Mike Daisey's False Witness

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The scandal that this chapter addresses is a recent American controversy which brings into sharper focus current debates over the ways in which non-fictional performance (whether called documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, or some other term) can assert a claim to truth, and the effects these claims can have. Like other scholars, I have grown quite concerned about the gap between over-broad claims that have been made for the political potencies of non-fictional performances, especially in the popular press, and the more nuanced understandings of the complex dramaturgy of these pieces which one can find in the academic literature. Janelle Reinelt's work expresses this tension. She acknowledges, of course, the "creative mediation" required in the craft of documentary theatre, and applauds those works which both demonstrate superior craftmanship and allow that craft to be seen.[1] She explains the elements necessary for the dramatization (or aestheticization) of public events, and how these resemble those of more traditional dramatic forms, such as Ibsen (Reinelt 2010: 33). And yet, she (correctly) sees that most spectators are uninterested in these dramaturgical concerns and find a straightforward claim to historical accuracy far more compelling: "I don't give a damn for all the nuanced arguments about the manipulation of facts and evidence", Reinelt writes in the voice of her spectator. "This thing … DID HAPPEN, and it must be enough to clearly, persuasively, SAY SO" (Reinelt 2010: 39. Emphasis in source). This is not, to Reinelt, a form of cynicism or disingenuousness, but rather (at least the potential for) "an ethico-political revolt … a demonstration of caring, engagement and commitment to others" (Reinelt 2010: 40). Yes, scholars such as Carol Martin analyse this truth-claim as a Barthean reality effect, "the result of a form of citation that confers [a certain] status of legitimacy upon the artwork" (Martin 2013: 5), but that analysis is quite far from the mind of Reinelt's spectator, who expects from documentary performance a simple and compelling presentation of (often politically potent) facts.

Of course, I agree that facts of the past are not, in themselves, simple or compelling, and that considerable dramaturgical craft is required in making plays that

[1] Reinelt 2009: 22. Her example is the performance of Vanessa Redgrave in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking.*

are so, whether or not they are built out of documentary material. The documentary author Robin Soans is correct that non-fictional material imposes no "embargo on editing creatively" (Soans 2008: 35). And yet, I am concerned that these claims, no matter how true, blind us to the expectations of non-fictional theatre's audiences, expectations shaped (at least) as much by the details of the social situation in which theatre finds itself as the dramaturgy of any individual piece. I *do* think theatre is a politically potent cultural practice, and can engage with contemporary political controversies in ways that other arts cannot.[2] But we undermine that when we mischaracterize the nature of that engagement, or forget that the degree to which the theatre constitutes a distinct and autonomous field, distinguished from the rest of society and operating under its own rules, is always a matter of debate and contestation.[3] When there is disagreement about which rules ought to govern a particular situation, scandals can erupt. Through these scandals, we can clarify what those rules are perceived to be by the public, even if they are not what scholars might suggest they ought to be.

The performance

For the past fifteen years, Mike Daisey has been an important solo performer in the American theatre world. His work has been seen in major regional theatres across the country, and he has a particular relationship with the Public Theatre of New York City. From 2010 until about 2014, he performed a monologue called *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* with a chair, a table, and a glass of water. The piece tells the story of Daisey's infatuation with Apple products, and his visit to the factories of Shenzhen, China where they are made. His discussion of both subjects is in the first person with no signs of the construction of a fictional character: spectators are led to believe that it is Daisey himself, the performer in front of them, is the same person who both takes extraordinary delight in tinkering with his electronic toys, and who visited Shenzhen and saw with his own eyes the horrific conditions their makers are

[2] This, importantly, includes documentary film, which is why I do not discuss it in this chapter. Briefly, the nature of the appeal to truth is quite different in film, where it is grounded in the camera's ability to record images (and sounds) that would be perceptible to human eyes (and ears), had they been there. A documentary film need not base its claim to truth on the notion of testimony, as developed in this chapter. It may make use of it, of course, but it is a rare documentary film indeed that relies on it entirely.

[3] For more on this, see Edelman, Hansen and van der Hoogen, 2017.

subject to. That tension is what holds the play together dramatically; we watch that dialectic between agony and ecstasy play out in Daisey's body, voice, and words, and it draws us in. In his writing outside the play, Daisey claims that he does not write out his monologues in advance, working instead off a few pages of handwritten notes.[4] I greatly doubt that each performance of one of his monologues differs substantially in its text from others, but the sense that the text is spontaneous, rather a recitation, does create a different, more emotional relationship between Daisey and his audiences. Of course, this is a technique used in most acting of realist fiction; my suggestion here is that Daisey's goal at least as much to be an empathetic character to his audiences than to be an accurate witness. Visually, Daisey's performance recalls that of other passionate, angry, self-reflective male American monologists, primarily Spalding Gray, of course, but also Eric Bogosian. But there is also a tradition of theatre presenting compelling documentary testimony of the political issues of the day, tracing back to the Living Newspaper of the Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s, to Teatro Campesino in the 1960s and 1970s, to Anna Deveare Smith's interview-based performances of the 1990s, and recent verbatim plays, many of which are imported from Britain, South Africa, and elsewhere. These theatrical forms have a wide variety of aesthetics, but a similar aim of creating a theatre that, through its claim to truth, gains a political efficacy.

Daisey is an irresistible storyteller: clear, playful, clever, and skilful but disarmingly self-deprecating, always seeming to be aware of the beautiful absurdity of an audience assembling to hear about the bad habits, neuroses, and travels of a large middle-aged American man in a ridiculous Hawaiian shirt. He casts a winning and charismatic figure with a positively Wildean wit, even if his visual style is far more schlub than dandy. He does not hesitate to use the first person plural in his monologue, drawing us into the absurdity of his own situation. For we spectators, too, are owners of Apple products, and we, too, have thought and perhaps worried about where and how these products are made. By identifying with Daisey, we spectators have a means of acknowledging our own latent anxiety about our own personal role in globalisation,

[4] For this claim, see Pressley 2012. Daisey has published what he describes as "transcripts" of these monologues on his website for others to use. He explains these as derivative works, developed from his performances, rather than the scripts which gave rise to them. Two versions of *Agony and Ecstasy* are posted on his website, one before and one after this controversy, which he calls versions 1.0 and 2.0, respectively. I will refer to both here.

and even if Daisey's self-portrayal reveals his own hypocrisy and neurosis, its charm makes it one we are willing to accept.

The empathy which Daisey intended was not just a theatrical effect, but a political one as well. At the end of each performance, Daisey distributed what he called a "reverse programme": a one-page flyer labelled "change is possible", offering suggestions to the spectators who wanted to take practical action on the political issue of Chinese workers' rights. Note that this flyer included not just Apple CEO Tim Cook's email address, but specific suggestions as to what to ask him.[5] Daisey also began appearing on American news talk shows, repeating his testimony about what he saw at the Apple supplier's factories in China and calling on the company to improve its labour practices.[6]

Trouble started when Daisey broadcast a portion of the piece on a American public radio programme and podcast produced by Chicago station WBEZ called *This American Life,* which is popular with the same broadly left-wing, well- educated and affluent audience that frequents the American theatre. Importantly, the radio show did not broadcast the portion of the performance in which Daisey's confessed his love of Apple products, leaving only the portion where he described what he saw in the Shenzhen factories—underage workers, guards with guns, maimed and fired workers, and makers of an iPad who had never seen one and were astounded by its magic. The audience for *This American Life* was not just orders of magnitude larger than Daisey's theatre audiences – millions instead of thousands – but it was a different audience too, with its own set of expectations. A few economics reporters who covered China found some details of Daisey's accounts hard to believe – the guards with guns, meetings in Starbucks – and so they looked into it.[7] They found Daisey's translator, who confirmed that yes, many of the most grisly and memorable details were not things that had been seen or experienced by Daisey himself.

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[5] Daisey reproduces these as the last page of the transcript of the monologue. It did not change between the first and second versions posted. See Daisey Feb. 2012: 62 and Daisey Sept. 2012: 70 respectively.
[6] See PBS Newshour, 14 April 2011, available online at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/conversation-mike-daiseys-the-agony-and-the-ecstasy-of-steve-jobs/>, and CBS News, "The dark side of shiny Apple products."16 March 2012, available online at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-dark-side-of-shiny-apple-products/>.
[7] The most important of these was Rob Schmitz, the China correspondent for the programme *Marketplace* on American Public Radio. See "Retracting 'Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory'." *This American Life.* 16 March 2012 (available online at <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/blog/2012/03/retracting-mr-daisey-and-the-apple-factory>).

The scandal

This American Life broadcast another episode in which it 'retracted' its earlier broadcast of Daisey's work, and presented its own journalistic reporting on the labour situation in Apple's Chinese factories. The programme's host, Ira Glass, interviewed Daisey and asked him about his earlier deceit. After going through a number of the falsehoods in Daisey's account, Glass asks Daisey for an explanation. His response is worth quoting at length for what it reveals about the sense of truth he is claiming for his work:

> *Glass:* I might be more inclined to believe you, but you admit to lying about so many little things-- the number of people who you spoke to, the number of factories that you visited. You admit to making up an entire group of characters who didn't exist, who were poisoned by hexane ….
> *Daisey:* All I can tell you is that I stand by what I told you before …
> *Glass:* That those things happened—
> *Daisey:* Yes.
> *Glass:* --those specific things?
> *Daisey:* And I stand by it as a theatrical work. I stand by how it makes people see and care about the situation that's happening there. I stand by it in the theater. And I regret deeply that it was put into this context, on your show.
> *Glass:* Are you going to change the way that you label this in the theater, so that the audience in the theater knows that this isn't, strictly speaking, a work of truth…?
> *Daisey:* I don't know that I would say in a theatrical context that it isn't true. I believe that when I perform it in a theatrical context in the theater, that when people hear the story in those terms, that we have different languages for what the truth means.
> *Glass:* I understand that you believe that, but I think you're kidding yourself, in the way that normal people who go to see a person talk-- people take it as a literal truth. …. I thought it was true, because you were on stage saying, this happened to me. I took you at your word.
> *Daisey:* I think you can trust my word in the context of the theater. And how people see it--
> *Glass:* I find this to be a really hedgy answer. I think it's OK for somebody in your position to say that it isn't all literally true …. I feel like, actually, it seems like it's honest labelling …. You make a nice show. People are moved by it. I was moved by it. And if it were labelled honestly, I think everybody would react differently to it.
> *Daisey:* I don't think that label covers the totality of what it is.
> *Glass:* The label, "fiction?"
> *Daisey:* Yeah. We have different worldviews on some of these things. I agree that

> truth is really important.
> *Glass:* I know. But I feel like I have the normal worldview. The normal worldview is somebody stands on a stage and says, "This happened to me," I think it happened to them, unless it's clearly labelled, "Here's a work of fiction."
> *Daisey:* I really regret putting the show on *This American Life*. And it was wrong for me to misrepresent to you and to Brian that it could be on the show. (This American Life #460 2012: 18-19).

Note that both Glass's attack on the piece's truth claim and Daisey's defence of it are placed squarely within the context of live performance. On the one hand, Glass sees Daisey as claiming "you were on stage saying, this happened to me," while Daisey defends the effects of the work on "people [ie, spectators] who hear the story in a theatrical context in the theatre".[8] Nevertheless, Glass's scepticism at this explanation was shared by the small battalion of critics and commentators who accused Daisey of being a liar, a fabulist, or a simple self-promoter.[9] David Carr, the *New York Times*'s media critic, was unequivocal: "Is it O.K. to lie on the way to lie on the way to telling a greater truth? The short answer is also the right one. No" (Carr 2012). Academic Sinologist Ralph Litzinger, like others with a professional interest in improving Chinese labour practices, writes that Daisey "will not be forgiven for his blurring of truth and fiction, for his journalistic posturing, for what some see as his arrogance to play the activist provocateur and tell us how we should relate to Apple and its dirty and dangerous supply chain" (Lizinger 2013: 176).

By his lack of truthfulness about what he, personally, saw in Shenzhen, Daisey has muddied the waters about what is actually happening at the factories in Shenzhen and places like it, making the work of those campaigning for better work conditions more difficult.

But those voices coming from within the theatre field itself—including performance scholars—were noticeably more forgiving to Daisey. While theatre critics such as Christopher Isherwood were not exactly flattering towards Daisey, they tended to see more nuance than their political colleagues.[10] Daisey continued performing the piece, lightly edited, for months after the scandal broke, to enthusiastic responses. The performance was enthusiastically received at the Spoleto Festival in

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[8] Elsewhere in the episode, Daisey adds. "I think it made you care, Ira. And I think it made you want to delve." Ibid.
[9] A quick search will find a variety of blog posts and articles on the scandal in March of 2012. See Osnos 2012 and Fallows 2012.
[10] Compare the sources referenced in note 9 to Isherwood 2012.

South Carolina a few months after the scandal broke, where academic reviewer Sharon Green "was surprised to discover the extent to which the 'scandal' itself misrepresented the story at the heart of Daisey's performance" (Green 2013: 105-106).

Shannon Steen, a performance scholar at Berkeley who is one of the few who has written about the controversy, refuses to condemn Daisey's falsehoods. She does see in his portrayal of Shenzhen and Hong Kong a disturbingly Orientalized view of China as the mysterious, unknowable other, but the relevant questions of truth she saw were those activated by the globalized economic culture that was the focus of Daisey's work. Steen writes:

> The scandal around *Agony* focused neoliberalist investments in a strict division between art and fact—frequently termed throughout the scandal as the division between theatre and journalism—and ignored the overlapping systems of narrative that activate both (Steen 2014:12).

Along these lines, she sees Daisey's "force[d]... public confession" in *This American Life's* retraction episode as not so much a setting-straight of the record as an "extensive ... flagellation" designed to reinforce the credibility of Glass and his public radio employer into the very neoliberal system that Daisey is condemning. In her view, the only problem with *Agony* the work only its orientalist tendencies; the larger scandals were the actual treatment of Apple's workers the ritual humiliation of Daisey the artist who tried to bring attention to them.

Perhaps the most ardent defence of Daisey's work and the authority of its truth claims within the theatre field comes, unsurprisingly, from Daisey himself. Though he apologised on his blog and on the follow-on *This American Life* programme quoted above, he continued to perform an edited version of the piece which removed the specific claims that had been debunked. In performing this modified version, however, he was defiant and unapologetic, standing, in Green's words, "behind the integrity of the truth at the centre of his story, even with its contested details" (Green 2013: 105). But the nature of that defence of the "integrity of his truth" —what other scholars, such as Ashley Barnwell, might call "authenticity" (2014: 710)— is interesting. In the revised version, Daisey removed the (likely untrue) story of a Shenzhen factory worker whose hand had been mangled by the chemical hexane in

building iPads but had never seen one; Daisey takes out his and shows it to him, and he calls it "magic". In its place, Daisey chooses something less dramatically compelling but much more defiant:

> And I hear these stories all day long.
> But...why believe me?
> I am, after all, a noted fabulist. Perhaps none of this is true.
> Wouldn't that be comforting? Perhaps your electronics are made by Oompa-Loompas.
> A benighted tribe of Oompa-Loompas, saved by saintly Steve Jobs, they work in a beautifully apportioned factory. And these Oompa-Loompas all have a severe OCD disorder, so they actually love assembling little tiny electronics the same exact way over and over and over, it's working out wonderfully (Daisey Sept. 2012: 61).

Certainly, there would be a comedy in these lines that does not easily translate to the page, but what this passage is mocking is the scandal itself. The comedy here comes from Daisey's ridiculous exaggeration of the claims of his critics. Of course, no commentator has suggested that Chinese labour conditions are good, or that (some of) the sorts of things Daisey described do not tend to happen in the sorts of factories he is describing. Glass and the other critics' charge is that Daisey has reported that he saw things that, in fact, he did not, which is an affront to journalism. But Daisey's new version makes no effort to defend these details. His claims, instead, rest on the traditional theatrical identification between Daisey and his spectators described above. The claim to authenticity and truth comes from Daisey's ability to share his affective discomfort with how his beloved Apple products are made with his audience. This discomfort is grounded in facts, but the details are not the important point. If we focus on them, Daisey is arguing, we lose our focus on the situation in which Apple products are made, which would be inauthentically "comforting."

But to define this affective coherence and comparability as "true for theatre" is something that very few outside of the theatre field would recognize. Saying that affective coherence can be equated with truth is incompatible with what Glass calls the "normal worldview" that he would expect members of the general public to have when attending a performance.

It is not that Daisey is wrong, or that defenders such as Steen do not have a point. Theatre works affectively, even documentary theatre; it makes no sense to judge the

arts but the standards of journalism. The documentary playwright Robin Soans puts this well:

> To declare that, because [documentary theatre's] subjects are real, they have to be portrayed in a way that fictional characters are not, is to undermine the power of the verbatim playwright. It prevents the tailoring of the material to make it political, emotional or even theatrical (Soans 2008: 35).

I agree with this, as I do with Steen's and Green's observations that the scandal ought not be relevant for the basic artistic and political work done by Daisey's piece. And yet it *was* relevant for the vast majority of those outside the theatre field. There was an enormous gap between how the majority of the cultural field viewed Daisey's actions and how the theatre field did. When Daisey tried to articulate his theatrical notion of truth to Glass—an idea not so dissimilar to that of Soans, quoted above—the radio host simply could not understand him.

The Daisey affair, then, was a particular sort of theatrical scandal: one in which the scandal was not so much within the theatre but in the eyes of those outside of it. In itself, that is striking, but if we want to hold on to the idea that the theatre we make and study *speaks to* a more general public – even an educated, elite public like the producers and listeners of *This American Life* – it becomes a serious problem.

The Public Theatre itself, the New York venue for *Agony,* saw this problem more clearly than most, perhaps because they need to find common cause with so many benefactors and audience members. The theatre's director, Oskar Eustis, released a statement noting that "every performance creates a contract, implied or explicit, between the stage and the audience," and apologizing for their failure to "fulfil" that contract with *Agony* (Hetrick 2012). This is surely accurate, and a useful way forward. How did the performance, intentionally or otherwise, set up a contract with the audience about the truth of what they were seeing? How, precisely, did the piece violate that contract? And what does this suggest about theatre's ability to make truth claims within the frame of drama?

Negotiating genres of fact and fiction

Stephen Bottoms has suggested that in order to help us negotiate the truth claims and constructed nature of documentary theatre, we need theatre which does not just *use*

texts and testimonies, but displays the contingent *ways* in which documents and testimonies are used to construct a dramatic work, so that the audiences can maintain a critical distance from what they are being shown, rather than being swallowed up by it (Bottoms 2006). This view has become quite influential, and as scholars, we have become quite proficient in the ways in which stories and their truth claims fluctuate, unmoor, and morph in the act of telling and re-telling. This form of asserting authority is, in Eustas's terms, part of the contract between performer and audience, which may be unstable but nevertheless grounds the key social relationship of the theatrical event. But this will not help us understand this scandal. *Agony and Ecstasy* displays Daisey's process openly, but not accurately. It had a clear contract; it simply did not adhere to its terms.

D. Soyini Madison, Professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern, wrestles through this confusion through notions of labour and the relationship between performer and audience. In her article on the Daisey affair and the biopolitics of labour, she cites Jill Dolan and José Muñoz in explaining the appeal of Daisey's work to its audience as a sharing of space, anticipation, affect and labour which she connects with the idea of a "utopian performative", not a desire for information.[11] She writes: "These bodies, seated before a live stage, are not seeking facts; they are seeking ephemeral transcendence, hopefully a transcendence to be remembered" (Madison 2012: 239).

She sees the "virtuosic" Daisey as the David to Apple's Goliath, and as succeeding in his task through the affective potency of his performance. This makes his falsehoods all the more frustrating. "All he had to do was stand strong in the informed passion of his imagination. More than annoyed by his lies, most of us are befuddled as to why this compelling performer felt the lies were necessary" (Madison 2012: 240). On the one hand, strict details were not the means by *Agony's* authority was authenticated to its audience, so these deceits were not necessary. And yet, their revelation did seem to undermine that authority; if not, why the annoyance and befuddlement?

Madison's argument, as well as Eustis's, suggest a confusion over the question of genre. Eustis's "contract", one could assume, is established prior to the performance,

[11] Though these concepts can be found throughout Dolan and Muñoz's work, Madison 2006 specifically cites their respective essays.

though labelling, marketing, reviews, playbills, or other information provided by the theatre, even if that genre may be played with or modified over the course of the work. Glass also alludes to this in asking that *Agony* be re-labelled as fictional. The difficulty is that politically-engaged or non-fictional theatre is not one genre but an entire spectrum of them. There are, of course, a variety of ways in which theatre can make use of real political controversies, from the clearly fictionalized (*Philadelphia, Here I Come!* on Irish emigration), to the semi-fictionalized (*Behind the Beautiful Forevers,* or more controversially, David Hare's *Stuff Happens*), to the self-consciously and visibly constructed from interviews (*London Road, Fires in the Mirror, I Am My Own Wife*), to the strictly verbatim (Norton-Taylor's tribunal plays, such as *The Colour of Justice,* or even *My Name is Rachel Corrie*). Some of these latter plays are written by self-professed journalists, not playwrights, and they lay claim to both a theatrical narrativity and a journalistic accuracy. But if a single line in *Colour of Justice* or *Rachel Corrie* did not accurately reflect its source text, the authenticity of the piece would collapse. I stress that I have absolutely no reason to think that such inaccuracies appear in any of these texts. But if they did, these pieces would violate their contract with their audience as theatre, not just as journalism.

And yet, *Agony* is hard to place on this axis partially because it stands on another one as well, that of the autobiographical monologue play. On the one end, one might find stand-up comedians such as Stephen Colbert or Rachel Bloom or who lend their own name (or nearly; Bloom's character is named "Rebecca Bunch") to a developed character which, though not unrelated to themselves, has a comic absurdity which invites its audience to see them as distinct from their creator. On the other end would be the public testimony of personal narratives, such as that of public "story slams" such as *The Moth* or Yael Farber's first-person narratives of trauma from apartheid in South Africa. Somewhere in the middle would stand those who Daisey most resembles: monologists like Spalding Gray and Eric Bogosian, whose autobiographical performances are personal, dramatic, and based on an empathetic relationship with the audience.

These autobiographical plays represent a different genre than that of documentary theatre. Even though both make a claim to truth, the two make that claim in quite different ways. The documentary theatre tradition grounds its claim to truth in the authority of written documents: reports, transcripts, letters, court decisions, and the

like. One of the foundational texts of the contemporary documentary theatre genre is Peter Weiss's 1968 manifesto, which begins:

> The documentary theatre is a theatre of factual reports …. The documentary theatre shuns all invention. It makes use of authentic documentary material which it diffuses from the stage, without altering the contents, but in structurating [*sic*] the form. In opposition to the incoherent mass of information which constantly assails us from every side, it presents a selection which converges towards a precise and generally social or political theme (Weiss 1968: 375).

While subsequent documentary theatremakers have developed the form in the past half-century, what is interesting here is that authenticity of the documentary form rests in its strict reliance on *documents* – "factual reports", "documentary material". Weiss encourages editing, cutting, and structural innovation to clarify and hone the play's purpose – at one point in his manifesto, he suggests the use of songs "for the purpose of presenting reports" (Weiss 1968: 389) – but while he is open to dramaturgical experiment, the genre would lose its authenticity if it were to invent new content. This work, according to Weiss, is inherently public and political, and seeks to criticise the nefarious public practices of "camouflage", "the falsification of reality" and "lying" through the authority of its use of documents (Weiss 1968: 376). This is a genre in which the notion of truth is essentially a textual one. Contemporary documentary theatre makers who ground their works in interviews stretch that definition of document somewhat, but they do not break it.

This is quite different from the authenticity claimed by the autobiographical performances, which is grounded not in a document but in the performer's own lived experience.[12] Unlike a document, that experience is necessarily subjective and cannot be fully re-created through text or performance, and it can only capture fragments of the original event. As such, if our goal is to re-construct the original experience, inaccuracy in small details are not crucial; even if some aspects are untrue, they speak to the memory and experience of the witness, and their poetic form may also provide

[12] Amanda Stuart Fisher makes this point with regards to the work of Yael Farber. She writes: "Unlike verbatim or documentary theatre, [Farber's plays] are not drawn from reportage or documentary evidence. Instead Farber harnesses the power of poetry, metaphor and song to crat together theatre texts that bear witness to actual *lived* experience. The authenticity of these stories rests less on their claim to factual veracity, instead it emerges from the "testimonial truth" of the witness presented before us. (2008).

insight into the way that experience has been shaped in the mind. Very often, these plays foreground the difficulties of memory and reconstruction, using the piece's own dramaturgy to model the effort of the subject (who is also the performer) to shape their memory into a coherent whole. Carol Martin describes this process in one of the most discussed examples of this genre, Spalding Gray's *Rumstick Road:*

> Gray used his preoccupation with his own life to illuminate how ephemeral the real can seem, how memory can escape us, and how we might be haunted by the presence of the past, how one can live the past as an eternal present …. Gray's unsentimental creation … simultaneously locate[d his] life as material for his performance *and* as performance itself - the actor as actor, a subject alongside the life the actor acts (Martin 2012: 47).

Thus, what is being staged here is not so much an experience taken from memory as the act of memorial reconstruction, haunting, and return and the nature of the subject who undertakes them. While this focus on interiority and process makes autobiography into a "semifictive" form (Heddon 2008:4), this does not mean it gives up any link with truth; an autobiography revealed to be wholly invented would no longer be testimony *to* an actual experience, and would thus lose its authority. But this is a very different criterion than the reliance on documentary material which characterises documentary theatre.

This, I would argue, is the basic issue at play between Glass and Daisey. Glass saw *Agony* as a piece of documentary theatre. Daisey saw it as a personal testimonial. The two genres have moved together in recent decades and now overlap, but the audience expectations as to the sorts of truth claims that will be made in one remain quite different than that of the other,[13] This could, then, simply be a mislabelling and misunderstanding. If Daisey had simply made clear to his audience and to Glass that the piece was first and foremost about his experience rather than about Apple's labour

[13] Some of the most interesting cases of overlap come from Moíses Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project. In different ways, both *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* and *Laramie Project* combine the two genres. Both structure their narratives around documentary material – letters and court transcripts in the first, and interviews in the second – but contextualise them with first-person testimonials from the Tectonic members who engaged in the research, conducted the interviews, and assembled the piece. What we have, then, is both the "factual report" of the document, but also testimony to the personal experience of engaging and developing those facts. These works' dialectical structure between the personal and the objective makes them particularly apt responses to Stephen Bottoms's concerns, quoted above.

practices, the implied contract would not have been violated and perhaps would have been much less of a scandal (though the piece would likely have attracted less attention).

But I would argue that this lets Daisey off too lightly. Even taking the piece as containing more testimonial than documentary elements, Daisey has violated the trust of his audience. To justify this claim, and to explain how we as scholars and citizens can respond to *Agony*'s truth claims, I will need to explore what I have glossed as the "autobiographical genre" more deeply. This genre is sometimes called testimonial theatre or theatre of witness, and in the last few decades, a considerable scholarship has developed on testimony and witnessing, both in the theatre and beyond. That literature is vast, and I cannot summarise it here. For my purposes, though, I want to highlight three brief points from it, each building on the previous, and then apply them to the present case.

Witnessing true and false

First, many theorists have discussed the necessarily unbridgeable gap between testimony and the events that the testimony describes. One cannot directly read the latter from the former. This is especially the case for testimony of traumatic experiences, which are especially difficult to assimilate into sense and thus similarly resist being somehow "captured" in testimony about them. Scholarship on the testimony to trauma began in earnest after the horrors of the Holocaust and has continued as testimony plays such an important role in addressing past political traumas such as apartheid (on this, see Martin 2015). But the gap between experience and testimony to that experience does not require trauma; it is a property of all testimony as such. While the traumatic nature of an experience makes that gap more visible and starker—and thus more interesting for theorists—it does not, in itself, create the gap. Daisey's experience in China, while challenging, was not traumatic. But there is still a necessary gap between that experience and his testimony to it, which will affect our analysis of its truth claims.

Michael Bernard-Donals discusses the case of *Fragments,* a book written by a Swiss author who went by the name Binjamin Wilkomirski, which presents itself as

the memoir of a Nazi death camp survivor.[14] While the author certainly had a difficult childhood, he seems not to have spent any time in the camps; the narrative was composed from fragments of the memories of others and the work of his imagination—not, frankly, unlike *Agony.* Bernard-Donals is slightly hesitant to condemn Wilkmonirski, arguing that because history and memory have such a vexed relationship, testimony, which draws on memory, cannot serve as a transparent window onto history. And so memories of this never-really-experienced event are necessarily full of aporias, gaps, impressions, inarticulable sensations. "The traumatic event remains unknown," Bernard-Donals writes (2009: 90). He quotes Lyotard's claim that it is not enough for testimony to claim that an event was seen. It also needs to "len[d] an ear to what which is not presentable under the rules of knowledge".[15] Thus testimony has an authority, but one that "is relatively autonomous from history" (Bernard-Donals 2009: 53), as the act of testimony requires a displacement or erasure of the event and its replacement with the (connected but distinct) act of witnessing.

This leads to the second point, that the carrier and the authorizer of testimony is not a document or a fact, but the embodied witness themselves. A witness makes a claim to the continuity of their own presence between the moment of the event and the moment of testimony. Thus, testimony privileges live performance; we as an audience are confronted with the presence of the very body that encountered the event. In Derrida's language, the witness is "the one who will have been present. He or she will have been present at, in the present to the thing to which he [or she] testifies".[16] If one were not so present, one would be bearing false witness. But this is a problem, of course – it depends on the witness's self-presence in the moment of the event being testified to, which is not straightforward. Derrida continues that the witness can be present only on the condition of being "sufficiently conscious of himself, sufficiently self-present to know what he [or she] is talking about".[17] For traumatic events, this poses a problem; there is an important sense in which the victim of trauma may not be conscious of themselves in this manner during the traumatic event; what can be testified to, then, is not so much the event itself, but its aftereffects. Even if one is sceptical of this line of reasoning, there is the larger problem that survivors of some

[14] Bernard-Donals 2009: specifically chapter 5.
[15] Lyotard 1989: 57 quoted in Bernard-Donals 2009: 86.
[16] Derrida 2005: 74, quoted and discussed in Wake 2009: 86.
[17] Derrida 2005: 79, quoted in Wake 2009: 86.

traumas— precisely because they *are* survivors – cannot have experienced the fullness of the trauma. This echoes Primo Levi's famous argument that "we, the survivors, is are not the true witnesses" of the Holocaust (Levi 1986:70); only the dead can have been said to have endured the trauma in its fullness.

Again, as Daisey's Chinese experience was not in itself traumatic, there is no reason to think that he was detached from his experience in the way that the subject of trauma would be. It is, in fact, the continuity of his bodily presence between Shenzhen and the theatre that is at issue. We have thus identified a specific way in which his testimony is deficient. But if one is inclined to be exceedingly generous, it could be argued that he is engaging in the classic actorly craft of presenting someone *else's* experience as his own. After all, there is little in Daisey's piece that was not experienced by *someone.* This gap between an actor's experience and a character's, the gap covered by Stanislavski's Magic If, may be seen as analogous—formally, if not ethically—to the gap between the experience of the those who can testify and the "true witnesses" who are unable to do so.

If we as critics are willing to take that step—which the scandal suggests that most of the public are not—then we can see how those aporias can be addressed (not bridged) by means of the traditional crafts of a performer who brings a dramatic text to life, whether documentary or otherwise. Carol Martin puts this activation in the familiar terms of the still and silent archive and the living, compelling repertoire. "It is precisely what is not in the archive, what is added by making the archive into repertory, that infuses documentary theatre with its particular theatrical vitality," she writes (Martin 2010: 20). But for theorists of testimony less grounded in performance studies, this enthusiasm may sound like papering over of a paradox that ought to be displayed. Kelly Oliver described the paradox of testimony:

> It is the *performance* of testimony, not merely what is said, that makes it effective in bringing to life a repetition of an event, not a repetition of the facts of the event, or the structure of the event, but the silences and the blindness inherent in the event that, at bottom, also makes eyewitness testimony impossible (Oliver 2001: 86).

This would suggest, perhaps frustratingly, that Daisey's skills as a storyteller in fact make his testimony more effective, regardless of its veracity.

This leads to the final point: a piece of testimony is *effective* if it places an

(appropriate) affective and ethical burden on the audience to respond in a certain way, not just in the moment of performance, but after. That burden is somehow akin the one the witness bears themselves. Caroline Wake refers to this as being a "spectator in the moment but witnesses in and through time" and this phenomenon as the "after-affect" of the performance of testimony (Wake 2009: 85). Oliver continues that this is, again, not a matter of the historicity of the witness's account: "My earlier analysis suggests that it is not the reality of one's [ie, the witnesses'] experience that obligates a response. Rather, it is subjectivity as response-ability itself that obligates a response - not just any response, but a response that nourishes the possibility of response" (Oliver 2001: 108).

And it is just this ability that makes Bernard-Donals hesitate to dismiss the book *Fragments* with its untrue narrative as merely pastiche or lies. It compels such a response, even if its facts are wrong. "Testimonial narratives don't disclose history," he writes. "instead they disclose - where the narrative most clearly shows its seams - the effect of events upon witnesses" (Bernald-Donals 2009: 89).[18]

And this is of course the reason for Daisey's reverse programme – his narrative, too, provokes this affective, ethical response in his audiences, and he would like to channel it. There is a tradition of calling this response "secondary witnessing" (see, for instance, Apel 2002 and Assmann 2006), but Wake is sceptical that we can neatly divide primary from secondary witnessing. These theorists agree, however, that acts of witnessing provoke further acts of witnessing in their audience, and thus performances of witness in a controlled setting such as the theatre do not so much tell us the truth of an event as teach us how to witness and the potency and responsibility that such an act entails.

By this logic, there is a certain legitimacy to Daisey's claim to truth. He provoked an appropriate response in his audience, he had in fact been to China and could imaginatively recreate the remainder of his experience, and if we take the distance between testimony and experience seriously, then his embellishments are not relevant. And whether or not Daisey himself is personally acquainted with this scholarship, this form of justification of testimonial performance circulates within the theatrical field in which he operates. It is not unreasonable to think that he has absorbed some of it. On

[18] One might quibble with the nature of such "effects" and suggest that affect theory or Levinasian ethics would be helpful here, but the point stands.

these enthusiastic terms, then, it does make sense to talk about the truth of Daisey's performance.

But of course we cannot accept these terms, and for one very simple reason. He has broken the chain of experience; his testimony rests on the assertion of a connection between himself and events that is not true. While trauma or the difficulties of testimony may mean that some experiences which did occur struggle to be realised in testimony, it is not the case that experiences which *do* allow themselves to be testified to therefore did occur. As a consequence, we cannot even say that Daisey's testimony was effective. While it did provoke a certain response in its audience—the aesthetic and political reaction that Daisey the theatremaker intended—because the chain of witnessing had been broken, we cannot talk about this as an ethically appropriate response by the audience. At best, they are innocent dupes. This is not the case of a trauma victim using artistic tools to attempt to re-create the fragments of their own disjointed experience. This is the case of a constructed piece of testimony built on false premises.

My suggestion, then, is to take *Agony* not as a piece of documentary theatre, but as a form of testimonial. This means that Daisy is not a failed documentarian, but a false witness. The structure and presentation of his performance led us –the audience– to take his performance as a form of testimony. His body and his physical performance were put forward as evidence of the truth of what he had witnessed in another place and another time, and this made not just aesthetic but also moral demands on its audience to respond. Because testimony has the ability to make these demands that other forms of speech acts do not, there are certain social rules to which it is subject which other speech acts are not. Mike Daisey presented his piece as testimony, but did so under false pretences. Daisey is thus not a simple liar; he is a perjurer.

I think this phrasing can also help us understand why the public found Daisey's falsehoods more scandalous than they might either Spalding Grey's self-exaggeration or a trauma survivor who gave incorrect details about their experience. Simple errors in testimonials are not, in themselves, scandalous; the gap between experience and testimony means that we do not expect witnesses to be objective repeaters of factual detail. The Biblical commandment I allude to in my title prohibits the bearing of false witness against a *neighbour,* which we can understand as a very large category but

one that includes only other beings, not the self. Misleading an audience about one's internal emotional life may be a form of lying, but we can begin to understand it as a different category, one which perhaps deserves a different sort of judgment. Witnessing in this sense requires an object; one can witness for or against another, but testimony that focuses only on the inner life on the self does not necessarily have the same moral force as testimony to the acts of another (and the consequences of that for the self). It also may not have the transmissible, response- generating relation to its audience that Oliver and Wake describe. Witnessing is, thus, a particular potent relationship of ethical responsibility that human beings can take towards one another and, like most responsibilities, it can be abused.

This language also allows one (if one wishes) to articulate the strongest possible claim that could be made against Daisey. Most ethical and religious traditions condemn falsehood in general, of course, but distinguish between the sins of boasting, gossip, and false witness. All are deceitful, but the last is particularly egregious and dangerous because of its authority, the way it presents the other, and the demands it places on its audience to respond. When a witness engages in the heightened form of speech we call testimony, that person is taking on an ethical responsibility that they would not have in the simple situation of a gossip with friends, nor would they necessarily have in an act of fictional or even documentary art. The anger that many activists, in particular, had for Daisey comes from the fact that, to use religious langauge, he bore false witness against them. Through his false statements, he hurt their cause. He cast unnecessary doubt on the suffering of the workers he was hoping to help, and failed to take account of their full, complex, inconvenient human experiences, instead manipulating them to serve his own narrative needs. Precisely because it is so simultaneously fragile and compelling, the link between the witness, their experience, and their testimony to that experience needs to be respected and treated with the highest degree of honesty. Daisey's violation of those expectations was particularly painful and offensive because of that fragility and power. Rather than opening up the possibility of future witnessing, Daisey's perjury *hinders* the effectiveness of testimony of future witnesses to labour injustices who may come forward. The distrust and scepticism we have learned from Daisey will poison our ability to respond to future witnesses in an ethically and affectively appropriate register.

In closing, I want to return to the question I began with through my citation of Reinelt. There does appear to be a substantial gap between the ways that scholars and the general public view truth claims in non-fiction theatre. There seems to be a generosity in the former that does not exist with the latter, as this scandal has demonstrated. Much scholarship on witnessing and testimonial in the theatre is highly laudatory towards the complex, subtle and deeply humane work that theatrical testimony can accomplish. But if we wish to make the claim that theatre can serve as a potent and genuine form of witnessing, we need to accept that that this witness may be false. To deny the possibility of theatre bearing false witness is to deny the possibility that it can bear any sort of witness at all.

Of course, it is our job as scholars to develop new concepts for the understanding and analysis of our subject matter, and in academic circles, we may use concepts that are not yet known or embraced by the public at large, or by the professionals whose work we study. But theatre is a public art form. And that means that we need to be aware of the patterns and expectations that audiences and the public bring with them, whether or not we think these expectations are legitimate. In this case, factual inaccuracy in the context of testimony would be scandalous to all "normal" audience members (to use Glass's term). While we may wish to dissect those truth claims more finely, we as scholars and artists should have realised that any attempt to justify these inaccuracies would have been met with furor and incredulity by those who made up the bulk of Daisey's (and Glass's) audiences.

Both the academic enterprise and the art of theatre have a certain autonomy, a certain distance and demarcation between themselves as fields and other aspects of society. And yet, I think most of us would like to see a theatre – and a theatre scholarship – that engages with the world around it. Doing so requires a constant effort not to deny that distance but to bridge it, in our research, in our teaching, and in our performance work. Public scandals such as Daisey's give us an opportunity to build these bridges, but also reveal to us just how wide they need to be.

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