Treading the Borderline: Play(ing) with Reality on the Post-Soviet Lithuanian Theatre Stage

Jurgita Staniškytė

ABSTRACT

During the second decade of the Independence, i.e. at the beginning of the twenty-first century the increasing number of performances trying to escape the tradition of anti-mimetic representation and to re-engage with reality appeared on the Lithuanian theatre stage. Fragments of everyday reality, 'real' personalities onstage, autobiographic narratives, historic documents, authentic spaces were becoming increasingly popular, allowing some critics to proclaim the eagerly awaited 'return to realism'. However, a closer analysis of this tendency of contemporary Lithuanian theatre can lead one to believe that such performances do not demonstrate the urge to return to the traditional notion of realist representation, but rather to playfully flirt with reality and its reception in the fictional world of theatre. In the light of theoretical and practical revisions of the concepts of reality and its representation, young Lithuanian theatre creators are not so much interested in truthful representation of reality, but rather in a performative investigation of processes of representation and their effects on audience perception. One might add that while engaging with the codes of reality or 'real' material onstage, contemporary Lithuanian artists try to dismantle the binary opposition between realistic representation and anti-realistic playfulness, which dominated the symbolic mentality of modern Lithuanian theatre. Various forms of playing with reality and fiction on the Lithuanian theatre stage, their underlying principles and wider cultural implications of such games are the object of investigation of this article. A comparative analysis of performances from Lithuania and Estonia will help to highlight the specific character of Lithuanian theatre as well as to define the patterns of playing with reality present on the post-Soviet Lithuanian stage.

Keywords: Lithuanian theatre, play, reality, realism, representation.

BIOGRAPHY

Jurgita Staniškytė, Ph.D., heads the Theatre Studies Department and is a Professor at the Faculty of Arts, Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas, Lithuania). She has published numerous scientific and critical articles on contemporary Lithuanian theatre as well as performative aspects of post-Soviet Lithuanian culture. Jurgita Staniškytė serves as a member of the Committee of the Social Sciences and Humanities of the Research Council of Lithuania. She has published two monographs: *Changing Signs: Lithuanian Theatre between Modernism and Postmodernism* (Vilnius, 2008) and *Post-Soviet Lithuanian Theatre: History, Memory, Identity* (Vilnius, 2014).

j.staniskyte@mf.vdu.lt

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JURGITA STANIŠKYTĖ

Relations between art and play are vindicated by many artists and analyzed by many scholars. Theatre and play form even a closer kinship and are often treated as synonyms. According to Willmar Sauter, playing is an integral part of the theatrical event, and Richard Schechner believes that playing is at the heart of every performance.[1] Undoubtedly, many qualities of play can be attributed to theatre, such as improvisation, make-believe, or assumption of roles. However, according to Gianni Vattimo, there is a notable tendency from the perspective of Hegelian theories to interpret the playful character of artistic practices as un-substantiality of art, which literally means the lack of substance.[2] Traditionally, one of the main characteristics attributed to play(ing) is its separation from serious activities and everyday life. Eventually this leads to the understanding of play as an autonomous activity associated with pleasure and defined in binary opposition to reality.

Even though, since the twentieth century, this binary opposition has been questioned by various theoretical approaches, this attitude is still particularly evident in the tradition of Lithuanian theatre research and haunts the conceptualization of the relationships between art and reality. The binary scheme of reality and play is latently present in many scholarly or critical investigations of Lithuanian theatre history, where this schematic division produces other dichotomies, such as realistic representation and anti-realistic playfulness, social and poetic-metaphoric theatre, realist and formalist theatre, etc.[3]

In the context of Lithuanian theatre criticism, 'playfulness' is defined as inventive flashes of the stage director's imagination, imaginative interpretation of the playwright's text and unrestrained play with theatrical language, all of this resulting in the creation of playful metaphors and improvised situations. Lithuanian theatre researchers mostly associate the term 'playful' with the performances of stage director Rimas Tuminas.[4] The canonic example of the 'playfulness' of Tuminas' theatre is the stage production of Mikhail Lermontov's *Masquerade* (1997). In *Masquerade* picturesque *mise-en-scène* and a playful interpretation of the poetics of Romanticism mesmerize spectators with gentle sentimentality and ludic atmosphere. The performance has to be admired for its pure visual pleasure: a dance of artificial snowflakes, choreographic movements of actors, comic gags and a pastiche of romantic music create an atmosphere of enchantment, beauty and detachment. At the same time, the performance opens a space of oblivion, which gently forces the spectator to forget the world outside the playhouse and allow oneself to be seduced by the fairytale-like performance. Tuminas' version of *Masquerade* exemplifies the notion of theatrical playfulness as a specific game of surfaces, separated from reality, shallow but seductive at the same time.

The other part of this binary configuration – a realist representation – was transformed into the dogma of 'social realism' during the Soviet period. Eventually, it became a perfect example of deceptive mimicry, and, according to Plato's classification, an imitation "of a phantasm" or "appearance as it

appears" rather than the mirror of social reality or truth.[5] As a consequence of the discredit of realist representation, anti-mimetic strategies, exemplified by the metaphoric theatrically of Eimuntas Nekrošius or the theatrical playfulness of Rimas Tuminas, became the dominant modes of representation on the Lithuanian theatre's stage in the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, anti-mimetic representation offered theatre makers and audiences the possibility to escape a vigorously changing social reality of post-Soviet Lithuania. The dominance of theatricality and metaphorical poetics in Lithuanian theatre was considered by many as a symptom of asocial theatre, where fantasies and symbols of the stage director's imagination had overcome the language of the real.

Nevertheless, during the second decade of the Independence, certain signs of change came into view; there appeared on the Lithuanian theatre stage an increasing number of performances which tried to escape the tradition of anti-mimetic representation and to re-engage with reality. Fragments of everyday reality, 'real' personalities onstage, autobiographic narratives, historic documents, authentic spaces became increasingly popular, allowing some critics to proclaim the eagerly awaited 'return to realism'. However, a closer analysis of this tendency of contemporary Lithuanian theatre can lead one to believe that such performances do not demonstrate the urge to return to the traditional notion of realist representation, but rather to playfully flirt with reality and its reception in the fictional world of theatre. One might add that while engaging with the codes of reality or 'real' material onstage, contemporary Lithuanian artists tried to dismantle the binary opposition between realistic representation and anti-realistic playfulness, which dominated the symbolic mentality of modern Lithuanian theatre. Various forms of playing with reality and fiction on the Lithuanian theatre stage, their underlying principles and wider cultural implications of such games are the object of investigation of this article. A comparative analysis of performances from Lithuania and Estonia will help to highlight the specific character of Lithuanian theatre as well as to define the patterns of playing with reality present on the post-Soviet Lithuanian stage.

PLAY(ING) WITH REALITY: DOCUMENTARY FICTIONS AND BORDERLINES OF THE REAL

The need to engage with contemporary reality rather than lock oneself up in the ivory tower of elitist experimentation or playful theatricality has become one of the most pressing issues of post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre debates. Even though this problem was directly linked to the Lithuanian theatre tradition, it represents a larger trajectory in western theatre of the last decades: "the trend away from the artificial and artistic and towards the authentic and documentary".[6] However, at the end of the twentieth century, the very concept of realist representation, together with the notion of signifying systems, has transformed by numerous theoretical revisions, practical criticisms and artistic investigations.

The limitations of realist representation as a literary-historic moment are presented in the works of Fredric Jameson. Realism, for Jameson, is an "exhausted" form no longer capable of adequately "representing" the reality of late capitalism because of the "impossible totality" of the contemporary world of postmodern globalization. As a result of this tight connection of realist representation and its socio-political context, Jameson declared realism an actual impossibility and an unattainable goal with the only possible prospect of "realism which is meant to derive from the shock" of the acknowledgement of that impossibility.[7] Contemplating the demise of realism Jameson even goes on to argue that, "the representational apparatus of Science Fiction […] sends back more reliable information about the contemporary world than an exhausted realism".[8]

In the second half of the twentieth century, the poststructuralist revision of the theory of representation challenged the fundamental notions of reality and its perception even further. While contemplating the discrepancy between language and reality, Jacques Derrida invoked the notion of play – demonstrated by his concept of "freeplay of signifiers" – as a point of the critique of the metaphysics of presence, declaring that "the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. […] The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and

the movement of chain".[9] The notion of an endless play of the signifying system signals its autonomization and disrupts transcendent categories of 'reality', 'center' or final 'meaning', focusing rather on internal inconsistencies, constructed nature and a possibility of multiple interpretations of these concepts. Indeed, after the poststructuralist turn, the very concept of representation has changed: the representation (text, image, voice or body of the actor) was declared to be an autonomous system, constructing rather than re-presenting reality. The idea that systems of signification cannot be perceived as neutral or transparent but are rather constitutive of reality influenced the theoretical as well as practical attitudes in the milieu of theatre, opening it up to the investigation of the mechanisms of production of meaning as well as the processes of performance creation and perception.

Faced with the declared "impossibility of capturing reality as such",[10] contemporary theatre artists are not so much interested in the presentation of realist codes but rather in a performative investigation of processes of representation and their effects on audience perception. As Hans-Thies Lehmann has remarked, "Representation and presence, mimetic play and performance, the represented realities and the process of representation itself: from this structural split the contemporary theatre has extracted a central element of the postdramatic paradigm – by radically thematizing it and by putting real on equal footing with the fictive".[11] As a consequence, 'play' and 'reality' are perceived as integral parts of the same performative system rather than mutually exclusive binary oppositions. Theoretical and practical revisions of concepts of reality and its representation encouraged theatre creators to investigate various forms of producing reality effects together with the relationships between realistic and theatrical codes of representation. Furthermore, these artistic explorations often took on playful forms, which, according to Lehmann, "tread the borderline" by "permanently switching […] between 'real' contiguity (connection with reality) and 'staged' construct, thus acknowledging the separation between reality and fiction as a perceptual experience".[12]

In this context, the emerging tendencies of Lithuanian theatre to playfully engage with reality can also be interpreted as a reaction to the dominant models of modernist binaries and the urge to disrupt and investigate them. An increasing body of contemporary Lithuanian performances tried to investigate contemporary reality by focusing on the notions of dislocation and paradox, on the imaginative or self-reflective aspects of reality-based narratives, while, at the same time, emphasizing the interplay between reality and fiction intrinsic to any performative situation. In general terms, these performances can be defined as artistic investigations of contemporary Lithuanian reality. However, they do not fall exactly into the category of documentary theatre where a performance script is constructed on the basis of interviews conducted by the playwright or the creative team with real people.[13] In the Lithuanian case, these performances try to mix or juxtapose the real and the fictional positioning both on an equal footing of theatrical structure. The main feature of these performances is that their core – script or text – originates from the artistic investigation of various aspects of contemporary reality executed by the members of the troupe and incorporates personal experiences and/or interpretations of the artists. Thus, there is always a combination of an introspective (self-reflective) impulse with the desire to 'touch' the hot topics of contemporary reality.

The impulses to investigate or play with reality in Lithuanian theatre come largely from the non-institutional theatre troupes and this 'passion for the real' is only expressed in the performances of young Lithuanian theatre creators. It could be argued that the artistic investigation of reality and a self-reflexive look at the mechanism of theatrical representation require a tactical cognition (in terms of 'tactics' vs. 'strategies' of Michel de Certeau).[14] To schematize de Certeau, tactics are the modes of action or knowledge that are acquired in the process, they are not stable, objective or given.[15] In this sense, tactical cognition is similar to the knowledge gained while playing. The tactic's ability to maneuver in the territory of the other (non-theatrical reality) and to adjust his/her ways of 'moving' to the quickly changing situation while retaining the critical view directed not only at the other but also at himself/herself somehow seems too schizophrenic for the modern strategists of Lithuanian theatre. Therefore,

it comes as no surprise that the tactical playing with reality can be found in the works of the youngest generation of Lithuanian theater creators.

Performances most representative of these tendencies attempt to look closely at various aspects of contemporary Lithuanian society: from emerging social roles in post-Soviet Lithuania (*The Clinic*, 2008, director Agnius Jankevičius, Arts Printing House) to the value of artistic practices in the post-industrial world (*A Phone Book*, 2010 and *Mr. Fluxus or Charlatans*, 2011, director Vidas Bareikis, No Theatre). While the intentions behind these performances clearly mark the urge for an engagement with reality, the real material onstage is playfully linked with theatrical, ironical and grotesque images. Performers deliberately disclose the fact that parts of the performances are based on real events, yet at the same time supplement it with fictional extensions. Thus, they openly declare the urge for authenticity, yet playfully engage in theatrical role-play. This constant border crossing between reality and fiction can be metaphorically described as 'flirting with reality', where the audience is made aware of the real material as a basis for the performance but is never allowed to question the theatricality of the situation.

Such attitudes are particularly visible in the performances of the theatre movement No Theatre and especially its investigation into the means of theatrical representations and the creative credibility of the artist in the performances, *A Phone Book* (2010) and *Mr. Fluxus or Charlatans* (2011); or the pseudo-autobiographical performances (or play-biographies) *Mono sapiens* (2010), director Vaidas Kublinskas, Trupė liūdi and Julius Tertelis' *Pra* (2007), director Aidas Giniotis, Open Circle. All these performances can be interpreted as a tactical play with the real and fictional material. The performances started from the zero point in terms of traditional theatre making, as the scripts of all were either created during the rehearsals or collectively during the workshops. The blue-print of the narratives was open to change, as the main 'tactics' of producing these performances was the investigation of the personal experiences of the artists. In these performances, playing with reality becomes the tool for a self-reflexive analysis of theatre, or "a theatrical thematization of thea-

tre".[16] The starting point of the performances can be interpreted as the willingness to investigate the processes of art creation, questioning the effects of 'real' or 'autobiographic' material on audience perception.

Instead of relying exclusively on the traditional modes of narrating a life story or 'autobiography-as-history', defined by Philip Dodd as a serious, politically engaged variety of self-representation that conceives a life of an individual as a part of a larger, collective social experience, „these performances question the modes of constructing and presenting the artists' personal stories to audiences, thus openly smearing the differences between 'autobiography-as-history' and 'autobiography-as-fiction'".[17] Almost all performances, at some point, ironically and playfully mock claims of artist autobiographies for absolute truth by showing explicitly how various artistic models are used in order to embellish, glorify or condemn the work of the Artist. Moreover, various forms of 'flirting with reality' are present in these performances. *A Phone Book* by No Theatre is constantly interrupted by the real-time phone calls to random people who are asked about the value of theatre in contemporary society; Julius Tertelis in *Pra* discloses the operations of various audiovisual effects (sound, lighting, stage design) right before the eyes of the spectators; in *Mono sapiens* the actors engage in a direct communication with the audience while jokingly discussing the fundamentals of acting (being on stage, creating a character, capturing the audience's attention, the dictatorship of stage directors, artistic narcissism) as well as its social (in)significance (salaries, craving for recognition, competition). In the performances of No Theatre, the playful meta-fictional strategy – an open questioning of the powers of artistic representation – becomes more than just a 'frivolous self-exploration'. *A Phone Book* and *Mr. Fluxus or Charlatans* can both be described as a meta-theatrical play with reality and fiction, with the artist's "knowledge of the manipulative nature of fictional discourse",[18] and with the knowledge of how narrative and metanarrative can be constructed, how empathy or critical distance can be achieved, and how a spontaneous community between the actors and the audience can be constructed and deconstructed.

However, not all performances manage to fully escape the traps of binary perceptions of reality and fiction while engaging in performative explorations of biographic material. This tendency is best demonstrated in the works *Open Circle* (2005) and *The Rain Land* (2011) by the theatre group Open Circle and director Aidas Giniotis. In these stage practices actors construct stories from their own experience (*Open Circle*) and their family history (*The Rain Land*) and mix them with themes from historical, political, and popular discourses as well as everyday reality. The appeal of autobiographic material for Open Circle artists is embedded in its ability to directly engage with personal experiences, the visible presence of a performing subject, and, according to Deidre Heddon, "the here-and-now-ness" of the autobiographical performance that "enables potentially different impact".[19] The intentions behind these autobiographical performances are "to reach the level of maximum authenticity possible in theatre".[20] This 'stage authenticity', according to the creators of *Open Circle*, can be achieved only through the 'real' material – the authentic personal narratives uttered on stage by the young actors themselves.

In the autobiographical performances of Open Circle, the staging of the *mise-en-scène* is made to look as open as possible, almost without any directing, to become as close to the real storytelling situation as possible. The actors and spectators are seated onstage – actors form the inside circle and the spectators gather around in an outer circle. The performance space is located in very close proximity to the spectators; they are seated onstage on the same level as the performers. Great attention is given to the authenticity of language and the effect of immediacy: the impression should be created that the experience of the performers is not closed, trapped in the textual frame, but rather that there is a lot of space left for improvised action. However, the presentation of the autobiographical material in Open Circle performances is based on the unproblematic understanding of relations between 'life' (reality) and its performed representation. Even when the actors present genuine, autobiographical material and strive for the authentic experience on stage, these stories take on a theatrical dimension and become dramatic and fictive.

The actors of *Open Circle* tell stories about their lives as teenagers in high school and their family history during the years of occupation in *The Rain Land*. Most of the stories seem to fit the frames of cultural scripts and publicly available discourses of acceptance, defiance and exclusion. Instead of questioning the suitability of linear narratives for representation of contemporary experiences, Open Circle actors 'carve' their own personal experiences according to the shapes of the already existing cultural templates or, to use the term of Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet, narrative models. All three narrative models identified by Chanfrault-Duchet are present in the performance *Open Circle*: the epic (identification with the values of the community), the romanesque (the quest for authentic values in a degraded world), and the picaresque (ironic and satirical position in relation to hegemonic values).[21] With the help of these pre-existing 'patterns of experience' private memory merges with the larger cultural narratives and "automatically becomes part of a larger, impersonal whole".[22] However, the effect of dramatization produced by the use of these recognizable narrative models goes against the grain of Open Circle intentions. The performers are concerned with the possibilities of translating unmediated experiences in the theatre; however, once thrust into traditional narrative frames these personal experiences loose the effects of authenticity. Instead of an authentic presentation, Open Circle multiplies recitations.

However, there are moments in the performance *Open Circle* when the staging of reality effect is complemented with theatrical illustrations of narratives uttered by the actors. Parts of the stories told are playfully enacted by the members of the group, collectively replaying verbal personal narratives by using the theatrical language of embodiment and role play. These moments of theatrical play, however illustrative and decorative, 'rupture' the fabric of 'reality effect' and trigger the flashes of a physical memory of being in school – fighting, singing, hugging, playing – in the minds of the spectators much more vividly. Episodically applied in *Open Circle*, this 'mimicry game' is developed even further in the troupe's performance of biographical improvisations *The Rain Land*. Collectively scripted, *The Rain Land*

focuses on personal stories and memories of the Second World War and a Post-War period collected by the troupe from their family members using oral history methods. These real life-stories are dramatized, retold and embodied by the actors onstage simultaneously mixing the techniques of storytelling and theatrical enacting. Every story of *The Rain Land* is irrupted by theatrical play: few gestures, musical fragments, pantomime, and improvisation with found-objects complement the biographical material. By intermingling the strategies of narrative and play, *The Rain Land* strives to disclose the complex simultaneous nature of memory that can be activated not only through narrative representation but also through space, body, sensation, image and performance.

One of the most recent examples of play(ing) with reality, a devised performance *Barricades* (2014), used traumatic historical events as part of the performative games. *Barricades* – a creative collaboration of young actors from the Lithuanian National Theater troupe, theatre critic Goda Dapšytė, Latvian stage director Valters Sīlis and playwright Janis Balodis from Dirty Deal Teatro – speaks about the traumatic memories of the history of the nation, the events of January 13, 1991.[23] None of the creators of the performance were witnesses to these events – at that time they were too young to directly participate in the dramatic recreation of Independent Lithuania. The creators of *Barricades* deal with absent memories; therefore, the past in the performance is reconstructed from the secondary material (historical documents and oral history sources, e.g. testimonies of family members and other witnesses) and is juxtaposed with the personal childhood experiences of the group members. Having no 'direct' memory of these events, the actors are forced to cite, improvise, fantasize and imagine the possible scenarios of many episodes that form the historical contexts of 'bloody January'. The creative group seems to be well aware of a "new historical situation" as described by Jameson, where history "itself remains forever out of reach" and we are always condemned "to seek History by way of" stereotypes and mediated experiences.[24]

The main strategies of this 'performative remembering' are playfulness and irony. In the paradoxical condition when, according to trauma theories, the past is inescapably "tattooed on the present" and yet is always constructed retrospectively,[25] the creators of *Barricades* chose playfulness as a form of engagement with the traumatic past. In this performance, history is presented as 'a toy box', where various elements can be picked up as if by chance and played with. One actor remarks: "Let's play! That's what we do best", and the imaginary extensions of historical events multiply onstage: the actors improvise the Nobel Peace Prize committee meeting, where the candidature of Mikhail Gorbachev is being discussed; they imaginably envisage the discussions of members of the first Lithuanian Cabinet of Ministers and fantasize about the mystery of the disappearance of the first Prime Minister Albertas Šimėnas during the dramatic events of January 13.

Historical figures intermingle with imaginary characters, their actions are complemented by real and invented memories of the actors, factual documents as real traces of the past are mixed with imaginary narratives – this playful re-imagination of a recent historical past transcends the binary logic of *either/or* in favor of *both/and*. *Barricades* takes a hybrid approach that merges imagination and fact, documents and speculative inventions, seriousness and play. There are several moments in the performance where a simple recitation of documents – hospital books registering wounds, injuries and causes of deaths of the victims – are calmly narrated by the actors sitting onstage. Amid these 'flashes' of reality the actors indeed become the performative witnesses to the past or, in Freddie Rokem's terms, "hyper-historians" that serve as "a connecting link between the historical past and the 'fictional' performed here and now".[26] The non-linear structure and hybrid character of the performance is demonstrated not only by switching the registers from play to seriousness but also by merging different modes of acting, utopian visions and parody, empathy and distance, 'forth wall' and audience involvement. Paradoxically, the ambiguous *both/and* attitude of the performance was projected onto its perception. *Barricades* has generated a fair amount of criticism based on two different claims: on the one hand, the employment of playfulness for representation of trauma was deemed disrespectful; on the other, the

Barricades (2014), Lithuanian National Theater, directed by Valters Sīlis. Photo: Dmitri Matvejev.

performance was criticized for its lack of a critical attitude towards the official version of national history.

Another way to investigate the boundaries between reality (materiality) and fictionality (symbolic level) onstage is the play with the materiality of the actor's body. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999) by Oskaras Koršunovas (Oskaras Koršunovas Theatre), through the interaction of the real bodies of the actors one more dimension of the performance – the physical drama of body – is displayed. The fictional and real (physical) layers of the performance are juxtaposed as the audience's attention is driven towards a physical action and its traces (bruises, sweat, scratches) on the 'real' body of the actor. Although the identity of the actor is concealed beneath the character, his / her body is revealed as a real physical presence, fighting the field of symbolic representation. The 'double coded' nature of the actor's body or 'ghosting' of the previous roles is played even more boldly in the recent production of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (2010) by Koršunovas. The stage director consciously makes the

split between a fictive character and the real identity of the actors visible by staging intertextual references to the previous roles of the actors as well as direct interventions into the audience space. For example, Koršunovas integrates the text from *Hamlet* into the performance of *The Lower Depths* as a reference to his previous production. During the performance, the actor, Dainius Gavenonis, invites the audience members to drink by asking "who wants to drink vodka with Gavenonis who plays Satin?" These tactics produced the immediate effect of "the irruption of the real"[27] and disrupted the audience's "aesthetic pleasure". The spectators were forced not only to acknowledge the fluidity of the line between the real and fictional identity of the performers, between physical and imaginary spaces, the 'ghostly', but at the same time material nature of the theatrical representation, but also to simply wonder whether vodka in the theatre can be real.

Although *The Lower Depths,* to a certain degree, demonstrates the fluidity and play between 'physical' (real) and 'the imaginary' (fictional) spaces of performance, Lithuanian theatre artists rarely trans-

gress the boundaries of theatre by physical action or media technologies – interventions into real spaces, site-specific performances or investigations of the effects of different media on audience perception are yet unexplored territories for Lithuanian theatre. However, such examples can be found in Estonian theatre. Playing with the 'representability' of a theatrical event as well as the instability of the theatrical space is the object of the performance *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* (2011) by the Estonian theatre troupe NO99. In this performance, the urge to talk about the history of the nation while playing with different modes of representation is displayed very boldly. The creators of this performance weave the story of national greatness and demise from individual stories and experiences. According to NO99, this intimate epic summarizes all previous performances by the group about Estonia.[28] While other parts of this informal cycle analyze the present state of contemporary Estonian society, *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* looks back to the past, to historical memory, and to a symbolic childhood of contemporary Estonia in order to explain the present.

The performance starts in Nokia Hall in Tallinn, where actors onstage watch the gathering audience, then ostentatiously leave the stage and the arena heading for their own theatre building to start the performance there. Paradoxically, while leaving the Nokia Hall, the actors leave the unmediated space of theatrical interaction and while entering the stage of their empty theatre building, they enter the mediated reality: every action is now filmed by cameras and broadcast to the audience left in Nokia Hall. On the formal level of theatrical production, the incertitude and ambiguity about the realness of the theatrical action is established with the help of the presence and absence of the performance / performers in front of the audience. This strategy instantly and effectively opens up the space for an endless play of uncertainty about the reality and fiction in *The Rise and Fall of Estonia*.

The actors perform in an empty theatre; the spectators in Nokia Hall watch the film – a 'live' transmission of the performance. The ultimate alienation effect is achieved in an extremely direct manner, without any symbols or metaphors. The epos of an Eastern European is told onstage and projected on the screen through the fragmented personal narratives of joy, frustration, and disappointment. This epic story unfolds in claustrophobic spaces of everyday reality: a kitchen, a car, small rooms, and corridors. However, each scene contains moments where through personal stories the flashes of a grand history of the nation are ignited. Occupa-

Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (2010), Oskaras Koršunovas Theatre, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas. Photo: Dmitri Matvejev.

tion, fear, terror, the first car, discomfort of communal spaces, betrayal, becoming a pioneer, quarrels about independence, guilt, eternal rush in a rat race, lust for money, greed – this mental journey of the individual and the nation starts with the breakfast of a dysfunctional family and ends with a dinner on commemoration day.

The events that many can identify with or authenticate as being similar to their own experience are juxtaposed with surreal situations that paradoxically amplify the experience of realness. In the final scene of the performance, a simple everyday act of eating becomes a surreal ritual of rapacious devouring. The intentions behind this scene are made very clear by the creators of the performance: the voice-over explains, with the calmness of the documentary film narrator, that devouring and consumption are the most favorite occupations of contemporary Estonians – they do it in spite of everything, without looking back or forth. The surrealistic extension of an otherwise perfectly 'naturalistic' scene of the dinner helps to approach familiar realities from the 'defamiliarizing' perspective of fantasy. The play of reality and fiction on a formal as well as thematic level of this performance helps to focus, to rephrase Linda Hutcheon, on both the imaginative process (of storytelling) and on that of the product (the story told).[29]

NO99 were able to deliver the portrayal of subjective experiences of the past, playing with the audience expectations of a 'live' theatre event and producing the effect of 'indecidability'. *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* plays with the ambiguities of presence and absence, real and imaginary, live and pre-recorded and never allows its spectators to forget the issue of mediation. The juxtaposition of the reality (a 'live' performance) and fiction (a 'live' recording) on a formal level of theatrical aesthetics creates the effect of distantiation: the history of the nation is perceived as a recorded film, distant and unchangeable, but at the same time as an open, improvised process, unfolding *hear and now* in front of our eyes. To rephrase Lehmann, it is not the occurrence of anything 'real' as such but its self-reflexive use that characterizes *The Rise and Fall of Estonia* and defines its critical potential.[30]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysed examples of Lithuanian theatre strive to re-engage with reality by using autobiographical narratives, historical documents and personal memories by focusing audience attention on the materiality of the actor's body or his/her real identity and by staging direct interventions into the audience space. However, in the light of theoretical and practical revisions of the concepts of reality and its representation, young Lithuanian theatre creators are not so much interested in truthful representation of reality, but rather in a performative investigation of the processes of representation and their effects on audience perception. The play with reality effects and perceptual conventions in contemporary Lithuanian theatre signals the revision of the links between theatre and reality; moreover, most of the performances discussed here playfully denounce the dichotomies of realistic representation and anti-realistic playfulness, realism and theatricality. Young Lithuanian theatre creators strive not so much to erase the differences between the two but rather try to disclose the modes and conditions in which reality and fiction are perceived at the same time making the spectator an integral part of this game. On a larger scale, these processes signal "the shift away from single-perspective notions of truth towards ambiguity and multiple viewpoints".[31]

To summarize, the performances discussed in this paper not only demonstrate that the methods of creating anti-mimetic fiction are similar to those of producing the reality effect of realist representation, but also strive to cross borders between reality and fiction by playing with the spectators' expectations and generating ambiguity as well as new forms of perception in the theatre. However, the comparative analysis of performances from Lithuania and Estonia demonstrates that Lithuanian theatre artists are less willing to engage reality by transgressing the boundaries of traditional theatre spaces or to test the effects of theatrical representation with new media technologies. Furthermore, the subversive and critical potential of playing with reality that would make the spectators aware of "how a skillful shifting of the borderline between fictionality and reality may become an ideological operation and a means of exercising political power"[32] is yet to be discovered by Lithuanian theatre creators.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1   Willmar Sauter, *Eventness: A Concept of Theatrical Event,* Stuts, Stockholm 2006; Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies*, Routledge, London, New York 2002, p. 79.

2   Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008, p. 61.

3   This characteristic feature of Lithuanian theatre theory and criticism is directly connected to the traditions of modern Lithuanian theatre scholarship as well as Lithuanian theatre practice. However, schematic opposition of mimetic and anti-mimetic representation is partly connected to the tradition of modernist theatre and its binary configuration of realism and theatricality. According to Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, "The concepts of realism and theatricality set up a binary configuration in modernism, with realism aligning itself with the idea of 'artless' art and the many alternatives to realism embracing and celebrating the explicit theatrical conditions of the stage, its genres, and its traditions". (*Theatricality*, Tracy C. Davis, Thomas Postlewait, eds., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 12.)

4   The interpretations of playfulness of Rimas Tuminas theatre are summarized and contextualized most thoroughly in the works of theatre researcher and critic Ramunė Balevičiūtė: "Tuminas has always remained faithful to the understanding of theatre as play, and his theatre is increasingly moving towards play." (Ramunė Balevičiūtė, *Rimas Tuminas: teatras, tikresnis už gyvenimą. Žaidimas Rimo Tumino teatre,* Metodika, Vilnius 2012, pp. 253-4.)

5   *The Collected Dialogues of Plato,* Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., Bollingen, Princeton 1961.

6   Mark Lipovetsky, Brigit Beumers, "Reality Performance: Documentary Trends in Post-Soviet Russian Theatre" in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 18 (3), 2008, p. 294.

7   Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1984, p. 25.

8   Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London, New York 2005, p. 384.

9   Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, pp. 278-93.

10 *Fictional Realities / Real Fictions: Contemporary Theatre in Search of a New Mimetic Paradigm*, Mateusz Borowski, Małgoszata Sugiera, eds., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle 2007, p. 24.

11 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, Routlegde, London, New York 2006, p. 103.

12 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 103.

13 Admittedly, this definition implies the traditional notion of documentary theatre. Contemporary examples of documentary theatre, according to the editors of the volume *Get Real. Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, are quite diverse, including a more varied range of "evidence" and annexing "a battery of reflexive performance techniques". See *Get Real. Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, Alison Forsyth, Chris Megson, eds., Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, p. 3.

14 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984.

15 For a more detailed discussion on tactical directing see Jurgita Staniškytė, "(In)visible Politics: Towards the Notion of Tactical Directing" in *Darbai ir dienos*, no. 54, 2010, pp. 157-64.

16 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 103.

17 Philip Dodd, "History or Fiction: Balancing Contemporary Autobiography's Claims" in *Mosaic*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1987, p. 65.

18 *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, vol. 2, *Mimesis, Semiosis and Power*, Ronald Bogue, Mihai Spariosu, eds., John Benjamins Press, Amsterdam, Philadelphia 1991, p. 129.

19 Deidre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008, pp. 5-6.

20 See http://atvirasratas.lt/idėja/ (accessed 05 October 2013).

21 Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet, "Narrative Structures, Social Models and Symbolic Representations in the Life Story" in *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, S. B. Gluck, D. Patal, eds., Routledge, London 1991.

22 Marc Eli Blanchard, "The Critique of Autobiography" in *Comparative Literature*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1982, p. 113.

23 On January 13, 1991, Soviet military forces attacked the Lithuanian Television and Radio transmission tower in an attempt to overthrow the legitimate government of the independent country. At least 14 unarmed people were killed and more than 140 injured by the Soviet military. January 13 in Lithuania is commemorated as the Day of Freedom Fighters.

24 Fredric Jameson, op. cit., p. 25.

25 Frederik Le Roy, Christel Stalpaert, Sofie Verdoodt, "Introduction to Performing Cultural Trauma in Theatre

and Film" in *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2011, p. 253.

26 Freddie Rokem, *Performing History. Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2000, p. 13.

27 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 99.

28 See http://www.no99.ee/eng/lavastused.php?nid=60 (accessed 05 December 2013).

29 Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox,* Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario 1980, pp. 3, 5.

30 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 103.

31 Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real,* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, New York 2013, p. 9.

32 *Fictional Realities / Real Fictions*, op. cit., p. 16.