language through two kinds of authorial imagination: that of the playwright and that of the theatre practitioners creating the concrete performance. This determines the symbiosis between the imaginary and the real characteristic of such productions, whose boundaries may be skilfully blurred or deliberately emphasized.

## **2. The Devised Performance**

In contemporary theatre the phenomenon of collective authorship by the artists in a performance team is increasingly common. It includes their own texts, as well as conceptual and often staging co-participation. This type of collective creativity is described as a collaborative or devised approach to creating performance. The

connection of collaborative creativity or the devising method with democratic principles is easily demonstrated and is expressed mainly in the following features of the creative process: freedom of expression for every team member; lack of hierarchy (playwright - director - actors), or, if hierarchy exists, the absence of strict hierarchical dependence in the research, gathering and selection of factual and dramaturgical material and in the taking of staging decisions; pluralism of viewpoints on a given theme and of the socio-political positions of the participants; and rehearsals conducted in a spirit of tolerance of difference and respect for the individual.

Shared commitment in the devising approach does not mean unanimity or the absence of aesthetic, ethical or personal disagreements. Artists working in this way specialize in extracting creative benefit from the positive and negative personal traits of the specific artistic team, as well as from the specific conditions of the time period and the characteristics of the rehearsals. Interpersonal relations among company members, their various forms of expertise and individual biographical experience often become part of the material generated for the performance. The interdisciplinary approach is also typical of devised theatre, expressed in the co-creation of artists from different arts and subcultures, collaborators from different fields of knowledge, representatives of different social groups and so on.

In the contemporary theatrical world, recognizable companies creating devised performances include Pig Iron Theatre Company, Goat Island, The Riot Group, Tectonic Theater Project, Neo-Futurists and others. In Europe, emblematic works in this approach are those of Forced Entertainment and other collectives. In Bulgaria, the examples discussed in the first part of Chapter Two are primarily connected with the ways in which the playwright and director use and rework document and fact in theatre based on a true story. The part devoted to devising and autobiographical documentary material reaches a crucial question: what are the modes of the actor's presence in the performance based on a true story?

With every new performance, the artists from the Association Based on a True Story and from Emergency Theatre deepen the co-creative trust within their teams and win, often almost unreservedly, the trust of their spectators. The principal reason is the skilful communication of existential dilemmas and motives from the artists' autobiographies through strong theatrical images. The taboo-free artistic play and phantasmatic imagery with which these artists present autobiographical material built into the dramaturgical basis of their performances brings their work close to the genre of autofiction. Borrowed from literature, the term was introduced in 1977 by the French novelist Serge Doubrovsky to define his novel *Fils*. By this definition Doubrovsky emphasized the blurring of boundaries between the real autobiographical fact transmitted by subjective memory and phantasmatic thinking. Transforming fragments of their own lives into art is the main conceptual direction of the two theatre companies examined in this part.

## **2.1. Association Based on a True Story - the Actor as a Stage Projection of the Self**

At the genesis of their intercultural approach lies the view of the artist as author of the spectacular text (after Pavis), built from personal themes and autobiographical fragments, musical interludes and duets between instrument and actor's voice. All of their performances also possess ambitious movement scores. This forms the specific, multi-genre theatrical language in which Based on a True Story translates facts from public and personal contemporary reality for its audience. The dissertation examines certain moments from *Nocturne - From Dust to Radiance* and the performative presence of its participants in detail in order to trace how theatrical reality is built from documentary autobiographical material. For clarity, the specific fragments and their relation to the study are described in an analytical table with two columns.

## 2.2. Emergency Theatre and The Room of Pleasure Is Empty

The need to communicate the meeting or collision of subjective and objective reality - the personal world and the world with whose news we wake up each day, increasingly confused and horrified - gives the initial impulse for the projects of Emergency Theatre. The dissertation examines in detail elements from their performance *The Room of Pleasure Is Empty*, whose idea appeared three years before its premiere in a series of online meetings by the team during the COVID pandemic. The dramaturgical basis of the performance arises from the study of specialized literature, discussions, psychodramatic and stage experiments, and texts created during creative laboratories. At the basis of the project is the staging of the neuroses of contemporary human beings, painful personal stories, and the search for an answer to the question: "Will we manage to open our own rooms and settle back into ourselves, in order to return our senses to the desired?"

The dissertation examines in detail how the performance combines biographical documents, texts born in rehearsal and a powerful aesthetic fantasy. For greater clarity, an analytical table with three columns is created, indicating several stage images, quoted lines from the stage text, and information about the sources and/or the method through which the images and phrases were reached in rehearsal. Through the detailed discussion of this performance, the author comments on an important aspect of the study: the manner in which the artist is present on stage in such autofictional devised projects. This presence may be characterized as a refusal of theatrical acting. The artists do not play situations and emotions but present a version of themselves in an attempt to be openly here and now.

In conclusion, the concrete examples from Bulgaria's independent stage examined here, devoted to the collaborative creative approach in devised performance based on a true story, belong to a global tendency in theatre today: giving expression to the personality of the actor as author. When analysing the use of autobiographical documents and autofiction in creating a performance, where the focus is on a contemporary theatrical phenomenon, it is difficult to use established theoretical concepts that would summarize the work of the relevant team. The artists from *36 Monkeys*, *Based on a True Story* and *Emergency Theatre* try to define an aesthetic territory in which they can work with their own biographical experience without losing their professional acting approach. Their live art is difficult to define both for theatre theorists and for the individual spectator, because they themselves do not channel their work into a unified and clear aesthetic framework. These contemporary practices from the Bulgarian independent stage are nevertheless extremely interesting and deserve more thorough research.

## 3. Field Documentary Work - Verbatim Performance

In theatre, attempts to meet the need for truthfulness in a more direct way are the reason for the emergence, development and popularization of documentary theatre and its subgenres. The search for truth and the desire to transmit it as correctly as possible are perhaps most prioritized by artists creating verbatim theatre, who often follow a strict methodology in the creative process and use verbatim technique. In such performances, broadly speaking, artists present to the audience the authentic words of people whom they themselves have interviewed - persons who are involved in life or strongly connected with the theme studied in the production. The verbatim actor seeks to reproduce, as precisely as possible the words, rhythm of speech, intonation and gestures of the interviewee. In most cases a given actor therefore has as prototype(s) people whom he or she personally found and interviewed.

The aim of this device is to give voice from the theatrical stage to ordinary, often marginalized people and communities to which the spectator would rarely have access through personal contact. At the core of this type

of theatre is the focus on a social and/or political problem through the individual experiences and worldviews of some of those affected. In this respect the performance does not and cannot claim to present an objective truth, but to set out different personal truths that are nevertheless filtered through the subjective selection of the creative team and layered in the individual consciousness of the spectator. The aim is therefore not for the team to express its own position on a given theme, but for the audience to be invited to perceive different viewpoints, to hear and question statements, and to analyse critically the complexity of the problem.

### **3.1. The Verbatim Method for Creating Performance**

This section describes the methodology for constructing a verbatim performance using verbatim technique. Because of the co-participatory and collective nature of its creative process, the verbatim performance is in many ways related to devised performance. The typical verbatim process has five main phases: research and theoretical entry into the topic; collection of material; processing or editing of the material; rehearsals and work with the actors and dramaturgical construction; and the public phase.

From the description of the process of creating a verbatim performance, the dissertation derives the thesis that this type of theatre based on a true story is the product of a contemporary theatrical practice that is as objective as possible, close to the life prototype and in a certain sense deprived of creative fantasy. At the same time, it notes that many theatre groups combine verbatim technique with dance, create post-dramatic forms from interviews, and employ other kinds of community theatre practice in order to communicate current social problems through art. Verbatim theatre is used today by many contemporary companies around the world, from small independent organizations to state theatre institutions. Over the last decade it has also gained popularity on the Bulgarian stage, although such projects are still few and nearly all are connected with one Bulgarian director: Neda Sokolovska.

### **3.2. Vox Populi Documentary Theatre Studio and the Voice of the People in Bulgarian Independent Theatre**

Sokolovska states that her experience as a documentarist is to work with the actors' bodies and create a collage: a combination of this performative corporeality with the "living texts" of documentary interviews. This combination constitutes the characteristic relation between fiction and document in the theatrical language of Vox Populi. It takes the form of a stage metaphor, usually embodied in a movement miniature that cuts into the pure form of verbatim technique. These theatrical images often function as illustrations of emotion or as summaries of the message carried by the authentic words.

When choosing participants to present socially significant themes or events on stage, Neda Sokolovska often uses a formula she discovered for the relation between professional training and authentic presence. She calls it 4+1: four professional actors and one expert. The expert, in the sense of "experts of everyday life," a concept created by the German company Rimini Protokoll, means a person whose life is connected with the theme, most often someone from the social environment discussed in the performance. This model is not obligatory for every Vox Populi performance. It is only one of the approaches Sokolovska uses in her effort for her performances to arise from direct communication among the document, the object from reality; the artist or character who carries the documentary story on stage; and the spectator, whose trust in the truths presented must be won.

One reason verbatim technique is so preferred in neo-documentary theatre is that without losing the immediacy set by literal word-for-word reproduction of documentary material, the verbatim performance easily achieves the aesthetic distance necessary for art between the object represented and the stage image. The actor's voice, body and biography are not the real voice, body and story of the person represented. The words in the performance are authentic, but they have been subjected to selection, shortening and structural positioning in relation to the other statements of the original speakers and to the different thematic layers included in the dramaturgy. The document of the interview becomes part of a subjective artistic interpretation, which is present in verbatim theatre even when it is very unobtrusive.

Sokolovska's accumulated professional experience gives her confidence that the direction of documentary theatre created by her and her associates is increasingly connected with political theatre, in the sense of art with a pronounced political position, examples of which include tribunal theatre and reconstructions of municipal, judicial and parliamentary sessions.

#### 4. Making Theatre Politically

With changes in society and the economy that began at the end of the twentieth century and have developed dynamically in recent decades, the understanding of the political in theatre based on a true story has been rethought and shifted away from the model of political theatre formulated in Piscator's book of that title and in Brecht's epic theatre, and later developed by the theatre of Peter Weiss, Rolf Hochhuth, David Hare, Anna Deavere Smith, Moises Kaufman and others. This final part of Chapter Two examines how post-dramatic theatre, after Lehmann, is situated in relation to political theatre, summarizing several essential theses by political scientist and theatre researcher Jan Deck from his article "Making Theatre Politically".

The article concludes that today making political theatre cannot be caught between the polar categories of engaged art and art for art's sake. The political act in theatre lies in the artistic process itself and in the artistic attitude toward documentary material. Deck's conclusions are compared with the way the Bulgarian projects studied in the dissertation relate to the problem of the political in contemporary theatre. In Galin Stoev's work, the stage is perceived as an opportunity to influence the spectator's political consciousness, and the artist and his talent are placed in the service of a unified truth about an urgent issue, reached by the author, director and team through research and personal position. The political in the analysed performance by Replica Theatre, as in almost all of its projects, lies in the open dialogue with the spectator, situated in immediate proximity and visibility to the actors. A specific empowerment of the spectator can be observed in the activity of this association.

36 Monkeys, Based on a True Story and Emergency Theatre share a point of contact in making political theatre that lies in the devising approach to the content and form of their performances. This approach problematizes the established hierarchy and division of labour in the conventional method of creating a theatrical product. According to Jan Deck, the refusal in acting to represent a role is also a political action. He writes that contemporary theatre, by saying farewell to the principle of representation, becomes radically democratic. Another democratic quality common to these three Bulgarian independent companies is the way their creative actions do not underestimate the spectator but think of the spectator as an equal participant in the authorship of the final dramaturgical collage and of the semantic and emotional charge of the performance.

At the end of Chapter Two the author reminds us that there are many other contemporary Bulgarian artists whose theatrical approaches are close to the political and social engagement of neo-documentary theatre, and in whose creative approaches and performative language the correlation between document and fiction can be

observed and analysed. One of the most recognizable among them is director Vazkresia Viharova with her project *The Silenced Told* within the Artists for Non-Violence platform.

Other performative genres from neo-documentary theatre that have representatives and projects on the Bulgarian cultural stage are playback theatre, sensory theatre, site-specific theatre, promenade performance, and other varieties of contemporary theatrical approaches that play with the transformation of material from life reality into a fictional artistic world. All of these are related to the subject of the dissertation, but remain outside the framework of this study, which seeks to offer and argue an authorial perspective in analysing the connections between document and fiction in theatre based on a true story from the beginning of the twenty-first century in Bulgaria.

### **Chapter Three. Theatre Based on a True Story Seen Through the Author's Own Directorial and Teaching Practice**

In this chapter the author reflects on three productions from her professional experience that belong to the genre of theatre based on a true story. In view of the theatrical methodology used to create them, the author analyses how document and fiction relate in her own searches for creating a stage language from documentary facts. The practical examples are considered in an order analogous to the three main methods described in Chapter Two: a production based on a dramatic work, a devised approach and a verbatim approach. The theme of applying these methods in teaching acting students is developed in the second part of the chapter, devoted to the doctoral student's practical research.

#### **1. Productions in Professional Theatre**

##### **1.1. Nordost**

*Nordost - A Tale of Destruction*, is a performance based on one of the emblematic contemporary documentary dramas in new European dramaturgy: *Nordost* by the German author Torsten Buchsteiner (2005). Although Buchsteiner bases his work on documentary materials, some of which he created himself by travelling to Moscow and speaking with witnesses and survivors of the terrorist attack, he writes a deeply personal, almost intimate drama. It reconstructs fifty-seven hours that shook the world: the terrorist action in the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow in October 2002. The play is built as a series of monologues and dialogues unfolding horizontally, without a conventional knot and culmination of conflict. This structure is typical of documentary drama, since emphasis falls on the event and on its distanced, as far as possible, presentation. The ending is known to the audience; what matters is not the narrative but the different viewpoints on the case.

The author analyses several of her directorial decisions in the Bulgarian production of this remarkable play. Directorial devices added to the dramaturgy, such as video projection of real news footage from the theatre during the hostage crisis, regularly remind the spectator of the cruel factuality of the plot, break the isolated convention of theatre, and create a sense of almost ghostly presence: communication here and now (actors and spectators in the chamber hall of Nikolay Binev Youth Theatre) with there and then (actors and spectators held hostage in the Dubrovka Theatre). The scale of the tragedy in social, political and above all personal terms - for the victims and their relatives, and for the terrorists themselves - exists in a contrasting relation with the minimal style of the performance.

The dissertation pays attention to the specificity of the stage language of this performance, generated by the search for a theatrical expression of documentary facts. Characteristic is the way stage time and factual time relate in the development of events. In places the text sounds like a brief information bulletin, reporting by hours and minutes what is happening in the hijacked theatre and what actions are being undertaken outside it. Each short piece of information corresponds to an actorly *gestus* that gives it emotional intensity and theatrical expression. In this way the actors build "living frames" of passing time. Their bodies are static in expressive poses caught by the change of light; their voices are alienated, rather reporting; and the commentary or human emotion is placed in a single, precisely found detail.

In staging *Nordost* and during its subsequent long and moving stage life, the director and actors felt that they were performing a kind of rehabilitation of theatre, a symbolic rebirth of art from the cruel blow of reality. There is something meaning- and life-affirming in transforming a life or historical trauma into an aesthetic gesture. There is theatre.

## **1.2. Bluebeard - A Marriage Without a Fairy Tale**

This performance, inspired by Charles Perrault's tale *Bluebeard*, was created through the method of devised theatre. With its idea that documentary dramaturgical fragments should be structurally "glued" together through a wandering fairy-tale plot, this personal directorial experience can be related to one aspect described in Chapter Two: the use of fairy-tale motifs in theatre based on a true story. The structure of the tale and the actors' authorial interpretations, including expressive movement miniatures on one of the most problematic aspects of the theme - the silence of victims - are fundamental to the construction of stage language and narrative. The spectacular text of the performance enters into dialogue with the closed circle of abuser - victim - saviour predetermined by the fairy-tale structure and succeeds in breaking it through the reduction of the external saviour and the realization of woman's free will.

The last performance based on documentary material examined in this scholarly text, like *Bluebeard - A Marriage Without a Fairy Tale*, is a production of Panic Button Theatre and also touches on the issue of human free will. Here, however, this will is tested by the coercion of illness.

## **1.3. A Body Thrown at an Angle Toward the Horizon**

This theatrical performance focuses on the encounter, life and parting with oncological illness. It premiered in 2020 in the Backstage hall of Azaryan Theatre, one of the most valuable spaces for independent theatre in Sofia, which existed only for a few years and closed because of commercial and political interests. Similar fates befell the former Centre for Culture and Debate, the Red House; DNA - Space for Contemporary Dance and Performance; and others. The author briefly deviates from the subject of the dissertation to note that while these spaces existed, Bulgarian independent theatre saw impressive quantitative and qualitative growth, and their abrupt closure caused the premature disappearance of many valuable performances, including neo-documentary ones.

The text then briefly describes the idea, aspects of the rehearsal process and public reception of the authorial performance, *A Body Thrown at an Angle toward the Horizon*. The team's aim was to create a performance without speculation and sentiment, constructed in a way that is not light-minded but healing in its insight, depth and sense of humour. The thematic focus of the staging concept is change - both at the existential level

in the characters and in the audience's thinking about illness. Essentially, this change is a shift in the perception of cancer from something like personal failure to an opportunity for personal growth.

What is interesting for the subject of the study is how, at the beginning of rehearsals, the team sought bold stage forms and vivid images and for a long time did not work on the documentary stories. As if to escape the weight of life facts and details that had to be translated into stage language, the actresses experimented with texts from high literature. Some remained integrated into the dramaturgical body of the performance: fragments from the Old Testament, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Lars Gustafsson's *The Death of a Beekeeper* and others. The guiding question in weaving literary fiction into this documentary performance was: "What would I read if I were struck by a compulsory year-long stay at home?" In the performance books are part of the stage props and the actresses read selected passages to the audience.

The author views the production as an example of a devised performance which, in its attempt to build theatrical language from documentary material, not only uses a non-traditional theatre text such as the documentary novel, but also relies on quotations from remarkable literary fictions. This stage inquiry through collective authorship is part of an important tendency in contemporary documentary theatre: theatre focused above all on telling personal stories that draw in the spectator and stimulate co-experience. The analysis also notes the aesthetic, playful key in which the costumes, stage space and sparse props are resolved.

The dialogic quality of the staging means and actorly presence - the relation between real fact and stage image, between dramatic character and the actor's personality - lies at the heart of the author's directorial curiosity. When staging theatre based on a true story, the author is interested in studying the relation between the living presence of actors and audience (here and now) and events that really happened (there and then), that is, the correlation between the live event and the chronological, historical time of the event that has already occurred. These relations are multidimensional and depend on the method of work for each performance: an existing dramatic text with a documentary orientation, collective authorship by the devising method, or a work based on interviews with real people through verbatim technique.

## **2. A Study of Neo-Documentary Techniques in Teaching Practice**

Most young people who choose to study theatre at university have only recently left the school environment and its culture of tests in the "select the correct answer" style. Students, often still influenced by a school mentality, therefore believe that there is only one possible correct answer to questions such as what theatre is, what the essence of acting is, how one becomes a successful professional and so on. A substantial aim of actor training at New Bulgarian University is for students to acquire in-depth knowledge of different theatrical methodologies from the last century, so that in their practical work they can successfully use and navigate among them.

With this aim, the author, in her role as teacher, challenges her students to use contemporary methods borrowed from neo-documentary theatre to create their own authorial stage experiments. The practical study with students was conducted through the training of three different acting classes in the field of theatre based on a true story over three non-consecutive semesters. Public presentations at training stage included one practical seminar, *Authorial Theatre with a Documentary Basis* (spring semester 2022/2023), and one performative action, *You Have a Theme - You Have a Stage* (spring semester 2024/2025). Some of the experiments with students on stage autofiction, consisting of the telling of personal stories and the performative use of autobiographical materials, were integrated into part of the performance *Birds after Konstantin Pavlov* at the NBU University Theatre, which premiered in the 2024/2025 season.

As a result of this practical method of research through mentoring students in the field of theatre based on a true story, the following conclusions were reached. Introducing acting students to basic techniques of documentary and neo-documentary theatre arouses active interest in most of them. Directing young people's attention to current social and political problems develops their humanitarian sensitivity and civic consciousness, which are essential components of an artist's personality. The need for independent research, the gathering of documentary materials and the transformation of these materials into theatrical images develops responsibility, critical thinking and authorial initiative. Public presentations of the students' authorial attempts confirm that current problematics and the documentary nature of stage language excite young people - future artists and their spectators.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

In relation to one of the tasks of the study - to examine the motivation of contemporary Bulgarian artists to create in the field of neo-documentary theatre - it can be confirmed that their motivation is connected, though to different degrees, with political and/or social engagement. This motivation is also generated by the existential need to search for truth and by the creative striving to achieve truthfulness in theatre. The motives of the contemporary spectator in attending performances with a documentary basis are similar.

The question of truth in performative art is multidimensional and complex. In this text it has been touched upon partly in relation to the binary opposition fact/fiction and in the analysis of the modes of actorly presence in the performances discussed. In neo-documentary theatre, truth often loses the character it had in twentieth-century documentary theatre of "revealing a lie" or "illuminating backstage political and social mechanisms". In the contemporary performance based on a true story, truth is a synthesis of multiple subjective truths and different viewpoints toward an event or social phenomenon. The aim is rather for documentary facts translated by artists into stage language to serve as a means for searching for and discovering the reasons for what actually happened. They are an important element in generating meaning in stage action.

With regard to the theatrical methods used and the performative role of the actor, Bulgarian theatre based on true stories in the last two decades can be placed within a post-dramatic discourse. Analysing concrete performative examples leads to the conclusion that in all of them acting aims at the natural, the real, the unsimulated. This tendency in the actor's mode of presence is observed regardless of whether the performance is created from an existing dramatic work, by devising, or through the verbatim method.

From the performances by Galin Stoev, 36 Monkeys, Panic Button Theatre and Replica Theatre, it may also be concluded that authentic actorly presence in a play based on real facts is often combined with elements of grotesque and hyperbole in performance. The boundaries between fact and fiction in dramaturgy and staging language are blurred, and documentary material is often integrated into vivid stage images and fictional plots such as dramaturgical structures with fairy-tale motifs.

Another conclusion reached by the dissertation is that the use of mythologemes is not at odds with the topicality and documentary basis of a socially engaged theatrical project. Like the fairy-tale sound, they sharpen critical discourse and bring a different, vivid perspective to the thematic focus of the work.

In the search for theatrical expression of documentary facts, the relation between stage time and factual time in the course of events is also crucial. The removal of the so-called fourth wall, the integration of spectators into the dramaturgical situation, the physical proximity of the actors to the spectator and their contagious emotional spontaneity all aim to strengthen the sense of events happening here and now, even when those events are already known from reality. This produces the communicative intensity between performers and recipients that is characteristic of theatre based on a true story.

Another conclusion relates to the strong position of the actor as author in many Bulgarian productions based on true stories. In creating new theatrical realities drawn from the actors' own experience and the aesthetic parameters they have chosen, document (biographical material) and fiction merge into theatrical autofiction. This form of using life facts in performance is characterized by masterful freedom, strong imagery and courage in stage expression.

The construction of theatrical reality from the document of the interview in the verbatim genre limits but does not completely exclude dramaturgical fiction and artistic fantasy, placed in stage metaphors or movement scenes. Examining the artistic method of this combination in certain performances by the Vox Populi Documentary Theatre Studio leads to the conclusion that the relation between document and fiction in them can be compared to oil and water poured into one vessel: they remain clearly distinguishable and create a contrasting effect.

The study also reaches the generalization that making theatre based on a true story is invariably a political gesture. This is so even when the theme of the performance does not address current political or social problems, but rather inhabits the sphere of the personal and the existential questions of human being.

The self-reflexive analysis of some of the author's own projects in the genre of theatre based on a true story helped her realize that through the empirical path of a theatre practitioner, using methods from neo-documentary theatre, she has reached essential principles in translating document into stage language. Practical work introducing students to methods for creating theatre based on a true story develops both their creative and acting qualities and their humanitarian sensitivity and civic consciousness. The public presentations of their authorial attempts confirmed that current problematics and the documentary character of stage language strongly engage young people - future artists and their audiences.

The main thesis of this dissertation was also proven: translating documentary facts into theatrical language requires considerable creative inventiveness and a bold scope of imagination. The real potential of theatre based on a true story not only to increase the spectator's knowledge of a social or political case, historical moment or particular community, but also to affect the spectator emotionally and provoke him or her to adopt or reconsider a civic position, is rooted precisely in the power of the artistic qualities of a given performance.

Work based on true stories in the first quarter of our century has acquired an attractive force for Bulgarian artists, especially those who create within the independent scene. Yet in contemporary Bulgarian theatre there is still much to be desired and expected regarding the quality, quantity and public reception of projects with a documentary basis. Nevertheless, the author believes that in Bulgaria experiments in this important and intriguing performative direction will become increasingly bold, meaningful and, hopefully, much more visible.

The text ends with words by Tzvetan Todorov that seem very appropriate as a wish to the artist creating from a true story: "there is no duty of memory, but a duty of truth and justice, toward which we can strive even if we know that we will never fulfil it perfectly." The use of documents in theatre should be approached analogously to the way a good historian approaches the past. From the past the historian should not merely restore a fragment, but produce meaning and value from it. The striving to create meaning and to invest aesthetic and conceptual value in the work gives the artist the right to a certain creative freedom and individual artistic handwriting, but it also entails enormous responsibility toward the real human stories and fates embedded in theatre based on a true story.

## V. MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION

The main contributions of the dissertation are connected with its theoretical and practical-applied aspects:

**1. Clarification of basic concepts in the field of performing arts related to theatre based on a true story in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.**

**2. Presentation of the author's own research into Neo-documentary theatre on the contemporary Bulgarian stage.**

**3. Analysis of the staging methods of selected Bulgarian artists and the stage language of their performances.**

**4. An empirical study of the research subject carried out through conducting and documenting conversations-interviews with Bulgarian artists creating Neo-documentary theatre.**

**5. Analysis, sharing and further development of the author's own professional directorial and pedagogical methodology for integrating documentary material into a performance.**

These contributions result from the successful fulfilment of the tasks set at the beginning of the research.

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