

# After the Riot

## Teatr.doc and the Performance of Witness

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*Figure 1. Audience members vote for a cast of characters in Khamsud. Prodolzhenie. Teatr.doc, Moscow, August 2012. (Photo by Olga Prosvirova)*

In August 2012, at a critical juncture for the protest movement then sweeping across Russia, one could attend an unusual performance at the Moscow documentary theatre Teatr.doc that both captured and bore witness to the changing mood of the protest.<sup>1</sup> At once a press conference, a political meeting, a happening, and a public trial, the performance followed no script and employed no professional actors. No fourth wall separated the audience gathered in Teatr.doc's small black box theatre from the action onstage; in fact, there was no action; instead, forsaking two of the principal features of dramatic theatre—representation and repetition—this one-off performance took the form of a dialogue between the audience and a panel of witnesses. The latter consisted of three lawyers, two journalists, and Pyotr Verzilov—former member of the radical

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performance art collective Voina (War) and husband of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, member of the protest band Pussy Riot. The title of the performance, *Khamsud. Prodolzhenie* (Khamsud: The Sequel), punned on the “boorish” (*khamskii*) nature of the Khamovnicheskii District Court, which just days earlier had given long prison terms to Tolokonnikova and two other band members.<sup>2</sup>

This was not the first time that Teatr.doc had experimented with this unconventional format, which in his introductory remarks to the audience the theatre’s artistic director, Mikhail Ugarov, described as “witness theatre” (*svidetel’skii teatr*). As early as December 2002 the theatre critic Grigory Zaslavsky staged a performance at Teatr.doc entitled “*Nord-Ost.*” *Sorok pervyi den’* (“Nord-Ost”: The Forty-First Day), bringing together survivors of the fatal hostage crisis that took place at the Dubrovka Theatre that October. The next witness theatre show was staged almost a decade later, in December 2011, and featured political activists arrested at an antigovernment rally a few weeks earlier—part of a growing wave of protests sparked by the fraudulent legislative elections on 4 December 2011. As the Russian protest movement strengthened, Teatr.doc repeatedly turned to witness theatre as a means of rapidly responding to unfolding events, staging two different shows about the Pussy Riot trial and one about the trial of political activist Leonid Razvozzhaev. Teatr.doc also organized two theatre laboratories in March and July 2012 entitled *The Witness Onstage*.<sup>3</sup> With the regime’s crackdown on protest, however, this phase in the development of Russian witness theatre seemed to come to an end, and today the term is used more widely, as it has been in the West, to describe *any* kind of oral history show that features “real” people rather than professional actors.<sup>4</sup>

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2. On 21 February 2012, five members of Pussy Riot approached the altar at Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, put on colorful balaclavas, and began to jump around, pumping their fists into the air. After less than a minute, they were escorted out of the Cathedral by bodyguards, but edited footage of the performance, entitled *Punk Prayer: Mother of God Drive Putin Away*, was later uploaded onto YouTube. In March 2012 three of the members—Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Ekaterina Samusevich—were arrested and charged with “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” On 17 August 2012 they were sentenced to two years in a penal colony. Samusevich was released in October 2012 after winning an appeal. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were freed under a general amnesty in December 2013. The identities of the two other women who took part in the performance remain unknown.

3. Teatr.doc’s witness theatre productions, chronologically: “*Nord-Ost.*” *Sorok pervyi den’* (6 December 2002); an untitled witness theatre show featuring activists arrested at a 5 December 2011 rally in Clean Ponds (30 December 2011); *Khamsud. Prodolzhenie* (27 August 2012); *Sluchai s moim drugom. delo Leonida Razvozzhaeva* (What Happened to My Friend: The Case of Leonid Razvozzhaev; 4 November 2012), a witness theatre show about a member of the political coalition Left Front who was abducted by Russian security forces in Ukraine and put on trial for organizing the 6 May 2012 protest in Moscow; *Pussy Riot. Prodolzhenie* (Pussy Riot: A Sequel; 9 January 2013), a second show about the Pussy Riot trial that featured, among other witnesses, the recently freed Ekaterina Samusevich. The *Svidetel’ na stsene* workshop took place on 10–11 March 2012 and again on 18–19 July 2012 at Teatr.doc. In addition to its witness theatre productions, Teatr.doc has premiered dozens of other shows in a variety of genres since their founding in 2002. For information about the theatre, see Teatr.doc’s website: [www.teatrdoc.ru](http://www.teatrdoc.ru).

4. The most recent example of this type of witness theatre in Russia is Varvara Faer’s *Lir-Kleshch* (Lear-Kleshch; 2015), which stars former penal colony inmate Marina Kleshcheva. Examples of Western witness theatre that influenced Teatr.doc include *Rwanda 94* (2000; dir. Marie-France Collard), which Zaslavsky mentions in his opening remarks to *Nord-Ost*, and the work of German theatre collective Rimini Protokoll (who prefer the term

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I examine *Khamsud*, Teatr.doc's first show about the Pussy Riot trial and, in my view, its most successful experiment with witness theatre to date, for what it can tell us both about the public response to the trial and about the meaning and functions of witnessing in the theatre. Although much can be said about this provocative piece, I limit my discussion to just a few key topics. First, I briefly introduce Teatr.doc and set up my discussion of witness theatre as a genre that departs from Teatr.doc's earlier work, blending elements of documentary theatre and performance art. I then begin my analysis of *Khamsud*, focusing on the way Teatr.doc's artists applied a variety of performative frames to create a subversive, carnivalesque response to the official trial. Drawing on the linguistic theories of J.L. Austin, I then scrutinize the performative (as opposed to constative) functions of witnessing in the theatre, examining the identity of the witnesses in *Khamsud* and the effect that their testimony had on the audience. I conclude by asking whether *Khamsud* did, nevertheless, have a constative (documentary) function, in addition to its performative ones, and if so, what precisely did it document?

## Reality Onstage

Teatr.doc was founded in 2002 by three Moscow playwrights who had attended seminars on the "verbatim" technique organized by delegates from London's Royal Court Theatre. A form of documentary theatre in which plays are constructed from the precise words spoken by people interviewed about a particular event or topic, verbatim theatre quickly became a major trend in Russia, its introduction coinciding with a growing desire on the part of Russian playwrights to portray previously ignored aspects of contemporary reality onstage. Verbatim was especially useful for revitalizing the language of the Russian theatre, which at the time no longer accurately reflected the language spoken by the populace. Teatr.doc's creative teams "went to the people," much like ethnographers or the 19th-century social reformers called *narodniks*,<sup>5</sup> in order to record the stories and speech patterns of underrepresented social and ethnic groups (such as prisoners, prostitutes, and sexual and ethnic minorities). At the same time, Teatr.doc addressed controversial sociopolitical themes, which at least some of its artists tried to approach objectively by adopting a "zero position" (*nol' pozitsiia*) toward their subjects. Important works created in this manner were *Sentiabr'.doc* (September.doc; 2005), which juxtaposed Russian and Chechen reactions to the 2004 terrorist school siege in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, and *Chas 18* (One Hour, Eighteen Minutes; 2010), Elena Gremina's docudrama about the death of anticorruption lawyer Sergei Magnitsky (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009; Freedman 2010; Iakubova 2014).

From the beginning Teatr.doc attracted as many detractors as admirers, most of whom have confined their criticism to the "antiaesthetic," "poor theatre" character of its productions. More sophisticated critiques, such as those offered by Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, have centered on the supposed naivety of documentary artists who, it is argued, exhibit an exaggerated faith in their ability to accurately represent reality (2009:209–38). In a recent article for the documentary theatre issue of the journal *Teatr*, Lipovetsky points to historical examples of documentality being put in the service of propaganda, reminding readers that documentary theatre always offers only "an illusion of documentality" (2015:84).<sup>6</sup> But in contrast to some Western critics, who argue that documentary theatre should simply "lay bare" its devices and thereby thematize the fraught process of editing and organizing material (Forsyth and Megson 2009; Martin [2006] 2012; Martin 2013), Lipovetsky instead calls for a fusion of documentary theatre

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"theatre of experts"). I use the term "Russian witness theatre" to refer only to the particular form of this genre that Teatr.doc developed in 2011–2013.

5. The *narodniks* (from *narod*, or "people, folk") were members of a social movement in the 1860s and 1870s who urged members of the intelligentsia to "go to the people" (one of their slogans) in order to learn about life outside the Russian capitals and to agitate for reform.

6. All translations from Russian texts, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

and contemporary performance art, which, unlike theatre, he contends, creates an independent reality in the “here and now” (2015:89). Thus while he praises the politically subversive and humanistic character of *One Hour, Eighteen Minutes*, a play constructed from a series of recorded testimonies to create, in Gremina’s words, “a trial that never happened” ([2010] 2014:443),<sup>7</sup> Lipovetsky nevertheless concludes: “The scenic action does not yet become here its own independent reality—as it does in the performance actions of contemporary art—but ‘reflects’ and ‘judges,’ just as in [the novels of Nikolai] Chernyshevsky” (2015:89). Only in the performance actions of groups like Pussy Riot and Voina, he writes (quoting Hans-Thies Lehmann), “does the illusion of documentality grow into the effect of reality, but of a special reality—‘bringing chaos and novelty into regulated and regulating perception’” (2015:88).

While there is nothing new in Lipovetsky’s desire to see a fusion of theatre and performance art—a process that has been unfolding organically in the West and, with typical delay, in Russia at least since the 1960s (Schechner [1988] 2003; Fischer-Lichte 2008)—I find interesting the specific terms according to which he envisions this fusion. “The documentality of transgressive action, taking place here and now,” he writes, “plus the documentality of a concrete individual fate, of ‘subjective time’ in conflict with the impersonal time of history, in this juxtaposition do I see the coordinates for a Russian political theatre” (2015:89). In fact, I would argue that this is precisely the juxtaposition of elements that we find in Russian witness theatre and especially in *Khamsud*, a piece that Lipovetsky unfortunately overlooks. This oversight is all the more striking given Lipovetsky’s provocative suggestion that the real Pussy Riot trial may have been the first political performance of this new genre. Modern Russia has, of course, witnessed no small number of public show trials, from the Moscow Trials of 1937–1938 to the 2003–2005 trial of Yukos Oil boss Mikhail Khodorkovsky. And yet, given both the logic of performance art, where the audience’s reaction becomes part of the performance, and the highly theatrical nature of the defendants themselves, whose courtroom performances electrified supporters, it was by no means clear who in fact was in charge of this particular “show.” As Lipovetsky observes:

Not only did this trial turn out to be a direct continuation and, therefore, a constituent part of the performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, but through it the “signified” of the punk prayer was expressed with astonishing vividness. On the one hand, the trial was understood as a more-than-real metaphor of the Russian political system. On the other, the fantastical nature of the accusations, rooted in the decisions of medieval councils and openly false testimony, shone through in this process with grotesque self-evidence. But the main thing: at the center of attention in this show [*spektaklia*] were the individual fates of real and extraordinary women. (88)

Thus in the totality of this “show”<sup>8</sup> (i.e., the combination of Pussy Riot’s original performance action and the ensuing show trial) Lipovetsky finds a model for political theatre in the post-documentary age, one that combines transgression, the (romantic) drama of individuals in conflict with an oppressive reality, and, more importantly, “not the illusion of documentality but the reality of something happening before our eyes—all the more astonishing the more surreal features it acquired” (88). Deliberately conceived as yet another episode in this larger performance, *Khamsud* anticipated Lipovetsky’s vision.

## The Play Frame

The Pussy Riot trial was part of one “grandiose show,” Mikhail Ugarov explained to *Khamsud*’s audience, individual episodes of which unfolded “inside the courtroom, on the streets, around

7. For an interesting analysis of this play, see Molly Flynn’s article in *New Theatre Quarterly* (2014).

8. Since the Russian word *spektakl’* does not always have the same negative connotation that “spectacle” does in modern English, and is more commonly used to describe any work of theatre, I have chosen to translate it as “show,” which I believe preserves some of the ambiguity present in the original.

the country, and on the internet.”<sup>9</sup> Like many works of theatre, he went on, this one began with a “fictional crime,” and this fictional crime was subsequently investigated. Claiming that new plays about the Pussy Riot trial are submitted to him daily, and that prominent actresses are already fighting over the lead roles, Ugarov nevertheless observed that Russian theatre still lacks the necessary language to speak about the trial and that a more traditional play about it would therefore have to be put off for another day.<sup>10</sup> As a result, he said, Teatr.doc’s artists decided to collect witness testimony that might one day prove useful to some as yet unknown playwright. But in contrast to traditional verbatim theatre, where testimony is collected by a creative team and later performed by professional actors, this time Teatr.doc brought the witnesses to the theatre, allowing audience members to become coauthors of the (hypothetical) future show. This clever and (as Ugarov’s mock-serious tone made clear) totally bogus conceit framed the participatory witness theatre performance entitled *Khamsud*.<sup>11</sup>

Having set up this playful frame, Ugarov turned the performance over to its director, Varvara Faer,<sup>12</sup> who introduced the witnesses and invited audience members to vote on a cast of characters. The resulting dramatis personae, whose names Faer wrote out with chalk on the theatre’s wall, included the trial judge, Marina Syrova; the defendants’ parents; a candle seller from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior; and a police Rottweiler that famously vomited in court. After that followed a long Q&A session, for which witnesses were instructed to ignore the legal aspects of the Pussy Riot case and instead to paint psychological portraits of the selected characters, basing their testimony on subjective opinion and on details “photographed” by their eyes and memory. Throughout the performance, audience members were given opportunities to pose questions to the witnesses and chime in with their own testimony; they were also asked to give opinions on such issues as the aesthetic quality of “the show” and the identity of its “author(s).” The performance concluded with the airing of a (mock) audition video—the screen framing the only appearance of a professional actor in *Khamsud*.

Although many factors contributed to the charged atmosphere in the theatre that evening, I will single out three features of *Khamsud* that I find the most significant: *actuality* (the Russian *aktual’nost’* can refer both to the state of “being real” and “being topical”); *authenticity*; and *carnivalesque mockery*.

The “actuality” of *Khamsud* was due, first of all, to the timing of the performance, which, as already mentioned, took place just days after the conclusion of the Pussy Riot trial. Given the great public attention garnered by the trial both domestically and internationally, with Moscow especially becoming the site of many public interventions and protests, any event dedicated to it was bound to turn into something of a political meeting. The audience members gathered at Teatr.doc that evening (like most people sympathetic to the political leanings of the theatre) had

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9. I was not present at the original performance, but I base my analysis on a recording that was made available on YouTube (rusreporter 2012), and on private interviews with Mikhail Ugarov and the show’s director, Varvara Faer.

10. Expanding on this idea in a later interview, Ugarov observed: “This show was too grandiose in reality. Precisely a show. The Magnitsky story was a secret action [*deistvie*], which we and the press brought out into the open. The Pussy Riot case is too difficult for our theatre [to use as the basis for a play] at the present moment; we do not possess the tools to carry it over into a second reality” (in Solntseva 2012).

11. It was evident from Ugarov’s tone that Teatr.doc had no intention of ever staging a conventional play about the Pussy Riot trial. His reference to a future show was only a conceit meant to “explain” the presence of witnesses in the theatre and to elicit the audience’s participation.

12. While Faer was the director of *Khamsud*, the task of moderating largely fell to Ugarov. During the course of the evening, the two of them stood behind the witnesses, facing the audience—an interesting detail to which I will return. The role played by them was in some ways reminiscent of that played by referees in a game. Richard Schechner discusses the use of “play frames” in a wide range of performance activities, including games and theatre, in *Performance Theory* (Schechner [1988] 2003:100).

been following the trial for months on social media and in traditional media; they had taken part in countless discussions and arguments; many had signed petitions and participated in protests. They were unanimous in their support for the defendants and extremely upset with the outcome of the trial, however predictable it may have been. One of the challenges facing Teatr.doc's artists was therefore to find an aesthetic form that would capture and marshal this energy.<sup>13</sup> "One must trace the structure only very lightly, on the surface," Ugarov observed in an interview about witness theatre. "If you create a rigid structure, the air and energy will dissipate, and the concept will begin to direct the story. [...] One needs spontaneity and, certainly, unrepeatability [*odnokratnost'*]," suggesting that one of the aims of witness theatre is to create the feeling of participating in a unique event. "[W]hen a participant knows that he speaks something only once, and the spectator listens only once, there arises the effect of uniqueness, and the adrenaline level rises many times. It transfers from the stage to the spectators and back" (in Lisitsina 2012).<sup>14</sup>

The "actuality" of the performance contributed to the effect of authenticity, which was heightened further by the inclusion of unscripted testimony. Of course, witness testimony plays an important role in verbatim theatre, which may be distinguished from other forms of documentary theatre by its reliance on recorded testimony. As Derek Paget observes in his article on the "broken tradition" of documentary theatre: "Documents have become vulnerable to post-modern doubt and information-management (a.k.a. 'spin'). But the witness's claim to authenticity can still warrant a credible perspective" (2009:235). "The rhetoric of witness" dominates in verbatim theatre, writes Paget. Still, verbatim theatre presents witness testimony only in a highly mediated way, after it has passed the filters of playwright, director, and actors. The playwright organizes and sometimes edits the testimony, the director finds an outward expression for it, and the actors embody it. Even when "real" witnesses are brought onto the stage, as often happens in Western witness theatre, they typically undergo an intensive process of preparation and training, which includes working closely with a professional playwright on a script.<sup>15</sup> In *Khamsud*, by contrast, such mediation was deliberately minimized. The witnesses were given only the most general information about the format prior to the show and no part of their testimony was scripted beforehand. Furthermore, Ugarov insists that a witness theatre performance must be "a one-time action" (*odnorazovaia aktsiia*) in order to preserve the authenticity projected by the witnesses. As he observed: "A person who was a real witness performs four or five times and then can no longer exist in the regime of repetition. He either falls into a stupor or, on the contrary, becomes an actor" (in Lisitsina 2012).

The "one-off" nature of witness theatre creates a sense that the experience is occurring in the here and now, uniting the genre with many works of performance art: "Here was an event, and here, a performance dedicated to this event," observes Ugarov. "After that it functions in the form of documentation; and in this, by the way, witness theatre is related to performance art, which also takes place in the 'here and now,' and then lives and functions in the form of a document" (in Lisitsina 2012).<sup>16</sup>

13. The Latin word *actualis* was a loan-translation of the Greek *energeia*. An "actual" object, in this ancient sense, is one that is capable of action.

14. On eventfulness in performance, see chapter 6 of Erika Fisher-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008).

15. For a description of Rimini Protokoll's work and process, see Christiane Kühl (2011). Teya Sepinuck has detailed her experiences directing witness theatre in the United States, Poland, and Northern Ireland in *Theatre of Witness* (2013).

16. The decision to upload a recording of *Khamsud* onto YouTube in some ways replicated the methods of media art used by Pussy Riot to create and disseminate their "punk prayer" (see Gapova 2015). Another way of relating witness theatre to contemporary performance art is to see it as an example of "delegated performance," that is, "the act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his/her instructions" (Bishop 2012:219).

What then marks witness theatre *as* theatre? For Ugarov, this comes down to the presence of a “play space” (*igrovoe prostranstvo*) and the establishment of live communication between the “I” and the “you” (what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the “autopoietic feedback loop” [2008]).<sup>17</sup> In *Khamsud*, the play frame (physical and imagined) ultimately defined the type of communication that took place between the participants, transforming Teatr.doc’s basement theatre into a carnivalesque version of a courtroom and enabling participants to engage in the collective mockery of the official trial. Ugarov’s characterization of the trial as an episode in a grandiose show at once opened it up for moral (and aesthetic) judgment and playfully hinted that authorship for it should be returned to the defendants. The process of collectively voting for and analyzing the dramatis personae, including the Rottweiler, reversed the largely passive role to which the public was relegated during the trial and transformed spectators into active participants.<sup>18</sup> The testimony itself—given with no claims to objectivity—mocked, but also mirrored, the blatantly manipulated witness testimony presented at the trial. And then there was the bizarre stand-off that took place toward the end of *Khamsud* (and to which I will return shortly) between the audience and a group of “Orthodox activists” who tried to break up the performance. Throwing their accusations against Pussy Riot right back at the intruders, one audience member even shouted: “Don’t desecrate [our] temple of art!”

One last factor must be taken into account: the manner in which Teatr.doc made use of the discourse of witnessing. According to John Durham Peters, “witnessing” carries with it weighty baggage in Western culture thanks to its origins in the interrelated domains of law, theology, and atrocity:

In law, the notion of the witness as a privileged source of information for judicial decisions is ancient, and is part of most known legal systems. In theology, the notion of witness, especially as martyr [the Greek word for witness is *martus*], developed in early Christianity, though it has resonance for other religious traditions as well. The third, most recent, source dates from the Second World War: the witness as a survivor of hell, prototypically but not exclusively the Holocaust or *Shoah*. These three domains endow “witnessing” with its extraordinary moral and cultural force today, since each ties the act of witnessing, in some deep way, to life and death. (2001:708)

All three notions of the witness informed the exchange that took place in *Khamsud*, albeit in unexpected ways. Portraying Pussy Riot band members as martyrs was widespread at this time and would have colored the reception of any individual who had been in close contact with them. Much of the testimony offered by the witnesses in *Khamsud* centered on the moral strength of the defendants in the face of adversity. This testimony may be described as a form of “secular hagiography,” with one of Pussy Riot’s lawyers, Nikolai Polozov, even declaring that, after the collapse of the Putin regime, the imprisoned Pussy Riot members will be hailed as “heroes of the revolution.”

Potentially more subversive, however, was the participants’ reappropriation of the discourses of law and trauma. It should be recalled that the prosecution’s case against Pussy Riot completely neglected the political and aesthetic aspects of their performance and instead focused on the allegedly traumatic effect that it had on worshippers. The prosecution brought out numerous witnesses, many of whom did not even see the performance firsthand, who reported being traumatized by Pussy Riot’s immodest dress, profane singing, and “devilish jerkings” (in Gessen 2014:174–78).<sup>19</sup> By inviting speakers to bear witness not to Pussy Riot’s original performance

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17. According to Ugarov, “[p]erformance art can take place even without spectators, theatre cannot” (in Lisitsina 2012).

18. As Bakhtin observes with regard to medieval carnival: “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators” ([1965] 1984:7).

19. Masha Gessen’s book is itself a good example of Pussy Riot hagiography. For a more critical scholarly response to the Pussy Riot affair, see Vera Akulova (2013) and Elena Gapova (2015).

action but to their experiences of the trial, *Teatr.doc* effectively displaced the scene of the crime from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior to the Khamovnichesky District Court, which was thus also marked as a site of trauma. Playful though it appeared, Ugarov's remark about theatre lacking the appropriate language for the occasion recalls the struggles of trauma victims who find themselves at a loss for words to describe their experiences. It hinted at the traumatic effect that the trial had on him and, more broadly, on the political opposition, which now gathered in the communal space of a theatre for a collective performance of witness.

## Witnessing as Performance

In *How to Do Things with Words* ([1962] 1975), J.L. Austin defined performative speech acts as those acts that do not simply *state* something, but *do* something in the real world—a notion that not only had a profound influence on shaping the modern field of performance studies, but has also informed our understanding of witnessing. According to Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, witnessing is performative in several ways. First, the act of bearing witness performs a therapeutic function by allowing the traumatized victim “to work through the experience of the trauma” and thereby to be released from the compulsion to relive it (2007:8). Second, witnessing performs an ethical function: in the process of unloading a “burden” onto the listener, the witness calls on the latter to assume responsibility for it, “to perpetuate the imperative to bear witness to the historical trauma for the sake of collective memory” (11). Finally, Guerin and Hallas show that bearing witness is not a constative act, “which would merely depict or report an event that takes place in the historical world,” but a performative one, because it “is not the communication of a truth already known, but its actual production through this performative act” (10), a production that takes place “in between,” as it were, the witness and the listener. Or as Derrida notes in an essay on witnessing: “To this act of language, to this ‘performative’ of testimony and declaration, the only possible response, in the night of faith, is another ‘performative’ consisting of the saying or testing out, sometimes without even saying it, of an ‘I believe you’” (2000:195).

Derrida's words can't help but call to mind the famous “I don't believe!” of Konstantin Stanislavsky, with which the director chastised his actors whenever they failed to attain his desired level of authenticity. The relation of witness to listener is thus in some ways analogous to that of actor to spectator. But while this might help explain the strong appeal that testimony has had for theatre makers, does it mean that witness theatre is no different than other forms of documentary theatre, and that it, too, is liable to criticism on the grounds that it produces only an illusion of documentary truth? I suggest that understanding witnessing as a performative act shifts attention from the documentary (constative) function of witness theatre to its performative functions, which, following Austin, cannot be evaluated based on whether they are “true” or “false,” but only based on whether they are “happy” or “unhappy” (Austin [1962] 1975:14). As any experienced lawyer knows, the truth of witnessing is not ultimately what's at stake here.

*Teatr.doc*'s decision to stage *Khamsud* as a piece of witness theatre, as opposed to a scripted verbatim play, was informed by many factors, one of which was the recognition that, for Russia's political opposition, the Pussy Riot trial had constituted a source of profound moral and psychological trauma and therefore had to be dealt with in a public fashion through the collective performance of witness.<sup>20</sup> Varvara Faer told me in a 2015 interview that the exclusion of the audience from the witnessing process would have been unethical, given how invested the public had become in the trial. She wanted to create a space where audience members would have a say in what was discussed and an opportunity to express their own opinions (Faer 2015). The

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20. For a fascinating analysis of the Pussy Riot trial and the responses that it elicited from a broad spectrum of the Russian public, see Anya Bernstein (2013). Bernstein's observation that many opposition leaders expressed views that were openly hostile toward the defendants suggests that the Pussy Riot trial had become a divisive issue within the opposition and, together with the arrests on the eve of Putin's third inauguration in Bolotnaya Square on 6 May 2012, contributed to the sense that the protest movement was entering a period of crisis.



collective process of listening and giving testimony was thus meant to help audience members vent their frustrations while also consolidating them through a sense of shared purpose and responsibility. The carnivalesque play frame further added to the therapeutic effect of the performance, offering participants the experience of collective catharsis through laughter.

This came through most powerfully in the exchange that took place between the participants and activists from the Orthodox group *Bozh'ia volia* (God's Will), who arrived at the theatre two hours into the performance, accompanied by cameramen from the pro-Kremlin news channel NTV. "We have given you two hours, now it's our turn to speak," declared one of these young activists, who made the sign of the cross with his fingers upon entering the theatre. But while Ugarov initially tried to bring these intruders into the discussion, inviting them to introduce themselves

and to explain why they had come, the audience for once refused to play along and quickly silenced the activists with shouts and mockery. What had until then been a participatory performance with uncertain borders separating the auditorium from the stage had suddenly become a clearly demarcated zone in which trespassers were not welcome. "Go perform in the theatre of the Soviet Army!" shouted one audience member when the activists asked to take the stage. "Don't disturb the social order!" cried another. "It's not possible for you to be onstage," said a third, the filmmaker Marina Razbezhkina, "you're outside the stage [*vne stseny*]!" Much of the audience's response took the form of open mockery, which seems to have disarmed and taken the activists by surprise. "They're afraid of our laughter!" a woman shouted after someone made a particularly biting joke at the young men's expense, drawing deafening applause and cheers from the audience.

"And so, there was no pluralism," recalled Ugarov when he was later asked about this episode, "and I don't think there could have been any. Because the people who came to the theatre knew exactly where they were going and what they wanted to hear" (in Solntseva 2012). Ugarov's remark could be taken to mean that the audience's reaction to the "Orthodox madmen" (as he called them) was inevitable; that the people who came to *Teatr.doc* that evening would have stood their ground regardless of the circumstances. And yet, given the fact that similar incidents have taken place with some frequency in recent years, often with very different results, I would argue that the audience's response was, in part, determined by the show's format, which transformed spectators into witnesses, passive audience members into active participants. As a performative act, this particular instance of collective witnessing thus turned out to be an especially



Figures 2 & 3. Orthodox activists from the group *God's Will*. Khamsud. *Prodolzhenie. Teatr.doc*, Moscow, August 2012. (Photos by Olga Provirova)



Figure 4. Filmmaker Marina Razbezhkina responds to Orthodox activists. *Khamsud*. Prodolzhenie. *Teatr.doc*, Moscow, August 2012. (Photo by Olga Prosvirova)

“happy” one—as evidenced by the smiles and cheerful faces of audience members after the show captured by *Teatr.doc*’s (and presumably NTV’s) cameras.

## Theatre as Witness

In an important manifesto on documentary theatre from 1968, the German director Peter Weiss warned that documentary theatre should not try to imitate the improvised nature of politically colored Happenings, but instead make use of its ability “to shape a useful pattern from fragments of reality” in order to reveal significant details and conflicts that had not been apparent otherwise. “A Documentary Theatre which is to be a political forum first of all, and which renounces aesthetic considerations, calls its right to exist into question,” he observed. “It would be more effective for its members to take part in practical political activity outside the theatre.” Even when documentary theatre “dispenses with aesthetic considerations and does not try to be a finished product,” Weiss argued, “when it merely takes up positions, giving the impression of bursting into existence at that moment and [acting]

without preparation,” the result “is still a form of artistic expression, and it must be a form of artistic expression to have any validity” ([1968] 1971:42).

Weiss saw no problem in the fact that documentary theatre offers only “an illusion of documentality,” insisting that, in such a theatre, “objectivity is likely to be a mere concept used by a ruling group to justify its actions” (42). On the contrary, he worried that the renunciation of aesthetic considerations and the imitation of nontheatrical forms could lead to a dangerous “illusion of participation,” leading audience members to forsake more effective means of protest. Thus if Russian witness theatre is liable to criticism from a political standpoint, it may be argued, following Weiss, that in overcoming the illusion of documentality, it has instead created an illusion of participatory action, offering audience members only the feeling of challenging the authorities while remaining confined within the (relatively) safe space of the theatre. And yet, as I have tried to show, such a view, too, would neglect the nature and functions of witness theatre, whose power derives neither from its promise to reveal any new “truths” about reality, nor from any immediate challenges to authority, but from the therapeutic and consolidating effects that it has on participants, who, it may be argued, come away prepared for, rather than swayed from, “real” political action.

But does that mean that the impact of witness theatre is limited to the participants? Does witness theatre not also have more lasting documentary value, which transcends the space and time of the performance and perhaps even attains some value for the historian? Ugarov’s observation that witness theatre, like performance art, takes place only once, in the here and now, and afterwards exists only in the form of documentation, raises the further question: What does witness theatre document? What is it that we who did not take part in *Khamsud*, but who can still watch a recording of it on YouTube, are meant to witness? Removed from the theatre in space and time we are not affected by the testimony in the same way as those who listened and were able to respond to it live. As I began writing this article in 2015, almost two years after Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina were granted amnesty,<sup>21</sup> going on to become

21. The third group member, Ekaterina Samusevich, was released on two years’ probation during the appellate process in October 2012. The early release of Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina was widely seen as an attempt to clean up Putin’s image ahead of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.

international media celebrities and, some complain, betraying the values they stood for in the past (see Ishchenko 2014), I no longer felt the same emotional investment in their story as I did in the summer of 2012 when I, too, attended protests, in Moscow and New York, and contributed what small part I could to draw attention to their case.

I would suggest that if *Khamsud* does have more permanent documentary value it is in bearing witness to the mood of the political opposition at that critical juncture in the protest movement, capturing their anger, disillusionment, frustrations, but also their attempt to overcome individual isolation and divisions within the protest movement. *Khamsud* not only replaced actors with witnesses, and spectators with participants, it transformed the theatre itself into a witness. “I have a theory that when I read a book, it’s the book that’s reading me. When I’m at the theatre, it’s the show that watches me,” Ugarov once observed in an interview (in Kopylova 2014).<sup>22</sup> Both the positioning of the cameras and the spatial arrangement of the participants in *Khamsud* suggests that the show was, in a way, “watching” that evening, that the real objects of attention were not the lawyers, journalists, and family members who were invited to testify about the Pussy Riot trial but the audience that came to listen to them. Except for a brief period toward the end of the performance, when the lights were dimmed for the screening of the audition tape, the theatre’s lights were kept on, Teatr.doc’s main camera tilted in such a way as to capture not only the stage but also a large portion of the auditorium. No less significant was the positioning of the moderators, Ugarov and Faer, who stood behind the witnesses, facing the audience. Although Faer told me that this was purely a matter of convenience, giving her access to the back wall so she could write on it during the voting process and also position herself to more easily direct the witnesses in real time, “as if [she] were a puppeteer” (Faer 2015), when I



Figure 5. The witnesses (from left): Mark Feigin, Nikolai Polozov, Violetta Volkova, Pyotr Verzilov, Konstantin Poleskov, Olga Prosvirova. Back row: Varvara Faer and Mikhail Ugarov. *Khamsud*. Prodlzhenie. Teatr.doc, Moscow, August 2012. (Photo by Alexei Pomerantsev)

22. As Ugarov notes in the same interview, his theory was inspired by Jerzy Grotowski, who insisted that it is not the actor who plays the role, but the role that plays the actor.

mentioned this detail to Ugarov, he told me that, indeed, he was paying closer attention to the audience. And how did watching the audience affect him personally? “When you have so many problems,” he said, “political and otherwise, limitations on freedom, you come to sharply feel your own loneliness. But here, when you look and start to understand that 80 percent of people share your views—this has a therapeutic effect on me as a director” (Ugarov 2015).

While we might not come away with the same reassurances as Ugarov after watching a recording of *Khamsud* today, we can still find value in the performance as a document. In fact, I would suggest that *Khamsud* bears a striking resemblance to one of Ugarov’s earlier documentary plays, *September.doc*, which, too, was concerned less with the facts surrounding a traumatic event (in that case, the terrorist school siege in Beslan), than with the public’s reactions to it. But while for *September.doc* Teatr.doc’s artists gathered a wide spectrum of responses to the hostage crisis, which Ugarov and his team then organized and presented in accordance with the principle of the “zero position,” without privileging any one side, in *Khamsud* the responses were collected in real time and were decidedly one-sided. And this shift, too, I believe, serves as a testament to the tensions that defined that moment in recent history. As Ugarov observed at the time: “I used to think that pluralism was a great thing. But now, I ask myself: why should I listen to swine and fascists and repeat the phrase ascribed to Voltaire that I will give my life for your opinion. I won’t give it” (in Solntseva 2012).

“If you cannot change reality, you have the duty, at the very least, to bear witness to it.” Ascribed to the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, this motto has been one of the guiding principles of Teatr.doc ever since it first opened its doors in 2002 inside a small basement in Patriarch Ponds.<sup>23</sup> In more than a decade of its tumultuous history, which has seen the theatre through dozens of productions and, at the time of writing, two politically motivated evictions—forcing the theatre to move, first, into a ramshackle *osobniak* (a detached house) on the outskirts of Moscow, then into another basement near the Kurskaya train station—Teatr.doc has repeatedly borne witness to the changing reality within Russia through works that have tested the limits both of political speech and theatre. Though largely confined to the short period coinciding with the 2011–2013 protest movement, witness theatre crystallizes Teatr.doc’s ethos perhaps more than any other genre, showing that, more than an institution or a network of artists, theatre itself can become a witness—a vigilant observer that bears responsibility for events, no matter how traumatic or politically risky they may be.

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23. The verb usually employed by Ugarov is *fiksirovat’* (to fix, to record); however, in some interviews and Facebook posts beginning in 2014, Ugarov has instead used *svidetel’stvovat’* (“to bear witness”).

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