

How to Work With Things That Really Happened

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What we are doing in our theatre is setting up works based on documents—and by “documents,” I mean that we work with things that really happened. So we take actual things, actual events and we try to create stories. We try to create multiple stories, stories that contradict each other, stories that work on different levels. And in order to give you an impression of what I do, I will tell you about things I have done. But before I do this, I would like everybody to say their names [*Students introduce themselves and give their ages*]. It is important that you say your name and your age—because in the theatre we work with ourselves. Your age tells you something about the timeframe that your life is a part of. It is very different to read about something or to have experienced it. I am much, much older than you. I am 55, so it is a long timeframe that I cover. I have been doing theatre now for thirty years, so I have been in the theatre for longer than you have been in the world.

Over this period, a lot of things have changed in the theatre. I received my training in the drama department of the University of Giessen. Giessen is a very small town close to Frankfurt. The advantage of a small town is that you don’t have many disturbances, the only thing you can do in small towns is work. The kind of theatre we were trained for in Giessen, our professors always told us, did not yet exist. “So you will receive a lot of classical training,” they said, “but for the theatre we imagine, you will have to make it happen, you have to do it.” It is very interesting if you think of theatre as something that is not fixed. You need a lot of professional skills to do it, but in the end, what is happening on stage between you and the audience is always something new. It depends on the timeframe, on what is happening in society. Every period creates new problems. When there are new problems, you maybe have to respond with new forms, because it has to be something that makes sense to you in relation to the age you are living in. It all sounds very abstract, but it is very simple: It has to be interesting for you, and it has to be interesting for the people who come—and it has to tell them something about you and your opinion about the world. But it is not about preaching. It is not like going to church. You think about something that is happening, and you try to give it a form. The audience will take something out of this form that is useful for them. In Giessen, we received a lot of classical training: We learned about

breathing techniques, movement techniques, about what actors think when they are playing a part, about what actors don't think when they are playing a part; also about what a director and a dramaturg think while constructing a play. We learned also the ability to describe what is happening on stage. That is a complicated thing, because you have to look very carefully at what is going on. On the stage, there is text being spoken by the actors, but there is always much more than the text. The stage is constructed out of a lot of layers. You have to try to get a vision of all these layers.

The big advantage of our department in Giessen was that we had visiting professors. They were experts in their field. Robert Wilson visited—a prominent director, Heiner Müller came—a major playwright, and then we had a director and playwright who was very important to us: George Tabori. Tabori was Jewish, and he lost almost all of his family during the Shoah. When he came to our department, he was already a very old man, but he had developed his own technique of working with actors and developing plays. He experienced many terrible things in his life, but he made the best comedies I have ever seen. He said that sometimes the only way to deal with reality is comedy, because the comedy opens up the audience's heart. And sometimes you laugh about something funny, and in the next moment, you start to cry, because there is something under this joke which isn't funny. He was looking for these moments, looking to create these moments.

One of the most famous productions that he did was Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. We all know how it has to look: There has to be a tree on the stage. When George Tabori directed it, there was no tree on the stage. So the people who knew the play from the book were very disappointed; the only thing that was on stage was a very small table. Tabori said this is because this play is about waiting, and usually in theatre, when you develop a production, you spend a lot of time with waiting and repetition. So he said to the actors, let us see what will happen if we just sit at the table and try to do the play in this form. So when do we have to leave the table? When something happens. He had two of the most brilliant German actors of this time doing this production: Peter Luer and Thomas Holzmann. Great actors with great personalities. There is a film about this production. If you know the play, you can see how these two actors reach results with minimal things that are far beyond what you think you can do on stage.

Then we had Richard Schechner from the Performance Group in New York. We had a lot of different visiting professors, different teachers. What is interesting about these various teachers is that each had his own approach towards theatre. So we had a variety of training, and every student had to take out of these different approaches what they considered important for themselves—and with everything you take, you construct your own thing. And during the training, you realize what is useful to you. In the end, you have to make the decision about what is useful to you when you are doing theatre.

I am telling you about various plays I did without showing you pictures, so you have to make up the pictures in your mind. When I finished my training, I was part of the production *Hamlet/Hamletmachine*, which was put on by Heiner Müller. Heiner Müller was staging *Hamlet*, and he was using his old play *Hamlet-machine* as a comment on Shakespeare's play. The production was rehearsed over a period of eight months. The play was produced in East Germany (GDR). When we started with rehearsals, the GDR still existed, but when we finished, the GDR was gone—the state had disappeared. There was a wall through Berlin that separated Berlin into East and West. Now all the tourists in Berlin look for the Wall and take pictures there. But in the 1980s, you could enter East Berlin for one day from West Berlin only if you paid twenty-five Deutsche Mark. If you lived in East Germany, you were not allowed to leave the country. You would have been shot at the Wall if you had tried to pass. It was really a divided city with a lot of tension. I grew up in West Germany and I had a special visa that allowed me to stay in East Germany. I could pass the border every day as I liked without paying. I could also stay overnight. If you didn't have this visa, you had to leave East Berlin before midnight. When we started the rehearsals, Heiner Müller had the idea that Hamlet was the son of high party members and that there had been a change in the party and his father had been a victim of this change, with Hamlet disagreeing with the new leadership. His dissent creates the central problem of the play. You can read this play in this way, and it makes a lot of sense. But what do you do if the state disappears and this model of the ruling party is gone? If the people are no longer interested in the party? If the people are interested in going shopping, going on vacation, leaving the country? Your frame of reference disappears. And it is very difficult to perform a play when the reference is no longer there. The performance lasted for eight hours, and sitting for eight hours in a theatre is really a long time. You have to dedicate so much of your time to the theatre. If you work with such a long timeframe, it changes something in the perception of an audience. There will be sequences where the audience gets tired. But because every member of the audience has different interests, they will get tired at different times. So it creates a particular atmosphere or energy in the audience. And this energy you can use. Then the audience starts to think about its own situation in relation to what happens on stage. Our stage designer, Erich Wonder, created a set where the people on stage looked very small. When you looked at the stage, you got the idea that the surroundings were too big for the people, then you watch very carefully what they were doing, they had to invest energy to exist in this environment. This play became very successful, to our surprise, because—situated amid all these events that were going on at that time—the theatre became a place where you could rest and reflect. When a society is changing so quickly, people have to rest somewhere and think about what is going on around them. But of course, you have to do this in an entertaining way. Because theatre, as we know, is also about being entertaining. Entertaining in a way so that people get energy.

There are different methods of creating energy. The most popular thing is to do some song and dance. So people would send 25 people on stage and let them

sing karaoke, and then you have this energy. But Heiner Müller did not do that. He had just a bunch of actors, and they were doing funny little tricks. But only small tricks, and they were all happening during one sequence at the same time. As an audience member, you had just got a little bit tired and then suddenly there was so much happening on stage, and because it all happens at the same time, you would miss something. And then for a moment you would feel very uncomfortable because you had paid and you wanted to see everything. And this keeps your energy level up, and you concentrate more, you focus more because you don't want to miss the next scene when something like this is happening. This is a very good way to deal with the audience. You educate the audience to pay attention. In the end, the audience is also responsible for the circulation of energy that happens during a performance. Theatre is always about the action happening between the audience and stage. A good performance is always working with a good audience. But if you want to try something new on stage, you have to train the audience, because the audience has to learn how to see and perceive what you do on stage. There is a text by Brecht on developing the art of watching. If you train your audience, you can achieve more with the things that you do on stage. The audience and the actors construct the scene together.

The kind of theatre that Regine Dura and I are doing has a lot to do with developing the art of watching. When we started our first performances, people said: "It is very interesting, but it is not theatre: There are no characters, there is no plotline, there is no drama. The actors give a lot of information. It is very complicated to follow, and I have to concentrate too much. I have to work during your performance as an audience member. Maybe it is visual art. Maybe it is visual art with actors." So, in the first three or four years, the critics argued a lot about whether it was theatre or not.

The good thing about this quarrel was that it existed and it made people curious: Every year something new was happening, and people would come to see it, and sometimes people would come to see the show twice because it was so complicated. And sometimes, people seeing a show for the first time would leave after 15 minutes because it was too complicated for them. Some people prefer having something relaxing. They might ask: "Where is the song and dance?" They realize no song and dance is coming and so they say: "Let's go and have some dinner!" That was not easy for the actors. It's a strange experience for the actors when the audience leaves during a performance. But sometimes it is necessary, since the people on the stage do not have the same interest as the people in the audience. In shaping your audience, you also develop the people you can work with. The interesting thing when one audience disengages with the theatre is that they are replaced by another kind of audience. When we started our theatre in the 1990s, many people had no more interest in theatre. They said, why should I see "Waiting for Godot?" He is not coming, and I know that. This is not a surprise. They lost interest, but they were very interested in what was going on in society.

In Germany, we had the fall of the Wall in 1989 and reunification in 1990. For one part of society, the state had disappeared. For the other part, the state had

grown bigger. Suddenly, there were 20 million new people in the country, speaking the same language, but having very different experiences, because they grew up in a completely different system. It also changed the western part of Germany. The society had to face new problems. Some of these problems were related to history, to German history—and you had to find a way to communicate this. In the kind of theatre that Regine and I are doing, we try to deal with these problems. We deal with German history and its impact on our country, on our society and its relation to the world.

The first documentary-style play I did was a play about Adolf Eichmann, called *Q&A—Questions & Answers*. The Germans killed six million Jews in concentration camps. Most of the german concentration camps were in Poland. So one had to transport the Jews from Germany and other countries to the concentration camps and gas chambers in Poland. One had to organize this, and the man in charge of the organization was Adolf Eichmann. He was responsible for bringing the Jews to the camps. He was very good at this. After the war, if they had caught him, they would have killed him immediately. So he went underground and ran away to Argentina, where he lived for about 15 years. The Israeli Secret Service, associated with the IDF, tried to catch him. They were looking for him all over the world. But they could not find him. One day, one person received the information that there was a guy in Argentina working for a German Company. Of course, his name was not Adolf Eichmann. He had a different name: His name was Ricardo Klement. He was living in Buenos Aires in very poor circumstances. And because Eichmann stole a lot of money, they expected him to live in rich circumstances. So they were not sure if this was really him. But they found out that he was living together with the former wife of Adolf Eichmann. They thought this could be a hint that it was him. But they were not sure if it was him, because he looked different. So they placed him under observation for two months, following everything he was doing. One day this man came home with a beautiful bunch of flowers, a really expensive bunch of flowers. It was not his wife's birthday, not his child's birthday, also not his birthday. So they wanted to know why he came with these flowers. And then they found in the papers that this was the day when Adolf Eichmann married his wife. And they said, why would he spend all this money if he was not Adolf Eichmann. Then they kidnapped him in a secret operation from Argentina. They took him from the street and flew him from Argentina to Israel. In Israel, they took him to court. But before you take someone to court, there is an interrogation, and the investigator tries to find out what has happened. Eichmann was sitting in prison and was not allowed to see other people. There was an Israeli officer from the national police who was Jewish German, who had grown up in Berlin, and was one of the best interrogation officers the Israeli police had. So they assigned him to do this interrogation. His name was Avner Less. He said, "I don't want to do it because they killed all of my family." But his superiors said, "You have to do it because you know Berlin and Germany."

And now imagine you have a period of half a year when these two people meet almost every day. Eichmann knows that in the end, he will be killed. So for him, it is important to talk as long as possible, and he does not know what the other knows. So they start talking, and at the beginning, he is lying all the time, and Less tries to catch him out. There is a team of people checking Eichmann's information. Towards the end, he gets more and more real information out of Eichmann. If you imagine Eichmann's situation: He is sitting in this prison and has no contact to anybody. The only person he sees is this interrogation officer. This creates a kind of intimacy between these two people. As a human being, you need contact. You have to talk to people; you cannot be alone all of the time. They do this interrogation, and Eichmann describes how difficult it was to get the trains to get the Jews to the camps because the army also needed trains for its soldiers to send them to the front lines. So Eichmann is very proud that he managed to get these trains to bring the people to the death camps. He says, "I am not responsible for the killing. I just did the transport." A very strange logic. They met all these days. Sometimes Less feels really sick, because what the other person says is so terrible. But of course, he cannot show how much he dislikes him; as then the other person would stop talking. There was one day when Less had to go to see Eichmann, which was the birthday of his father, who was killed in Auschwitz. He is sitting there, and he is interrogating the officer who is responsible for the transport. He is full of anger and full of despair. Eichmann realizes that this day something is different. So he asks him, "Is something wrong with you?" Less says, "It is my father's birthday, and he was killed in the camps"—and Eichmann looks at him and says, "That's terrible!" It is a very interesting moment if we take this moment for real, that Eichmann—at this moment—really has sympathy for this guy whose father was killed. But he is not making the connection that he is the one responsible for the killing. That is a very theatrical moment: It is a moment full of tension, full of energy. When you experience something like this on stage, it does something with you. You start thinking: Something is happening on an emotional level and an intellectual level.

In theatre, this is what you are looking for: You are searching for something that works emotionally and intellectually. And you have to give it a form. When the interrogation was over, they put Eichmann before the court. And there he could no longer see Less. The trial against Eichmann lasted, I think, about four months. During this trial, it was the first time in Israel that there was a public discussion about the Shoah. A lot of the Jews that came to Israel did not talk about the Shoah. It is the year 1961. During the trial, there is one more meeting between Less and Eichmann in the courtroom. Before the trial, these two people always met in a small, closed room—you could say in privacy. Suddenly they are in a big courtroom: There are 600 people in the audience, international media from all around the world, film cameras—it is a major public event. One of the journalists who was there during the trial described that you could feel a link between these two people, something that you could not touch, like a strong connection. Two

people who knew a lot about each other. That is also a very theatrical moment. How can you transfer it to the stage?

They sentenced Eichmann to death. They hang him, burn him, and put his ashes in the ocean so that there is no grave, no place where you can remember him. I found this a very interesting subject for theatre. There was a transcript of this interrogation. It has 3,600 pages. It is a huge volume of paper: six books. On one part of the page, it is in German; on the other, it is in Hebrew, and Eichmann had to sign every page to authenticate the content. On 3,600 pages, you find his signature. The same signature that you find under the document that authorized the deportation of the Jews. When you read through the papers, there is a special kind of logic in his language: The logic Eichmann has is not connected to the killing. He is talking about solving problems and that he is very good at solving problems. In one part of the papers, Eichmann mentions that 1,800 Jews were deported to Auschwitz, where they were killed. But Eichmann's focus is on the problem of getting 30 wagons for transportation. He is not talking about the people. He is talking about solving the problem. You realize that Eichmann starts talking once Less enters into this kind of logic. You read more than 40 pages, whose content is about the killing of people—but you just read about solving problems. This is very interesting language, because it avoids the reality it is dealing with. So when I set up this play, I decided: This language will be at the center of the play. We will create a special place where the audience can be a part of this interrogation.

And now imagine you have a space double the size of this one [*gestures to the room*] and you have a very big table, 15 meters long, and on one side of the table sits Eichmann and on the other side of the table sits Less. And on each side of the table are 30 chairs for the audience members. So you sit together with the actors at the table. This is one space. In this space on the table, you have a microphone into which the actors speak and a camera that picks up the images of the actors.

You have a second space, where you have very small tables, and there is a lightbulb hanging from the ceiling over each of the 30 tables. Two members of the audience sit opposite each other very closely. There are no actors. There is just the sound of the interrogation that is being performed live by the actors in the first space; you just listen to its text, and you see a technician who is working with a recording machine. From the visual point of view, it is very interesting, because the movement of the wheels of this recording machine resembles train wheels. And you can make a lot of interesting sound effects just by moving these wheels. This was the second space. There is a third space, where you have three television sets. You have documentary footage from the trial on one set; on the second monitor, you have the actor playing Eichmann; and on the third monitor set, you have the actor playing Less. The audience is placed in a normal theatre situation, sitting in rows. They all watch the monitors. The only sound they have is from the documentary footage. They don't hear the actors talk, but they see original material.

We also did something very impolite: We dressed the actor who was playing Less like Eichmann. So when you just watch the surface, you see a man in a black

suit, and you think it is Eichmann in the black suit. The other guy is just wearing a pullover. If you don't pay attention to the body language, you think the guy in the black suit is Eichmann.

And now imagine that there is an audience in each of the three spaces when this play starts. You have an audience together with the actors; you have an audience together with the voice of the actors; and you have an audience together with the images of the actors. The play is structured in three sequences, in three acts. The audience will move around the building, but they will not meet. The audience is on different routes, and they go on different journeys through the play. There is one group that starts with the image. They get a lot of background information. Then they go to the next space, and suddenly they are sitting at small tables and listening to the voices of the actors while sitting opposite each other at such a small distance, and so they think of the actors as also sitting that closely opposite each other at a small table. Then they enter the third space, and suddenly they see the large table. They sit together with the actors at the table.

There is something about the human being which is very interesting: Nobody wants to sit next to the bad guy; because you want to be on the good side. But, if you don't pay attention, you think that the guy in the pullover is the good guy. When the space opens, the audience rushes to the guy with the pullover. They want to be as far away as possible from the bad guy. And when the performance starts, they realize: "Oh shit, I am sitting on the wrong side." You can see it in their body language. They start to become uncomfortable, since the actors are really so close to them that if they reached out their arms, they could touch the audience. This creates a very special kind of energy in the audience. That is one trip. The second possible journey is when you start together with the actors in the same space. Of course, this is very nice, because you are usually not so close to the actors in the theatre. Then you go to the next space and you just listen to the actors' voices, and you have to pay more attention because you only have this voice. In the last space, the voice is gone, and you see only the images of the actors. And you have all this documentary footage. The people on this route were always very disappointed because they feel like you have taken the actors away from them. Back in those days, people liked to go to the theatre because they wanted to spend time with the actors. And they were already so close to them, and suddenly, their bodies are gone. So they were unhappy. But sometimes, in theatre, you have to be unhappy. And the last group started with the voices and then got the presence of the actors, and then, in the end, they saw the documentary footage. This is the most intellectual way to experience this performance.

What was interesting was that we separated the audience into three groups. The audience is clever, so they realized that if you go on a different trip, you experience a different play. So the people who liked it wanted to see the other trips, too. They came back and saw it another time, and so they had a real encounter with the material, with the performance. You know it from yourself, if you see a show a second time, you learn different things about the performance. This is a way to train the audience. And it is very good for the box office, because people

buy another ticket. When you work with these limited crowds of 100, 120 people, you have to ensure that you sell tickets. This is not our main intention, but it is important to consider. That was the first play we did in this documentary style. It was quite successful. There were a lot of people who came, and we toured it through other cities as well. And since then we have continued to do this kind of theatre.

