The present article will focus on the creation of “the effect of authenticity” in post-dramatic theatre. The notion of post-dramatic theatre introduced by Professor Hans-Thies Lehmann in his seminal book *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999) covers a wide range of aesthetic practices in contemporary theatre. Their common ground consists of leaving drama (i.e., conventions that govern a dramatic text) as its artistic basis, as well as reducing verbal text to merely one of the many elements of theatrical production. By now, the phenomenon of post-dramatic theatre has been widely discussed theoretically (defining it through its difference from dramatic theatre) as well as descriptively, through a panorama mapping new forms of theatre. The latter approach gives a good overview of the repertoire of the artistic principles and stage devices but risks to an extent with a possibility that the reader may lose orientation within the thicket of numerous examples. No wonder that for conceptualising post-dramatic theatre, alternative ways are being sought as well. New vistas could be opened when the main focus is moved from particular stage productions (analysing their structure and poetics) to the practices of theatre (analysing various directing and acting strategies), in other words – from a question “what can we see in theatre?” to a question “how is it done?” For instance, we could talk of meta-theatrical strategies, of the strategies of recycling or of authentication in post-dramatic theatre. Through these strategies post-dramatic theatre moves “beyond illusion”: instead of representing outside world, the stage productions use overtly anti-illusionary devices and aim at establishing an immediate interaction with the audiences. These multiple strategies used in post-dramatic theatre turn theatre into a laboratory where the fundamental relationship between reality and fictionality is explored (Sugiera, Borowski 2007: 3). As the same strategies were and are used in dramatic theatre, we must examine their use in tight connection with the particular practices of making and employing theatre texts, as well as the mechanisms of their reception. In this article, I will take a closer look at the strategies of authentication in a couple of Estonian post-dramatic theatre productions to find out how and to what extent it is possible to act “beyond illusion” in theatre. I will also point at some similar phenomena in contemporary Latvian and German theatre.

Let us start from the very notion of “authenticity”. The notion points etymologically at the subject’s arbitrariness, independence from outside influences (*authentō* – acting arbitrary). Historically, the word “authentic” has been used describing texts or knowledge based on initial sources and therefore reliable – the opposite being “fake”, “imitation”, or “copy”. In a wider sense, “authenticity” means genuineness, realness, as opposed to such notions as “illusion”, “fiction”, and “pretending”. Discussion of authenticity tends often to take on a moral flavour as genuineness and sincerity are in high esteem in the value systems of today. Thus, Charles Taylor in his monograph *The Ethics of Authenticity* stresses that the ideal of sincerity and constancy to oneself is exactly the moral force which could take away the worries of the modern man “living under the skies devoid of gods” (Taylor 1991). Earlier, Walter Benjamin (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 1936) has written that during the process of the secularisation of art in the 19th and 20th centuries, authenticity takes the place that in the ritualised and religious art was filled by transcendental powers (Benjamin 1963: 17). In the post-dramatic theatre of the 1970s-1990s, the actors’ real bodies, real time and space (as opposed to the fictional stage world and fictitious characters) became the guarantors of truth, the theatrical “here and now” bearing an indelible stamp of authenticity (Sugiera, Borowski 2007: 3). “Authenticity”, “trueness”, and the like are also features in wide demand among the theatre-going public. This is demonstrated by the vigorous rebirth of the documentary theatre in the recent decades and the popularity of the
new ‘authentication’ techniques (e.g. the verbatim-theatre\(^1\)). As regards Estonian audiences, stage director Hendrik Toomperč Jr describes their expectations as follows: “Today, people expect to meet reality, facts, in the theatre. They expect something that really exists. […] No images no double meanings. […] Only what really is.” (Toomperč 2006: 2450) Even if Toomperč overdoes it a bit, he seems to be right in the most part. How does today’s theatre meet those expectations?

We have seen that the notion of authenticity has at least two different aspects: the genuineness of the material (texts) and the sincerity of the mode of being. The first is in theatre mostly connected to the base materials of the stage production (e.g. documentary theatre versus an invented story); the other with the mode of acting (self-expression versus role-playing). The relations of representation (depicting of something else) and immediate presence seem to serve as a wider framework here; in other words, the notion of ‘authenticity’ allows us to view from a new angle the familiar relationship of fictional – real in theatre. It must be emphasized, however, that insofar as we have to do with events framed as theatre performance and repeated on stage from evening to evening, we can neither eliminate representation completely nor reach absolute authenticity. It would be thus more to the point to speak of making something authentic or producing the effect of authenticity by performative processes. German theatre researcher and a member of the well-known alternative troupe **She She Pop** Annemarie M. Matzke has written:

The stage as frame points directly at the mediated character of what is shown. Authenticity on stage is always a constructed effect. […] That is how authenticity becomes, instead of a problem of depicting […] a problem of rhetoric: how is it possible to create an impression of immediacy on stage for the public if any

\(^1\) In *verbatim*, the words of real people are recorded during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records; they are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals (Verbatim 2008: 9).

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**Authenticity and Fictionality in Post-dramatic Theatre**

impression of authenticity is a result of a construction? (Matzke 2006: 43).\(^2\)

I shall further discuss two Estonian productions that may be classified as documentary theatre – as being based on documents is the first attribute of authenticity. These are Merle Karusoo’s *Küpsuskirjand 2005* (*State Essay* 2005, Estonian Drama Theatre, co-director Toomas Lõhmuste) and Tiit Ojasoo’s and Ene-Liis Semper’s *Nafta!* (*Off*! Theatre NO99). Both premiered in 2006, the text of both is written and/or composed by the directors, in collaboration with the troupe. Here we meet a ‘director’s dramaturgy’ rather typical of the post-dramatic theatre, inseparably connected to the stage production. Such texts are not *a-priori* ‘recipes’ for the production but rather records of preparation of the production (see Cinna 2003: 138); text as record can be also assembled during the actual performances, including for example the improvisations of the actors.

In the context of contemporary Estonian theatre, Merle Karusoo’s theatre is quite unique. In criticism, her stage productions have been variously called documentary theatre, memory theatre, and theatre of biography. She prefers to call it sociological theatre herself, and to describe it as *Põhisuunda mittekool* (*Not Belonging to the Mainstream*) – which was the title of her MA thesis (1999). Karusoo started her projects in sociological dramaticity and theatre in the early eighties. She has focused on risk groups of the Estonian society (e.g. teenagers, immigrants, children in orphanages), and has produced documentary plays on topics such as drugs, HIV, teenage problems, homicide, etc. In preparing her stage productions, Karusoo uses data from sociological research, and makes use of questionnaires, polls, interviews, school essays, etc.\(^3\)

*Küpsuskirjand 2005* focuses on one of the most sensitive trouble spots of the present-day Estonian society: the interrelations of

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\(^2\) “Der Rahmen Bühne verweist gerade auf die Vermittlung des Gezeigten. Authentizität auf der Bühne ist immer Effekt einer Konstruktion. […] Authentizität wird damit von einem Darstellungsproblem […] zu einem rhetorischem Problem: Wie kann dem Zuschauer ein Eindruck von Unmittelbarkeit auf der Bühne vermittelt werden, wenn jeder Eindruck von Authentizität Resultat einer Konstruktion ist?”

\(^3\) See the articles about Merle Karusoo in *Interlitteraria*: Monaco, Kurvet-Kloasaar 2002; Kruusperč 2002.
Estonians and Russians and the possibility of integration. By its topic it is connected with Karusoo’s “integration project” called Kes ma olen? (Who am I?) which started in 1999. Within the frame of the project Karusoo worked with non-Estonian citizens, trying to make them find a positive identity through telling their own biographies. Although some public performances also took place, the project was mostly directed to its participants and had socio-therapeutic aims. Kipsuskirjand, however, is a stage production, which tries to disentangle problems of identity in front of the audience and for the sake of the audience, doing this on a documentary basis. The text is formed as a montage of Estonian and Russian secondary school graduation essays on the themes Inter-National Relations in the 21st Century and Etu zemiju zovu ja Rodinoi (I Call this Land my Homeland). The performers are three young actors – two Estonians (Lauri Lagle, Taavi Teplenkov) and one Russian, a guest from the Russian Theatre (Nikolai Bentsler). Let it be said here that this quota (two to one) reflects the make-up of Estonia’s population: about two thirds of Estonians and one third of Russian-speaking people. The actual national situation is also reflected in the use of language: the actors speak in their own language and it is only occasionally that the Estonians use Russian and the Russian performer uses Estonian. Thus, the production is bilingual, equipped for the benefit of the audience with a written synchronic translation projected on the back wall. The actors perform under their real names and hint only occasionally on certain character types. There is no narrative, no dialogue in its traditional sense. The almost empty stage (with minimal scenery) acts as a neutral territory; translation helps to overcome the language barrier. A question is whether under those circumstances a dialogue can be born between the young generations of Estonians and Russians, as represented by their essays, which let meet on stage very different views to international relations and the future perspectives of Estonia. The range of opinions is exceptionally wide, extending from sophisticated discussions about “the end of history” or “the war of civilisations” to very personal childhood memories. Also the attitude towards the national ‘Other’ varies from the hatred of strangers to non-recognition of any strangeness.

The dominant of the production is doubtless its text. Surely, the text is enlivened by several stage images but they neither compete with the text nor contest it but have rather an illustrative function. (For example with the help of a blue canvas the disagreements concerning Estonian – Russian border question are exemplified.) Minimalist aesthetics presumably supports the effect of authenticity. Nevertheless we might ask: if the production is authenticated by a documentary text then what authenticates the documents? Does the text we hear from the stage represent the ‘real’ attitudes of Estonian and Russian young generation in any trustworthy way? And in this respect we should rather be sceptical. First, here we have to do with a specific genre – a graduation essay, where the thoughts presented will be graded and those who write the essays know it. The compulsory aspect of the genre is underlined by the radio speech of the Minister of Education, which, recorded, frames the performance. This audio-document relates ironically with the rest of the texts: the Minister’s appeal to the undergraduates to think positively and rather artificially cheering tone is in dissonance with the seriousness of the questions posed at the beginning and at the end of the performance: Will small nations survive in the 21st century or are they designated to fade away? Second, an attentive spectator hears from the stage a notable quantity of stereotypes and slogans used in the media, which in turn makes one ask, to what extent does the public political discourse affect the attitudes of the young (and that of the not so young). An expressive fact is also the difference of the essay themes: the Russians are expected to express patriotism and emotions, the Estonians to discuss intellectually global problems. Although it does not stress it very much, Karusoo’s production nevertheless points at thinking schemes prefabricated in the media. Where, in that case, is authenticity?

Kipsuskirjand 2005 is thus not produced in a clear-cut verbatim-technique but utilizes texts undergoing certain genre rules. However, Karusoo has used oral interviews in several productions introducing Estonian recent history. She has staged life stories of those who, in 1944, failed in their attempts to escape to the West (Sügis 1944 (Fall 1944), 1997), people who assisted the deporters (Küüdipoisid (The Deportation Men), 1999), conscripts of the Soviet army who fought in Afghanistan (Missonäärid (The Missionaries), 2005), etc. Karusoo believes that revealing “hidden” life stories has a therapeutic impact, helping to cure individual and national traumas.

Productions based on the biographies and oral interviews of real people have also been made by Alvis Hermanis, a stage director of
the younger Latvian generation and the leader of the New Riga Theatre. _Latviešu stāsti_ (Latvian Stories, 2004) and _Latviešu mīlestība_ (Latvian Love, 2006) have been created as a teamwork using also the actors’ initiative and fantasy. The first production is actually a series of 20 episodes (stories); these stories are presented in groups of three or four, so that presenting the whole production will take six performances. The starting point is the conviction of the stage director and the troupe that the life of every human being is really a drama worth of presenting it on stage (“the life of any man alive is much more high-powered drama than all Shakespeare plays put together”). Hermanis’ actors were given a task of learning to know someone they did not know before, to interview him or her, to watch his or her life and to form a small ‘portrait production’ of the material thus collected. _Latviešu stāsti_ is thus made of not interconnected monologues very different of each other in their chosen form, portraying common people – a bus driver, a retired person, a female worker on a chicken-farm, a female taxi driver, a computer expert, etc. Usually the persons portrayed participate in a way in the performance, either on family photos demonstrated on a big screen, in a recording played from the stage, through their personal belongings, etc. _Latviešu stāsti_ doubtless offers a cross-section of the Latvian society but differently from Karuso’s theatre it is not subordinated to sociological interests and does not attempt to influence people politically. The choice of people and their life stories seems to have been random, it is life demonstrated through art without any ‘processing’. All this certainly strengthens the impression of authenticity. _Latviešu mīlestība_ is, differently from the former production, thematically concentrated. In 13 scenes first meetings of people are shown, attempts of creating human contact that often fail. Situations and dialogue are based partly on real life stories collected by the actors, and partly on the actors’ fantasies about people who use dating services, thus the importance of fiction is greater here than in _Latviešu stāsti_. In between the scenes dating advertisements and other documentary texts are read. The gallery of the personages is extremely variable – Latvians and Russians, retired and young persons, artists and workers, teachers and pupils, etc. – and the milieu depicted characteristically to the theatre of Hermanis (hyper)realistically, is an everyday milieu: a hospital, a country club, seashore, a café, a bus-stop, etc. The realistic environment and genuine spoken language together with a totally or partly documentary material create a strong impression of authenticity. But in those productions, too, strategies of authentication and artistic strategies work together to make apparent the theatricality of what is happening on stage. The masterful art of acting of the members of the Hermanis’ troupe, their ability to play very different personalities from their own, for example very old people, supported by outside means (wigs, costume, etc.) promotes the artistic mastery (but also artificiality) of the productions and directs the attention of the public to the performative dimension.

Tii Ojasoo’s and Ene-Liis Semper’s _Nafta!_ is, according to the definition of the directors, a “documentary cabaret about the end of the oil era”. Like in Karuso’s _Kupsuskirjand_ 2005, the starting point here is also a problem, presented through the text created by the directors; the actors (Mirtel Pohla, Tammet Tuisk, Gert Raudsepp, Jaak Prints, Kristjan Sarv) again act under their own names. The text is characterized by a discursive variety, a cross-section of current modes of speech and thought. At first the problem is presented in the form of a report including lots of numbers and facts (an interview with the leader of the Estonian Green Party Marek Strandberg has been used); further very different points of view are brought forth and made to collide: those of economy experts and politicians and simple consumers. Various styles and genres are used to present them: illustrative examples, short sketches, storytelling, direct communication with the public, and arguments between the performers, all mixed with songs and dancing numbers. The label of “cabaret” points at the tradition of the political theatre of the 1920s. It is, however, recycled in the post-modern social context, shaped by the new media to a great extent. _Nafta!_ is well conscious of that context, using also the means and formats of the electronic media. But differently from the tradition, those means are not applied to serve and amplify a unified message. The production rather creates an aesthetic space where strategies of authentication work together with strategies of fictionalisation, producing sometimes dissonance and sometimes cancelling each other.

Let me give some examples. In traditional documentary theatre the key problem is the authenticity of the factual material. At the beginning of _Nafta!_ actors pour out numbers and facts (not pointing to their sources) which prove that the end of the oil era is close while...
over-consuming has reached a catastrophic level. They present all that passionately and convincingly. Some time later they present with an equal passion equally convincing facts about how September 11 was a conspiracy led by George Bush and how a handful of capitalists control the whole world. This may baffle part of the audience: are the actors really revealing the backstage of the world politics? Only when one of the actors announces that “UFOs are anyway filming it all, all from the very beginning”, an ironic distance from the global conspiracy theory is created. In post-dramatic theatre, the effect of authenticity is above all created through strategies of influencing the audience; that means, the credibility of a documentary drama depends on how attractive the performance is and on the capability of the actors to make the spectators believe. If authentication takes place with the help of convincing the audience, will it not be the audience who eventually takes the responsibility?

As said before, the frame of theatre acts as fictionalising power. Apparently the effect of authenticity can be created with the help of getting out of theatre (off-stage) into the “real” space or also “breaking the performing strategies” which marks an error, an unforeseen hitch in the machinery of the performance. We can find examples in Nafta! First, we can see a video excerpt of the weekly press conference of the Estonian government where the Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, answering a question what might the government’s plan of action be if oil reserves should end, totally denies the existence of the problem. The excerpt acts as a visual ‘authentic’ document but is actually the result of staging or, to be more exact, of provocation, as the stage director asked a friendly journalist to ask this question from the Prime Minister. In another scene an irritated actor runs out of the theatre building (video camera following) and the audience can see how he reviles bankers behind the windows of a bank across the street. Then two passers-by come and after a short quarrel the protesting actor gets a punch in the face. This can be interpreted by the spectators as an unlucky incident (real life butting in); the wiser, however, are those who remain sceptical. At the latest, when watching the production for the second time, it turns out that this scene is “street theatre”, with two stagehands cast as accidental passers-by – thus the scene is a mistake made on purpose. Such deliberate mistakes and breaking-ups serve the inte-

rests of the “aesthetics of indecision” (Ästhetik der Unentscheidbarkeit), if we use the notion of Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999: 171).

Nafta! has undertaken serious themes, questioning the very idea of market economy and a consumer lifestyle, but does it in the form of entertainment – using disco music, glittering costumes, attractive dances and songs, jokes, etc. In several critical articles this controversy between the message and form was stressed as a fault. It seems to me that the dissonance of a serious theme and easy form brings forth a problem as equally important as the oil theme. From one aspect, unanswerable questions are asked on purpose, instead of proclamations and action instructions. On the other hand, a way of handling social problems in the media society is also demonstrated. The spectators are treated lightly as clients whose expectations must be met: at the beginning of the performance they are warmly greeted and the actors announce that although terrible things will be discussed, it will be done against the background of songs and dances to make it “less horrible” – for the spectators as well as for the actors. As in Kipsuskirjand, the actors call upon each other to think positively, and they make ritual relaxing exercises at critical moments. A notable part of the performance is taken up by a “survival game” “The Ark” in a TV reality show format, which offers amusing solutions for the case of an apocalypse. Thus the production works on two simultaneous levels: it speaks about the world’s situation but demonstrates also the strategies of diminishing or camouflageing the troubling problems, used in today’s hedonistic society.

Neither Kipsuskirjand 2005 nor Nafta! construct a super-narrator’s position characteristic of the earlier documentary theatre. The neutral author’s position of Kipsuskirjand allows the spectator to distance himself from the mentalities depicted and to compare them with his or her own worldview. Nafta!, however, questions rather aggressively the spectator’s position. The audience is not allowed to enjoy an intellectual superiority or a privilege of knowing the truth; the spectator is rather directed towards consciousness of its own belonging to the society where social problems are tackled in the format of entertainment, not caring about his/her individual dislike of it. At the same time, the actors do not position themselves as preachers of the truth. The production acknowledges not only a crisis in the media but also a crisis in the theatre, which needs to be
attractive even when it speaks of energy problems; and also an inner crisis of performers — their inability to live according to a model of life radically different from the present-day model of happiness. From the aspect of authenticity, it seems relevant to quote here the members of the company: if there is no belief in absolute authenticity, "... there is a possibility to go someplace where a public is waiting. To take over the demagogy of politics and the client rhetoric of advertising [...] and to talk, talk, and talk. [...] the main hope lies in that at some point the form opens up and exposes itself, giving way to sincere despair." (Epner, E., Semper 2006).

The Ojasoo — Semper political theatre has been compared by some critics with the work of the German dramatist and stage director René Pollesch. The creation of texts has real similarities along general lines. Pollesch writes his own texts and does it before and during the rehearsals, not formulating them as dramas. The text is in both cases taken as a component of the production, not as an independent work of literature. Pollesch even states that he does not write dramas nor produce in the habitual sense of the words (with actors organizing the text themselves) but 'makes theatre without theatre' (see Lengers 2004: 143–144). Radical stage productions of Pollesch definitely fall into the category of post-dramatic theatre. There is no narrative and almost no real dialogue in his performances. Texts are composed of excerpts from theoretical and philosophical essays, newspaper articles, sociological and economical studies, etc. The actors present the text very fast, aggressively or even hysterically — thus they do not epitomize certain characters but act as 'text machines'.

The Pollesch theatre is interested in great political and economical questions: globalization, neo-liberal capitalism, power relations in the present-day world, etc. Quotations from theoretical texts and theatrical means are blended with loans and citations from other media. Pollesch uses amply pop music, alternates text with wordless scenes resembling video clips, hints at B-category films, television, etc. Thus, in several productions, like in his trilogy (2004) Telefavela, Svetlana in a Favela, Pablo in der Plusfiliale (Pablo in the Plus), the underlying structure of the performance is the Latin American soap opera: the performance re-plays a plot of a telenovela and at the same time comments and re-contextualises it. The Pollesch theatre has been called a 'culture theory theatre' and a 'discourse theatre', as it researches critically the discursive and medial practices of today. Massive quotation of non-fiction texts could create an impression of documentality and authenticity but the result of combining academic discourse with mass media and pop culture is that they estrange and abolish one another. An Estonian critic has written about Pablo in der Plusfiliale: "Reality [...] is, however, beyond the viewer's reach for the 'reality' he gets a glimpse of seems absurdly unreal like a soap opera." (Saro 2006: 25.) Really, media that has become an inseparable part of people's everyday lives and which Pollesch utilizes in his theatre does not reflect reality truthfully but masks it instead, producing simulacrum and fictions (see Lengers 2004: 153).

To sum up: the analysis of these texts, to a great extent based on documentary material, demonstrates that post-dramatic theatre is not so much aimed at breaking illusions and revealing the "true truth", but rather mixes the authentic and the fictitious. Authenticity is revealed being produced by textual strategies, as well as staging and acting techniques, and also as something depending on the disposition of the spectator. Instead of the rigid opposition of authenticity and theatricality, we are dealing with a continuous spectrum where authenticity is only the minimal stage of fictionality and theatricality, never completely excluding them. Problematizing the notion of authenticity in itself leads to the collapse of the dichotomy real versus fictional.

References


The Reader in Reading Theatre

ANNELI SARO

Since reception theory has grown out of the study of the reception of literary texts (we can just note Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Umberto Eco and others), the imagery of text and reading has become verbally and mentally entrenched in the study of the reception of other art forms as well. Thus during the 1980s many theatre semioticians treated performances as specific kinds of text, including the use of concepts such as “performance text” when referring to the audio-visual texture of the work. And the theatre researcher Marco De Marinis has coined the concept of model spectator (Marinis 1987), based on Umberto Eco’s concept of the model reader as a particular kind of textual strategy. On the other hand, as a result of the development of theatre anthropology, sociology and performance studies during the past 50 years, theatre and performance have been applied more broadly in culture studies as particular models of communication.

Literature, with its verbal nature and individualized processes of creation and reception, seems to be the clearest and most distant opposite of performance, since the primary characteristic that constitutes the latter is usually considered to be the co-presence of performer and spectator in the same space and time where the actual performance takes place. I have previously considered the relations between literature and performance in my earlier paper ‘Literature as performance’ (Saro 2006), so here I will focus more closely on...