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DOCUMENTARY SOLO PERFORMANCE

The Politics of the Mirrored Self

In mid-1995, shortly after the final disintegration of the five-member post-Wall directorate of the Berliner Ensemble that left Heiner Müller sole leader, I asked him whether Brecht would continue to be central to that theater's repertory. "Absolutely," he said. The German critics who were then loudly insisting (along with some former members of the directorate) that Brecht was an outdated paradigm were "idiots," and Müller had half a dozen exciting Brecht projects in mind that he hoped to begin in the near future (pending approval by the recalcitrant Brecht heirs) to maintain his theater's provocative political profile. I felt compelled to justify my question, explaining that in my country, Brecht was not only currently out of fashion but had never been properly *in* fashion, even during his lifetime, not even among the theatrical intelligentsia. Puffing on his cigar, Müller said quietly, "That's because Americans are all innocents." The most difficult audiences in the world, and "the most dangerous people," are "those who feel innocent of everything."

The whiff of intellectual bigotry in these remarks aside, they contain a truth that reaches beyond Brecht to the general challenges of political theater in the United States. It has been thirty-three years since Guy Debord coined the term "society of the spectacle" for the conditions of sweeping, media-driven trivialization and perpetual public distraction that began to emanate from the United States to the rest of the consumerist world after the Second World War.¹ By now these conditions are familiar on every continent, making the primary preoccupations of political theater in many countries the restitution of elided memory and history and the canny yet tentative reintroduction of critical thinking as a species of fun. Müller pinpoints one of the biggest enduring hurdles in America: for much of its history, our culture's congratulatory self-image as the world's benefactor, as well as our deeply ingrained myths of optimism, possibility, and self-reliance, have made us doggedly resistant to any theater based on guilt.

This essay is an appreciation of a particular group of contemporary American solo performers—some of whom do and some of whom don't acknowledge their ties to the

Marc Wolf in his solo piece *Another American: Asking and Telling*. Photo: Carol Rosegg.



idea of documentary—as a powerful response to this and other challenges. These artists seem to me to fuse a psychological and political appeal, linking compassion and identification with objective scrutiny in a way that, though Brecht might not have approved of it, amounts to a new, peculiarly American form of individualistic *Verfremdung*.

The primary artists I have in mind are Anna Deavere Smith, Marc Wolf, Danny Hoch, and Sarah Jones: not an immediately harmonious grouping, perhaps, for those who know their work. My linkage of these artists depends on being able to steer the discussion of solo performance away from its usual emphasis on identity politics and toward a more elementary debate about the public's receptivity to politics and critical thinking per se. It also depends on loosening the definition of *documentary* to a point where it could apply as well to John Leguizamo, Eric Bogosian, Eve Ensler, David Cale, Lisa Kron, Pamela Gien, Spalding Gray, Dael Orlandersmith, Whoopi Goldberg, and dozens of other soloists whose work may not be a product of field research but is unthinkable apart from the performers' experiences in some degree of firsthand witnessing.

GUILT AND CUNNING

Solo performance is, of course, a field rife with self-indulgence and incipient monumental egotism, and I have sat through as many shows demonstrating this as anyone—typically performed by frustrated and mediocre New York actors trying to jump-start their me-machines with sitcom-shallow autobiographical monologues. Over the years, though (as Jo Bonney has marvelously documented in her recent collection *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century*), a critical mass of serious work has appeared that amounts to much more than a passing trend. Cheap, convenient, and seemingly diminutive as it may be, the best solo performance has arrived at a unique political opportunity, a subversive moment of clarity concerning what Debord called the spectacle society's "sham battles between competing versions of alienated power."² This refers to the discouraging vagueness and confusion in our age about the exact location and identity of those responsible for material conditions, as well as the public apathy and passivity that follow. Inflated as such a claim for soloists may sound, it is justified, and the achievement is all the more impressive in that the art generally contains little direct analysis of power structures or political institutions. Solo shows are built on individual stories, and the choice and handling of those stories determine the art's political strength.

Like everything else, the genre didn't arise in a vacuum. Its individual origins aside (and I'll come back to this topic), it is partly a reaction to what has not worked in larger-scale theater, the past quarter-century or so having been a conspicuously dismal period for political theater in America. Happily, we have now emerged from the era of "splinter theater," when many of the country's most politically vital groups voluntarily ghettoized

their creative and political energies by playing only to select communities defined by ethnicity, party, gender, or geography. But in fact, the basic complacency and unreflectiveness of the commodity-obsessed public have remained largely unaffected by the gradual “mainstreaming” of race- and gender-bending practices, as is also true of the continued use of dated and impotent agitprop techniques by such expressly “Brechtian” companies as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and Irondale Ensemble.

The Mime Troupe’s play about urban development and gentrification, *City for Sale* (2000), cowritten by Joan Holden and Kate Chumley and directed by Keiko Shimosato, was a perfect example of an application of the fifties and sixties “nuts-and-bolts” approach to *Verfremdung* that seems irredeemably naive today. Holden and Chumley were actually very good at clarifying the complexity of the housing issues they raised, but precisely because of that clarity the cartoonish characterizations and broad clowning in the piece were irritating. The technique seemed to apologize for the material’s complexity, like a set of children’s theater blatancies arbitrarily imposed on a subtle, adult tale.

If today’s general theatergoing public thinks of political theater at all, it most likely thinks of innocuous, media-friendly sketch comedy in the vein of Capitol Steps (a Washington group founded by former congressional staff members that prides itself on “giving equally to both sides,” inadvertently reflecting the classically cynical corporate attitude toward political donations) or of moralistic parables like *City for Sale* or the plays of Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, and Arthur Miller. (The sixties and seventies “social protest drama” of such authors as Imamu Amiri Baraka and Miguel Piñero has dropped off the popular radar.) The sentimental parable tradition of Odets, Hellman, and Miller, also sometimes known as American social-protest drama, has long been popular and is likely to remain so because, as Brecht pointed out, it allows spectators to congratulate themselves on their sympathetic feelings without seriously questioning their behavior or beliefs. But the sad truth is that the ostensibly antisentimental tradition of Brecht is scarcely more effective in our savvy and self-satisfied era. His parables come off more as didactic exercises in oversimplification than as fervent efforts to make the world appear changeable (the theoretical basis of *Verfremdung*). *City for Sale* is all too typical. Almost every new play written in this tradition leaves me brokenhearted; they invariably start out as passionately told stories about specific people, then end up as underwhelming clichés about, say, the fact that Chicanos exist (as in the California group Culture Clash’s 1998 *Culture Clash in Border Town*) or the fact that a powerless woman grasping for sexual independence will be exploited (as in Suzan-Lori Parks’s 1999 *In the Blood*).

These are the outlines of the general impasse out of which a few clever forms of guerrilla theater, documentary theater, and solo performance have shown possible paths in the information age. “The question is,” as the guerrilla preacher Reverend Billy put it succinctly when I interviewed him last winter, “how do you tell an ‘original’ story in 2000?” That is, how do you tell a truly personal tale “that will not be immediately folded

into some big metastory that politicians or the media manufacture?” How can the artist “be heard, and heard politically” by people who do not tolerate being compared to any fictionally drawn category of exploiters and who prefer not to think politically in any case? Effective political art in boom-time America must be cunning—much more so than in previous ages, when institutional targets had less complex cosmetics and were less proficient at seeming nebulous—and the documentary impulse is a form of cunning, even if its practitioners don’t always see it that way. Nearly half a century of media saturation has made us stupider in many ways, but one way it has made us smarter is in our unprecedented familiarity with stories. Among its many other motives, documentary solo performance is a search for a freshness and unpredictability that carry the force of gossip, for powerful topical narratives that are not easily dismissed or second-guessed, and for performance circumstances in which *Verfremdung* becomes a living concept again because the reality of the performer-researcher has been made an active part of the art.

It is crucial to remember, in considering this work, that no previous society has ever placed the sort of burden of self-invention on its citizens that ours does: that of constructing a fully satisfying self from scratch with little more than the trivializing idiocies of consumer and pop culture as guidance. As the social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman recently wrote, “The way individual people define individually their individual problems and try to tackle them deploying individual skills and resources is the sole remaining ‘public issue’ and the sole object of ‘public interest.’”³ However little we may really be interested in anyone else, we do seem willing to listen to people’s individual stories as possible keys to our own individual development—and that is the narrow political opportunity the solo performers exploit. The fact of their authentic individuality (or that of their stories) seems to me far more important in explaining their popularity than any ostensible authenticity in their research, assuming they even do real research.

SMITH AND WOLF: ROAD PICTURES

More has been written about Anna Deavere Smith than about any of the other artists under discussion, largely because of the immense public interest in and anxiety over the topics of her pieces *Fires in the Mirror* (directed by Emily Mann in 1992, about the 1991 riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, sparked by the accidental killing of a black boy by a rabbi’s motorcade and the retaliatory killing of a Jewish student) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (directed by Christopher Ashley in 1993, about the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, sparked by the acquittal of four police officers for their beating of the unarmed motorist Rodney King). As is well known, both these works were based on the same technique: interviewing large numbers of people about the selected tumultuous events and then impersonating some of them onstage, using their exact words and mannerisms. Smith developed this technique for several years, touring colleges and other forums with commissioned shows based on local hot-button issues (such as feminism and racism at the University of Pennsylvania and the Five Colleges at Amherst), before she became



Anna Deavere Smith
in the world premiere of
Twilight: Los Angeles,
1992 at the Mark Taper
Forum. Photo: Jay
Thompson.

widely known. She also ultimately applied the same method to *House Arrest*, her recent solo piece about the American presidency, although in earlier phases that show employed up to fourteen actors.

Smith's overall title for these linked projects is *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, whose echoes of Jack Kerouac's prototypical Beat romance *On the Road* (1957) deserve a moment's pause. As she writes in the introduction to the published text of *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith's goal, like Kerouac's, has as much to do with the act of travel ("The spirit of acting is the *travel* from the self to the other") as with arrival at a destination (such as a preconceived, tendentious political position). Smith says she sets out in her interviews to "find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally,"⁴ implying that her faith in the existence of "authentic speech" and "true character" (phrases she uses elsewhere) is an endorsement of the myth of unfettered individualism—the picaresque vision quest in search of it—that Kerouac preeminently represents in the postwar era. I consider this implication to be the essence of her political cunning: wittingly or unwittingly, she appeals to a prevailing ideology, seems to flatter it, and then deconstructs it gently and thoroughly in performance. Her strategy is to enshrine the principle of the inviolate, holy self in order to question and challenge it.

As anyone who saw these works can testify, it was the specificity and savvy with which Smith, a black woman, inhabited the personae of so many different parties to the conflicts—people of both sexes and various races and classes—that engrossed audiences. Her process of impersonation was at all times more compelling than her facts and information. Her impressions weren't entirely convincing by the standards of fourth-wall realism, and they weren't meant to be. She built the characterizations around penetrating enlargements of isolated traits and mannerisms, but the fact that she was always visible beneath the intensely studied character surfaces was what gave the pieces their strangely persuasive texture. The ever-changing split in her persona assured spectators of the constant presence of a discerning editorial eye and selective framing hand.

In several interviews Smith has spoken of her process of inhabiting characters who are plainly repellent or guilty of disgraceful deeds, and she unfashionably explains that "love," not "judgment," must be the essence of her task if she is to make such behavior real enough to be submitted to fair criticism. "We're in a weird moment," she told the radio host Leonard Lopate on WNYC in October 2000, "where we think the search for a lie is the same as the search for the truth." But actors must always employ lies in one sense, must "create a fiction to illuminate a truth." Thus (again quoting from *Fires in the Mirror*), she considers her residual "unlikeness" to her characters a "bridge" that encourages openness to metaphor. The conventional, naturalistic, "self-centered" American acting technique, she says, "has taken the metaphor out of acting. It has made the heart smaller, the spirit less gregarious, and the mind less apt to be able to hold on to contradictions or opposition."⁵ In the end, what was most moving for me in her performances was the risky and provocatively metaphorical spectacle of an artist imposing form on the agents of a shapeless crisis, of her boldly self-conscious artistic sensibility giving cogent shape to a painfully raw and chaotic reality.

Appropriately enough for a cunning cultural critic, Smith's technique turns out to be transferable. In 1999 a relatively unknown New York actor named Marc Wolf, who gratefully acknowledges his debt to Smith, applied her method to another selected topic—the U.S. military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy on homosexuality, which divides millions of Americans as bitterly as issues of race and class. The resulting show, *Another American: Asking & Telling*, which played at the Theater at St. Clement's in New York and still travels to numerous venues around the country, drew its power from many of the same sources as Smith's pieces. Wolf, who is gay and has no military experience himself, spent three years gathering documentary material and conducting more than two hundred interviews with people on both sides of this controversy, and he clearly understood as well as Smith did the value of *not* blending completely into his eighteen onstage impersonations.

Just as the immediacy of Smith's performances depended on her physical presence (one reason why her recent film of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* was unfortunately much less powerful than her stage show), so too did Wolf's. With Smith, for instance, one thought: This woman actually sat with both Reginald Denny and the unapologetic brother of the man who beat him almost to death, and then steeled herself to switch back and forth, within seconds, between their radically opposed points of view. Similarly, with Wolf, one thought: This is the man who tracked down dozens of victims and bigots, activists and establishmentarians, convinced them to open up to him, and then imitated them all with apparently equal enthusiasm. He also promised anonymity to many of them, making the audience aware that careers, and perhaps lives, depended on his secrecy. Neither Smith nor Wolf was a mere actor in any received sense; they were conduits for testimony that might otherwise never be heard and thus possessed a certain secondary "authenticity" as witnesses of witnesses.

Furthermore—and this is a key point—both artists were remarkably good at keeping their performances from seeming tendentious even though their sympathy with certain people and positions was obvious. Wolf was clearly searching for common ground in the fact that gays and military people are frequent objects of stereotyping, and this sense of "biased fairness" was evident not only in the nuanced content of each vignette but also in his selection and arrangement of scenes. His play's stories (or pieces of story) seemed to comment on one another like a sequential argument that left each side complexly human. The spookily calm reminiscence of Edward Modesto, for instance, an ex-army colonel who served a prison term for dressing in women's clothes, was followed by the smug explanation of the official rationale for "Don't ask, don't tell" by Charles Moskos, the Northwestern University sociologist who helped develop it. Then an unnamed colonel's startlingly honest and persuasive explanation of the danger of tampering with soldiers' macho "warrior ethic" was followed by the recollections of an unabashedly effeminate Vietnam veteran, nicknamed "Mary Alice," whose humor and eccentricity had been crucial in keeping his unit alive.

On a more practical level, both Smith and Wolf also achieved the rare feat of attracting truly integrated audiences. Smith wrote in *Fires in the Mirror* that some of her

main goals were to “1) bring people together into the same room (the theater) who would normally not be together, and 2) attract people to the theater who don’t usually come to the theater.”⁶ The same is true of Danny Hoch, whom I’ll discuss in a moment, and of John Leguizamo, whose 1998 solo show *Freak: A Semi-Demi-Quasi-Pseudo Autobiography* (about growing up Hispanic in Jackson Heights, Queens) attracted the most racially and generationally diverse Broadway audiences that I’ve seen since *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, partly because of his insistence that thirteen-dollar tickets be available for every performance. A May 2000 *Washington Post* feature article about *Another American* quoted a retired navy captain who attended Wolf’s show in uniform at the Studio Theater in Washington: “You try to change attitudes. You don’t do it by giving statistics, you do it by telling stories like these.” Wolf added, “They’re stories that military people are not supposed to tell, so by inference the American community is not supposed to know them.”⁷

Wolf’s remark touches on the root idea that binds together all this work: violating public secrets. Solo artists foil invisibility and stigmatization, and though the reasons their subjects are invisible and stigmatized differ in each case, the basic strategy is always the same. By speaking the unspeakable, making the seemingly unremarkable remarkable, or simply leaving the impression of having been “on location” (the defining notion of documentary), these artists destroy the simplistic scaffolding that prevents fuller truths from being recognized.

THE DOCUMENTARY IDEA: ALONE AGAIN, NATURALLY

Let me digress briefly in order to clarify how the documentary concept does and does not seem to me valuable in describing these performers’ work. In recent decades there has been a great deal of hand-wringing among critics and journalists over deliberate misrepresentation and indifference to truth in the mass media, which has made it difficult to speak on anything but the crudest level about factual representation and its inherent quandaries. Because other media lie to us regularly and shamelessly (in the form of spin, staged news, docudrama, infomercials, and more), it has sometimes been suggested by prominent theater practitioners that theater should be preserved as a pillar of integrity regarding the reliability of documentation and of fact presented as such (a bizarre thought when you consider the historical mistrust of theater and theater people).

This idea harks back to Peter Weiss’s effort in the 1960s to distinguish his work from that of Rolf Hochhuth and others, who blended fact and fiction more obviously than he did in an effort to keep audiences and readers interested. Weiss wrote that, ideally, “documentary theater shuns all invention . . . in opposition to the incoherent mass of information which constantly assails us from every side.”⁸ More recently, Eric Bentley (author of the 1972 documentary drama *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, about the House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC] investigation of the entertainment industry) inveighed against docudrama by complaining that it was a way for an

author-director to “have it both ways and, while strongly suggesting one version of the facts, also [avoid] affirming anything for sure.” The only way to escape this “boomerang,” which leaves viewers “free to think that the fictions are facts . . . [and] equally free to think that the facts are fictions,” is to “abide by a clear set of rules that the audience will understand, whereby no fiction will be foisted on them as fact.”⁹

Deliberate misrepresentation is obviously reprehensible. And there is no question that plays and films in which the reliability of fact is paramount have been very valuable over the years, both educationally and historically. For the purposes of this essay, however, I set aside such material as “historical drama and film,” distinguishing it from “documentary drama and film” by pointing out that the purpose of the former is principally to inform and entertain, not to change the audience’s perceptions of its own world. These definitions are difficult to keep separate, of course. The strength of the latter form, however, radiates from the fact that it never pretends to a detached objectivity that isn’t really possible.

Elsewhere in the essays just quoted, both Weiss and Bentley suggest that they, too, understand the impossibility—indeed the undesirability—of keeping fact innocent of fiction. All arranged presentations of facts are inevitably editorialized. As the playwright and poet Sergei Tretyakov said as early as 1927 about Soviet documentary film, the question is one of “gradation in the falsification,” and an artist’s priority is necessarily “on the attraction, on the effect.”¹⁰ Weiss provides a good illustration, since he prided himself on composing *The Investigation* entirely out of minimally altered excerpts from the Frankfurt trial transcripts of the Auschwitz murderers. One of the most unforgettably immediate experiences I’ve had in the theater was a staged reading of that work in Germany in 1988 (memorializing the fiftieth anniversary of *Kristallnacht*) that was cast exclusively with actors in their seventies and eighties—that is, with actors who had literally been witnesses. Several days afterward, however, it occurred to me that neither I nor most of the other spectators really had any idea whether those actors had been in Germany during the Holocaust or whether they’d been Nazis or not, any more than we knew with certainty that Weiss had accurately transcribed the trial transcripts. The play, in other words, had had its effect, and like all documentary audiences we had trusted in others (professional experts in competition with the documentarian at hand, presumably) to verify questions of verity.

Documentary is perforce a loose concept. It is nothing more than a tacit agreement by artist and audience to meet on a chosen field of presumably factual reference; to make the rules tighter than that would drain it of dramatic impact. A common truism in the field of film and television documentary is that the secret is to follow people around until they say what you want them to say. Cynicism aside, however, a similar editorial imperative pertains to the arrangement of materials in documentary theater.

As many commentators have pointed out, the “theater of fact” (Kenneth Tynan’s term), or “theater of testimony” (Emily Mann’s) tends to be woefully perishable in any case, its appeal closely linked with the media age’s craven appetites for the “purely”

voyeuristic and confessional. Writing recently in the *New York Times*, Charles Marowitz stated and then overstated this case, declaring that all “manufactured authenticity” and “neo-naturalism” on the stage—such as Brian Johnstone’s *Lifegame*, Rob Berger and company’s *Charlie Victor Romeo*, and David Mamet’s dialogue—represented a “drought of imagination”: “By appropriating real-life people in real-life circumstances, artists have turned themselves into poachers and the public into voyeurs.”¹¹ Just as there is no point in condemning all fact-based material en masse this way, there is also no point in aspiring to a factual purity that contravenes the theater’s gloriously slippery nature. The best documentary theater ingests the medium’s inherent duplicity and also recognizes (as mentioned earlier) the audience’s sophistication regarding stories and its resistance to guilt.

In 1998 the visual artists Jochen and Esther Gerz organized another public reading of Weiss’s *The Investigation* in Germany. The Gerzes had the text read aloud by three hundred volunteer nonactors—subscribers of the Hebbel Theater, the Berliner Ensemble, and the Volksbühne—and the result was an insufferable spectacle of armchairish psycho-purgation penetratingly described by one critic as “political karaoke.”¹² The situation was uncomfortably similar at the May 2000 New York premiere of *The Laramie Project*, a work by Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project based on some two hundred interviews with the people of Laramie, Wyoming, about the homophobic murder of Matthew Shepard. This unquestionably loving and earnest piece claimed to be about the self-exploration of the Tectonic company members as much as their reportage about the Laramie townspeople, but (in part because there were eight actors) this self-exploration was dilute and superficial, giving the whole affair an air of self-congratulation and implying that it would have worked equally well, or better, on video. At the time I wondered: Was this really just a weak text that good actors couldn’t make compelling? Or did the very presence of more than one actor actually make the text seem weaker than it was by defocusing—continually interrupting and restarting—the audience’s imaginary engagement and identification with the many different characters?

My general experience over the past two decades has been that group documentary plays are almost always disposable, their full power dependent on the ephemeral newsworthiness of their topics. This danger is much less with solo pieces. (Again, let me stress that I’m not speaking of commonplace historical drama, which can also take the form of solo works, such as William Luce’s *Barrymore*, Pam Gems’s *Marlene*, and Martin Sherman’s *Rose*.) Consider, for instance, the four “plays of testimony” in Emily Mann’s 1997 volume *Testimonies*. The public issues at the center of the later works, *Execution of Justice* (1984) and *Greensboro: A Requiem* (1996), had enormous news value in their time, and the private ones that dominate *Still Life* (1980) and *Annulla* (1977, revised 1985) had none, yet the earlier two works (particularly *Annulla*, essentially a solo piece) read as fresher and more stage-worthy today than the others. The main reason seems to me that both are basically portrait studies constructed as self-analytical monologues.

The self-analytical monologue is no guarantee of profundity, of course, as David Hare's pseudoquesting travelogue *Via Dolorosa* demonstrated on Broadway in 1999. Describing his experiences during a 1997 trip to Israel, Hare elucidated, through many quotes and reported conversations, not only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also various political issues relating to the factionalizing of Israelis and Arabs. In his stage debut at age fifty-one, however, he was utterly inept at illuminating the relationship of the teller to this wide-ranging tale. He spoke frequently of "faith" and "homeland," for instance, but his revelations about those matters were few, shallow, and detached. Moreover, his embarrassingly wooden gestures, badly strained voice, and inability to characterize the people he quoted homogenized the emotional tenor of the show and made one wonder whether he was aware that he occasionally came off as, say, a colonialist snob (mocking a settler's ignorance of Trevor Nunn, for instance), an egotist (scoffing at a woman's ignorance that he wrote *Plenty*), and a phrasemaker ("Myself, I would like Jerusalem more if it weren't so important").¹³

In 1968 the television producer Arthur Barron wrote a provocative essay distinguishing between two divergent traditions in documentary that is applicable to the media-age bias I'm describing. On the one hand, Barron wrote, is the historical paradigm, an emphasis on "film as knowledge" leading to the belief that "documentary's chief function is in energizing, motivating, and informing the masses by rendering the complex issues of the day understandable and meaningful"—in the tradition of Louis and Auguste Lumière, John Grierson and the British School, V. I. Pudovkin, Sergey Eisenstein, the Office of War Information, "CBS Reports," "NET Journal," and much more. On the other hand is the personal paradigm, an emphasis on film as emotion and drama whose seminal documentary figure was Robert Flaherty and whose other exponents include D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, Albert and David Maysles, William Jersey, and Ed Pincus. This "personal documentary" tradition focuses not on "great issues" but on "human events in human scale . . . not topicality, but timelessness . . . not expertise and authority, but ordinary, real, human beings swept up in the currents of life,"¹⁴ and our preference for it defines an important aspect of taste in our age.

We lean toward the personal paradigm perhaps in part out of journalistic laziness (it requires less homework) and in part out of a deeper-seated postmodern preference for micro- over macro- and metanarratives. But more significantly, I think, we choose the personal because of our culture's more and more overpowering ethic of self-actualization. The more we fetishize independence and nurture the narcissism that supports and girds it, the more self-conscious we begin to be about mirrors. Solo artists turn the mirror into a political tool (recall Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*). They provide the audience with opportunities to identify with the other through a transformed single individual and thus bring the power of the mirror to the representation of otherness.

HOCH AND JONES: I AM A CAMERA

Thirty-year-old Danny Hoch says he grew up in a forsaken neighborhood in Queens called Lefrak City, though his mother, who raised him alone, insists that they really lived in Forest Hills. In any case, his formative experiences didn't revolve around the expected skin privileges of a white kid from a "nominally Jewish household," as he calls it. No culture was dominant on the streets where he spent his time, and he describes hip-hop as the "common language" among his diverse friends. The two solo pieces for which he has become nationally known, *Some People* (1993) and *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop* (1998), both directed by Jo Bonney, are collections of fictional character sketches in which he mimics a remarkable variety of New York voices and attitudes with astonishing precision, familiarity, and insight. His people range from a Caribbean radio host taking poignant calls from listeners in the dead hours of early morning, to a Polish handyman with execrable English who nevertheless manages to insinuate an array of complex feelings for his absent wife and the woman he's helping around the house, to a teenage "homeboy" practicing his hip-hop routine while banging on a box and talking more revealingly than he knows about his ex-girlfriend, to a Cuban father reluctantly visiting a therapist after the police kill his son, to a Puerto Rican man "accidentally" crippled in a police shootout who tries to chat up a girl in a hospital waiting room, to a white, teenage wannabe gangsta rapper from Montana who imagines himself being interviewed by Jay Leno but keeps getting interrupted by his mother.

Hoch stresses in the introduction to the published texts of his shows that he doesn't consider himself a documentarian: "A few people think I am some anthropological/theatrical case-study guy. But I don't tape-record or interview people to then play them on stage. This is my world! These are my inner monologues, layered composites of stories and voices from me, my family, my neighborhood, my people." Nevertheless, as he himself admits a few lines later, the exoticism and foreignness (and, I would add, the specificity and realism) of his characters are key factors in the notoriety he has gained in middle-class theatrical venues where people like his characters rarely go. "I think all the hoopla about my work comes from people simply not being accustomed to seeing traditionally peripheral characters placed center stage. Well, these characters are center stage in *my world*."¹⁵

Still later he muses candidly on skin privilege and its vocal equivalent: "I often wonder if my skin were darker, or if I couldn't flip my linguistics during meetings to sound 'businesslike and un-threatening' (I swear somebody said that to me), if I would have had the success I've had with these two shows. Was I a 'safe in' to the 'disenfranchised voices of America' for the rich and middle class? Maybe."¹⁶ His honesty recalls the remark of the scholar Sandra Richards that "a viewer's sense of the ease with which [Anna Deavere] Smith [switches] racial identities is aided by the fact that she is a light-skinned African-American woman."¹⁷ Unlike Smith, though, Hoch has had the effect of his art questioned in public by at least one critic, who complains he "never decides what view to take of his subjects" (Jessica Winter, writing about the 1999 film *Whiteboyz*,

cowritten by and starring Hoch as a lead character modeled on the Montana kid “Flip” from *Jails*).¹⁸ The solo performer Dael Orlandersmith has similarly questioned whether Hoch’s work is an inadvertent advertisement for “gangsta chic”—the trend, perpetuated by corporations like Tommy Hilfiger, that encourages white suburban fantasies about the coolness of being inner-city black.¹⁹

My own view is that Hoch isn’t peddling any particular fantasies. Fantasy is his dominant theme, complemented by the complex denial mechanisms that so often buttress fantasy. The political provocation in his art begins with his willingness to travel this territory without tiptoeing around questions of race and class. Furthermore, rappers make up only a small portion of his hugely varied *dramatis personae* (although admittedly they provide high points in both his solo shows). The most startling aspect of these shows is the detail and perceptions of the figures. If all solo performers are cameras to an extent (another twist on the documentary idea), then Hoch is a remarkably acute and sensitive instrument. He simply sees more in the models that become his figures than most people expect of an actor-author—especially of one dealing with such a bitterly polarized (and hence usually reductive) arena—and thus anyone who needs to know too quickly or categorically what he is “representing” is bound to be confused and disappointed.

Hoch’s purpose isn’t just to “keep it real” as a white rapper. He is interested in the myth of “keeping it real,” in the profusion of open questions about what the “real” is in a society saturated with “simulations” (Jean Baudrillard) and “prefabricated ‘pseudo-events’” (Guy Debord) that affect the aspirations of the disenfranchised and enfranchised alike. He sees that “thug life” is a veneer used to manufacture moral superiority (“It’s just cooler to be the oppressed than the oppressor. Who wants to be the oppressor? Shit, not me”).²⁰ Moreover, television, the watching of television, and resentment at television’s distortions of reality are mentioned in almost every one of his vignettes (a repetition that makes the theater seem like his preferred means of illuminating and apprehending the world, as well as the best means of forcing such reality-rumination on a spectacle-benumbed audience). His people swagger and bluster about their goals, principles, pride, and (in the case of the rappers) media dreams while betraying the most intimate feelings of shame, ignorance, powerlessness, and self-hatred, and this layering creates an impression of doubling that is as Brechtian (as effectively *verfremdet*) as any performance of Smith’s.

When Hoch quickly clips on a pair of earrings to play a young Puerto Rican woman named Blanca who ridicules her bisexual boyfriend’s suggestion that they use a condom, for instance, he changes his accent but not his comfortable baritone vocal register, inviting us to think as much about the performance of Blanca’s character as about her life circumstances. And when he rolls up his pant leg to play a motormouthed, angrily intelligent prison inmate walking to get a toothbrush with a newcomer, telling him to “just plead guilty” and explaining how he was arrested when a cop flew into a rage at his indeterminate race, Hoch also steers attention toward the dangerously blind social game of self-representation. (The advice to “just plead guilty” comes from the inmate’s

Danny Hoch in
Some People at P.S. 122.
Photo: Dona Ann
McAdams.



presumptions about the judge's presumptions about the character who is not seen, who is also of indeterminate race.) Every sketch in Hoch's shows is as preoccupied with the business of looking shrewdly at the process of looking as it is with the enacted pictures and behaviors themselves.

Sarah Jones is another soloist who works these same fields of perception, and is as keen an observer of character as Hoch, but because she is female and dark skinned (she's actually the product of a mixed marriage), she necessarily reaps a different crop. Jones is a twenty-five-year-old actor and hip-hop poet who won the 1997 Nuyorican Poets Cafe Grand Slam Championship and developed a solo piece called *Surface Transit* about eight fictional New Yorkers, which Hoch produced at P.S. 122 in 2000. Directed by Gloria Feliciano, her piece, like Hoch's work, is a tour de force of transformation with an astonishing variety of characters, and several situations in it are analogous to situations in his shows. *Surface Transit* spins a significant variation, though, by establishing links, some distant and some intimate, between the characters in its vignettes.

Pasha, for instance, is a Russian immigrant and the widow of a black American who speaks with brittle courage to her daughter while making cornrows in the child's blond hair. The figure presented after her is Lorraine Levine, the elderly, narrow-minded, bigoted Jewish woman Pasha cares for, who is capriciously thinking of firing her and fills her time by making mischief with various lies and half-truths over the phone. And later Joey, a deactivated Italian-American cop, turns out to be the former best friend of Levine's son—a fact we learn only near the end of his long, crude harangue to his psychiatrist about his rage at losing this friend to the "illness" of homosexuality. So it goes in grim and violent but also sometimes incongruously bright and humane circularity—a richly varied world in which everyone is, poignantly, estranged by only one degree of separation. The circle of submerged connectedness is like a round dance reminiscent of Arthur Schnitzler's *Reigen (La Ronde)*, with the universal denominator of sex replaced by the quintessentially American denominator of self-invention.

Here, as with Hoch, Smith, and Wolf, it is the precision of the portrayals that supervenes—the meticulousness of the accents and the exactitude of the coughing, cackling, sitting, and handling the phone—as well as the jarring contrasts between performer and characters that stun the audience into a political receptiveness that the stories alone probably wouldn't generate. Jones's own self-confidence and severe, statuesque beauty, for instance, provide an extremely strange and unsettling foil for Pasha's heart-sick determination and fragile humility. The three characters closest to Jones herself establish these contrasts most powerfully, however, because they are written with the greatest originality and acted with the most affection and sympathy.

Sugar Jones (note the name) is a black, British, unemployed actress who becomes imprudently emotional while narrating a past sexual assault (by Joey, it turns out) during an audition for a reality-TV show called *SICK (Seven Immigrants, a Campsite, and Kayak)*. Rashid is a young recovering rapper who relapses into marvelous hip-hop

rhymes while leading a meeting of “the reformed MC wannabe–Junior Mafia revolutionary new Black Panther society of Hunter College.” And Keisha Ray is Rashid’s strong-willed and confident girlfriend who, tired of fending off predatory males while waiting for a bus, launches into a magnificent feminist response to Gil Scott-Heron’s “The revolution will not be televised”: “Your revolution will not happen between these thighs / the real revolution / ain’t about booty size / the Versaces you buys / or the Lexus you drives.”²¹ These three sketches lift the production beyond the sententiousness and stereotyping that sometimes seeped into the earlier scenes, steering it toward a broader commonsensical feminism built on compassion and sophisticated fairness. In the end, the two seemingly antagonistic hip-hop poems, male and female, proudly complement and strengthen each other. Rashid’s anticommodity machismo is held up against Keisha Ray’s patriarchy-popping hubris. There is no question of parochialism, naïveté, or tendentiousness because the human “camera” in front of us is far too trustworthy in its own right.

The greatest political strength of Hoch, Jones, Smith, and Wolf is that they are themselves caught in the social maelstroms they invite us to probe and understand. They are meticulous mimics but also courageous explorers of both the flattering and the unflattering sides of the others they choose as alter egos. Like the creators of all political theater in America, solo performers must negotiate the terrain of guilt, mined though it is, but they have an important edge in accomplishing that: the transparency of their self-reference. That is why I call their risky project of self-characterization by opposition and contrast an all-American version of *Verfremdung*. This notion is paradoxical in basic ways. Brecht’s reason for proposing “estrangement” was to show that supposedly “natural” and “inevitable” events and behaviors were part of human-controlled historical processes and were thus changeable through volitional action; he avoided naturalism because its positivist ethos seemed inconsistent with that aim. The idea that being swept up in any sociopolitical maelstrom might be politically useful to an artist would have been entirely foreign to him.

Nearly half a century after his death, however, in the land whose HUAC investigations sped his return to Europe, Americans sympathetic to his goals necessarily pursue them based on a more particularized view of American society than he ever applied. The grip of psychological realism on the American imagination, for instance, has outlasted decades of avant-gardist efforts to dislodge it, and the style is now divorced from its positivist heritage and available to the Left, the Right, and the apolitical alike. Today, a generation after feminists insisted that “the personal is political,” the personal dominates politics as much as it does drama in theater, film, and television. (Furthermore, according to a recent article by Sue-Ellen Case, the detached attitude of the smoker that Brecht proposed is now a figure for patriarchal remoteness.)²² For politically minded information-age Americans, estrangement lives primarily as a means of seeing ourselves voyeuristically seeing ourselves, as a nonmediated form of self-actualization based on critiques of self-actualization. Ours is an era obsessed with witnessing, and an effective *Verfremdung* is nothing less than a reason to consider one sort of witnessing more persuasive than another.

NOTES

1. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995).
2. *Ibid.*, 36.
3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 72.
4. Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (New York: Anchor, 1993), xxvi–xxvii.
5. *Ibid.*, xxix.
6. *Ibid.*, xxxviii.
7. Steve Vogel, “A Telling Theatrical Experience,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2000, A25.
8. Peter Weiss, “Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre,” *World Theatre* 17 (1968): 375–77.
9. Eric Bentley, *Thinking about the Playwright: Comments from Four Decades* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 189–90.
10. Sergei Tretyakov, Victor Shklovsky, Esther Shub, and Osip Brik, “Symposium on Soviet Documentary,” in *The Documentary Tradition: From Nanook to Woodstock*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1971), 30.
11. Charles Marowitz, “Let’s Not Forgo Imagination for Voyeurism,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2000, 5, 22.
12. Harold Martenstein, “Karaoke für den Kopf,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 27, 1998.
13. David Hare, *Via Dolorosa and When Shall We Live* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 37.
14. Arthur Barron, “Toward New Goals in Documentary,” in *The Documentary Tradition: From Nanook to Woodstock*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1971), 476–77.
15. Danny Hoch, *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop* and *Some People* (New York: Villard, 1998), xiv.
16. *Ibid.*, xv.
17. Sandra Richards, “Caught in the Act of Social Definition: *On the Road* with Anna Deavere Smith,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 52.
18. Jessica Winter, “Corn Doggy Dogg,” *Village Voice*, October 6–12, 1999. Smith’s art has been publicly questioned at times, but not (to my knowledge) for the same reasons. When she performed *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* in Los Angeles, for instance, local performers complained that she was an outsider opportunistically appropriating their stories and seizing a limelight that properly should have been theirs.
19. Somini Sengupta, “A Multicultural Chameleon: Actor’s Experience Spawns Polyglot Cast of Characters,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1999, B1, 7.
20. Hoch, xvii.
21. Quoted from Sarah Jones, “Surface Transit,” unpublished ms.
22. Sue-Ellen Case, “Wer raucht, sieht kaltblütig aus’: Brecht, Müller, and Cigars,” *drive b: brecht 100 (Theater der Zeit Arbeitsbuch/The Brecht Yearbook 23)* 1998, 163–69.