

«My Father Passed away a Couple of Weeks Ago» On Boris Nikitin's *Hamlet*

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The essay delves into Boris Nikitin's *Hamlet* with Julia*n Meding, centring on the theme of mourning and its portrayal within a radical reconfiguration of the 'documentary theatre' genre. Set against the backdrop of the 'reality turn' that has seen significant growth over the past two decades, particularly in German-speaking theatrical landscapes, Nikitin's stage critically interrogates the power asymmetries inherent in documentary theatre. He introduces an artistic format that denaturalizes the concept of 'reality', presenting it as a constantly evolving horizon shaped by constructs. In doing so, he forges a form of 'queer documentary' that resonates deeply with Saidiya Hartman's notion of «critical fabulation». The essay argues for recognising fiction not as an antithesis to reality, but rather as a vital tool to dismantle dominant narratives and to initiate alternative modes of knowing and analysis. This approach invites a critical examination of the boundaries between history and imagination, exploring the potential to reconstruct scenes of subjugation without perpetuating the grammar of violence.

KEYWORDS: *documentary theatre, critical fabulation, representation of subalternity*

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to Sergio, in memoriam

There's still a dead father. Only a few scattered textual remains endure of *Hamlet* – a reflection on time, the world's disarray, psychological distress and a keenly reflective and self-reflective engagement with theatre, voiced by those who take the stage. After all, this is not solely Hamlet's prerogative. Yet, the ghost of this name, of its significance within the protocols of Western culture, lingers over Boris Nikitin's production. A name that belongs both to the dead father and to the son, persisting in the audience's imagination even when it is denied, even when the lone figure on stage steps forward and introduces themselves.

*Good evening
My name is Julia*n Meding
I am a musician and performance artist¹.*

Julia*n, not Hamlet, yet the name and the fictional identity cling to the subject like an aura, leading us to suspect that we are witnessing something more and something other than a piece of documentary theatre.

After all, Nikitin is one of the contemporary artists who have most profoundly questioned the claim to reality established by the documentary genre in theatre, probing its complicity with the ideologies and mechanisms that, through the repetition and reproduction

¹ Boris Nikitin, *Hamlet*, in *Postdramatic Dramaturgies. Resonances between Asia and Europe*, ed. by Kai Tuchmann, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2022, p. 205. All translations are by the author.

of testimony, generate an injunction to be believed, and thus a form of propaganda².

Born in Basel in 1979 to a family of Ukrainian-Slovak-French-Jewish immigrants, Nikitin trained in the cradle of German documentary theatre, the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at the University of Giessen, founded by Andrzej Wirth and Hans-Thies Lehmann. Lehmann, in particular, had made an enormous contribution to the institutionalisation and dissemination of this reality trend or postdramatic realism in Germany, both through his work at the Institute and through the publication – now internationally renowned – of *Postdramatisches Theater*³. From the 1980s onwards, the Institute became a hub for the aesthetic and linguistic renewal of 'performative theatre' and a key training ground for young directors working within this framework. Documentary theatre is part of this broader movement, standing out as one of its most enduring and widely explored expressions⁴.

Ever since his *Woyzeck* with Malte Scholz (2007), presented as a student project, it was clear that Nikitin would both torment and deconstruct the documentary genre while remaining closely engaged with it. Among other things, he pursued this vision by founding and curating a festival pointedly titled «It's The Real Thing – Basel Documentary Platform», aimed at shedding light on the various ways in which artistic construction and audience perception shape what we recognise as reality. He claims, for example, that:

what we call 'reality' is to some extent indistinguishable from 'social reality'. This is basically what we mean when we say that reality is a construct. A construct, but one that is so convincing in its appearance and in its permanent repetition that we are often inclined to naturalize it, to take it for granted, to believe it and forget its constructedness, [...]. It is, you might say, the point at which reality becomes realistic. It is the point where

2 For a critical profile of his work, see *Boris Nikitin. Das Gegenteil der Dinge*, ed. by Florian Malzacher, «Postdramatisches Theater in portraits» 6, Alexander Verlag, Berlin 2022; for the critical positioning and framework of references and collaborations of his cultural and artistic practice, see *Dokument, Fälschung, Wirklichkeit: Materialband zum Zeitgenössischen Dokumentarischen Theater*, hrsg. v. Boris Nikitin – Carena Schlewitt – Tobias Brenk, Theater der Zeit, Berlin 2014.

3 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt a.M. 1999.

4 For an examination of this form of theatre, particularly in the works of Rimini Protocoll (the group which, according to most critics, ushered in the reality trend season), see Francesco Fiorentino, *Realismo postdrammatico: 100% Karlsruhe dei Rimini Protokoll*, in *Teatro tedesco contemporaneo*, a cura di Francesco Fiorentino, «Kritik. Rivista di letteratura e critica culturale», 1 (2024), pp. 169-187.

reality and propaganda intersect in the assertion of the authentic. But where the non-fictional, the real(istic), the authentic appears as a figure of thought and a model of perception, the fake is not far away. After all, only what we accept as real can be faked⁵.

The prevailing aesthetic regime in postdramatic realism features an emphasis on documentary reality and on the identification of subjects with the protagonists of the events portrayed – who are thus granted the right to speak through their own experience. It is also strongly oriented towards the act of communication that shapes the audience's reception. In his works, Nikitin challenges this approach, in particular by staging a composition of ruptures and short circuits between fiction and reality in such a way as to irreparably undermine the claim to absorb reality into the stage. In doing so, he generates an ongoing sense of suspicion in the spectator, alongside sudden epiphanies that lead him to recognise – or to remember – how the notion of what is real stems from a system of repetitions, beliefs and persuasions.

And yet, in his *Hamlet*, this matter of the father's death instantly produces a fundamental unease in the spectator, causing their suspicion of falsification to shift and waver.

Soon after introducing themselves, Meding states:

*My father died a couple of weeks ago.
I don't actually want to talk about it on the stage because it's so private*⁶.

The opening of such an intimate, confessional space – where Meding begins with a refusal, «I don't actually want to talk about it», only to then relentlessly describe the effects of illness on their father, the humiliation of hospitalisation, the family's exhaustion, the final moments and the transformation instantly imprinted by death on the body, leading to the impossibility of cognitively processing absence – leaves the spectator with no reservations about the truthfulness of their experience. We instinctively believe that the character who says 'I' is the one who has experienced the events recounted; we have no reason to doubt it. After all, they are describing an experience that is ordinary in its horror, and they appear to be credible – especially as they have established an interaction with us by asserting indisputable truths: the declaration of their name and the explanation of certain features of their physical appearance. Before us stands a young person

⁵ Boris Nikitin, *Don't Be Yourself. Notes on the Impossibility of Documentary*, in *Post-dramatic Dramaturgies*, op. cit., pp. 183-202: 198.

⁶ Nikitin, *Hamlet*, op. cit., p. 207.

with a non-binary identity, entirely shaven (head and eyebrows alike). They are wearing a hoodie, a T-shirt, slim-fit jeans and New Balance trainers, nothing else of note, nothing to distract us from their face (magnified and multiplied on a giant screen at the back of the stage) and from their voice, which is monotonous, shrill, and petulant, the voice of a child or an old woman.

The stage is an empty, darkened boxing ring, where Meding does not perform an adaptation of Shakespeare's play but, rather, gives «Hamlet» as the title of a performance centring on questions of identity, reality and illness. The material composing their confession is a montage of autobiographical accounts, both their own and Nikitin's, which Meding retraces while placing themself in a state of radical vulnerability and solitude – tempered only by the entrance of a baroque music quartet, positioned at the edge of the ring opposite the audience. Everything conspires to turn the stage into a burning mirror, in which Julia*n is exposed, made observable, sharing their grief with us.

After such a disarming declaration, any suspicion of falsification is banished from the scene: intimacy is overexposed to the point of searing our gaze, in the video-multiplied image of Meding's sulky, slightly catatonic face. Their voice distorts it, yet at the same time sharpens our perception of what they're telling. The speaker here is laying bare a complex apparatus, demonstrating in material terms what it means to enact politics of positioning – to expose oneself to the piercing gaze of dozens of spectators as a gendered, desiring, embodied, historicised being, marked by grief, entangled in a dense web of social, economic and cultural conditions. Why should we not believe them?

1. «CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK AT THEATRE?»

Yet even before speaking of their father, Meding had warned us:

Some information before we begin:

*This is not theatre.
This is not a performance.
This not a concert.
This is not real life.
This is not reality.
And it's not the first act either⁷.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

We might see it as the performative counterpart to Magritte's *La trahison des images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*): neither the image nor the statement is the thing itself. The pipe is not there, the sign cannot replace the object, and imitation can no longer sustain or suspend our belief as spectators. According to Meding, the scene in *Hamlet* defies any univocal definition: neither theatre nor performance, neither life nor concert, and so on. Each of these negations holds true, as the performance does not align exclusively with any single category. Instead, it emerges within the indistinction created by the convergence of elements that are theatrical, performative, concert-like, real, and rooted in everyday life. No single domain fully encapsulates what unfolds on stage; rather, all contribute to enabling Meding to navigate multiple expressive registers, traverse different fields of knowledge and blur the boundaries between theory and embodiment. Above all, to wear away the boundaries between real experience, memory and fiction.

In documentary theatre, social and political reality serves as the point of reference for a form of representation that often carries a role of denunciation and collective awareness regarding conditions of violence, segregation, discrimination and racism⁸. The authors of documentary theatre collect subjective memories, verify, decipher, contextualise, and interpret them – in other words, they carry out a process of 'reification'. They do not replace or speak on behalf of others (that is, in their stead) but rather inscribe these experiences within a code – the theatrical one – of which they master the grammar. In doing so, they produce a selection, a structuring, and a dramaturgical montage within which they re-inscribe the protagonists – often marginalised figures whom the stage welcomes and allows to speak in the first person as 'experts'⁹. Thus, we come into contact

8 Documentary theatre in Germany is generally considered to be divided into three waves, featuring distinct authors and specific politico-aesthetic features. The first wave dates back to the period between 1924 and 1929 and is primarily associated with the works and teachings of Erwin Piscator. The second wave emerged between 1963 and 1970, driven by playwrights such as Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss and Heinar Kipphardt, whose works take a critical approach to Nazi history and postwar Germany. The final wave surged at the turn of the millennium and includes prominent figures such as Hans-Werner Kroesinger, She She Pop and Rimini Protokoll. These artists and collectives have worked extensively on formalising speech acts and granting stage visibility to subjects traditionally excluded or marginalised by both society and representational theatre. See, in particular, Andreas Tobler, *Kontingente Evidenzen: Über Möglichkeiten Dokumentarischen Theaters*, in *Dokument, Fälschung, Wirklichkeit*, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-163.

9 Cfr. *Experten des Alltags. Das Theater von Rimini Protokoll*, hrsg. v. Miriam Dreyse – Florian Malzacheri, Alexander Verlag, Berlin 2007.

with factory workers dismissed from their jobs, migrants who have survived massacres, postcolonial subalterns, terminally ill patients, former prisoners, and sex workers. The role of the 'expert' witness, the protagonist of the true story, in documentary representation – as in legal truth and historical reconstruction – implies a correspondence between the subject and their own identity: testimony is not given by proxy. No actor is admitted between – or even after – the event that has been truly experienced (and of which one becomes an 'expert') and the testimony given about it. In many cases, these 'experts' represent the opportunity that the stage provides to those whom Foucault famously described as 'infamous men' – subalterns, unknown subjects deprived of a voice. Theatre grants them rights that society is slow to recognise or outright denies, enables them to speak, and produces their visibility and the possibility of political experience.

This form is not unique to German theatre: consider, for instance, examples distant in time, subject, and geography, such as *Rwanda 94* – and that harrowing opening with Yolande Mukagasana, who had survived the genocide – by the Belgian collective Groupov; the work of the Italian company Kepler-452 with the factory workers who led the long occupation of GKN in *Il Capitale. Un libro che ancora non abbiamo letto*; or the documentary theatre of Argentine artist Lola Arias, who was awarded the Ibsen Prize in 2024.

Who tells the story, how it is told, who has access to the stage, how they legitimise themselves and what they bring to it, these are crucial questions on which the power to speak and to see, to remember and to reclaim, to repair and to mend may depend. Even, to some extent, the possibility of redress. Yet this power is attributed through the dramaturgical and directorial construction of those who master certain cultural tools, who rarely share with the protagonists of documentary theatre the experiences that are being staged. These 'experts' may aspire to incorporation as 'secondary associates', but creative and productive ownership remains beyond their reach.

This leads to the logic behind the suspicion underlying Nikitin's distance. The main criticism he aims at this scene and against the documentary theatre artists working with experts, witnesses, specialists or ordinary people is that «they primarily work with people who are weaker than themselves. There is an asymmetry in the distribution of power, in the knowledge of the apparatus. The authentic is not an expression of an emancipated personality – which the authentic could be – but the aesthetic manifestation of this asymmetry»¹⁰.

10 Nikitin, *Don't Be Yourself*, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

The issue of speaking out and visibility, as well as the work on sources underlying the construction of documentary theatre, has a well-known genealogy common to social and historical research. It branches out from the studies of Michel Foucault and Carlo Ginzburg but also passes through Michel de Certeau's *La prise de parole* and the symbolic and disruptive act of handing over the means of production to striking workers so they could narrate their own mobilization. In 1968, Chris Marker filmed *À bientôt, j'espère* with the workers of the Rhodiaceta textile industry in Besançon, and then stepped back, allowing them a process of self-affirmation within the work and leading to the founding of the Medvedkin collective, which would go on to film the May 1968 strikes in France. These were all research and experimental practices that exploded in the 1960s: the world was in turmoil, new subjectivities emerged on the scene, Gramsci was being revisited, concepts of subalternity and oppression were being updated, decolonial struggles multiplied and feminism and the emancipation movements of African descendants in the United States came to the fore.

The possibility of opening the field to counter-hegemonic narratives is nurtured by the awareness that the ruling classes determine the very intelligibility of discourse – the ability not only to be heard but also to be understood.

Foucault and, in a different way, Ginzburg, showed that it is indeed possible to sift through archives for the voices of the oppressed, but that these voices never leave behind free and voluntary traces. Instead, they are collected, captured or coerced – mostly in the form of confessions, depositions or testimonies. That is, in moments when they encounter power. Such is the case for accused witches on trial, inmates in asylums and subjects of medical exploration in the construction and development of biomedicalization principles and the administration of the body.

In a broader vision, the meaning of 'literature of infamy' that emerged from Foucault's research in hospital and police archives, as well as from the *lettres de cachet*, builds a sort of diagram or cartography¹¹ not only of disciplinary power but also of power's ability to use writing as a disciplinary technique. For instance, the disciplinary technique of confession, whether in pastoral, judicial, and psychiatric contexts, operates through the concept of veridiction—the establishment of a discursive and existential order that is structuring and reproducible.

11 Such is the definition given by Gilles Deleuze in his *Foucault*, Édition de Minuit, Paris 1986.

Following this line of thought, and in contrast with Foucault, Gayatri Spivak later posed the famous question: «Can the subaltern speak?»¹².

With Spivak, the power to grant speech emerges in all its profound political ambivalence: offering a space of visibility, bringing to the fore issues related to discriminated, excluded or racialized subjectivities is not a sufficient criterion for constructing a path of emancipation. On the contrary, it can have the effect of reducing individuals and their experiences to mere objects, incorporating them into a cultural apparatus – in the case of theatre, the stage – where producers and audiences master the grammars of expression, while the ‘experts’ often remain external to them. For Nikitin, this condition represents an improper occupation of another’s space in the name of a political and moral principle that becomes the justification for artistic practice. Therefore, an epistemological and aesthetic shift is necessary, one that rejects the inclusion criterion and instead calls for an analysis of the devices that produce reality or, rather, the effects of reality as material-semiotic, discursive, and corporeal fictions. For Nikitin, this can take shape through a form of queer documentary, a documentary in which certain themes from *Hamlet* coalesce, and which Meding, speaking in the first person, brings to life for us, mastering the codes of scenic expression in an independent and emancipated manner: «It is precisely this act of appropriation – Nikitin claims – that constitutes all queerness here. Perhaps this could be a definition of a queer form of documentary: A form of documentation that does not depict reality, but appropriates it in order to participate in and act upon the definition of what ‘reality’ or a ‘collective norm’ is»¹³.

12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson – Larry Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1988, pp. 271-313.

13 Nikitin, *Don't Be Yourself*, *op. cit.*, p. 199. The point was further clarified in a private conversation with Nikitin. I report his statements as follows: »: when I conceived *Hamlet*, Julia*n identified as straight and male, as ‘he’. For the conception of the work, the common idea of queerness (LGTBIQ) didn’t matter with respect to the protagonist’s identity on stage. Julia*n (at the time, Julian) and Hamlet were a ‘he’. However, he was a special ‘he’, not fulfilling the expectations and norms of a male person. That included the shaved hair and eyebrows. Obviously, this is a play with gender-norms, but also – as Julia*n/Hamlet says on stage – with norms of health. In other words: it was quite important to me to start with a stable idea of a ‘he’ (also, because of the patriarchal logic in Shakespeare’s play) that would become unstable/fluid/more complex through the and by the real time of the performance. That’s also why with respect to the concept of *Hamlet* it became a bit of a problem, when Julian decided to become Julia*n and started to identify as non-binary (which they started to do about 2-3 years after the premiere). In a way, it was the opposite movement: by its designation/clarification the fluidity got stabilised. For me, that was really a big

2. THE POSSIBILITY OF FICTION

Fact is simply fiction endorsed with state power.
Saidiya Hartman

In documentary theatre, documents are mobilised as evidence of an authenticity that legitimises the artistic operation, endowing the performance with an aura of truthfulness. According to Nikitin, it is necessary to problematise this mechanism, as reality is not a neutral and transparent entity but, instead, a construction infused with ideologies and shaped by discourses that serve to perpetuate power structures. Even the dramaturgy of confession and testimony, despite often being driven by the best intentions of intervention and support, tends to reproduce within theatre the modes and languages of a disciplinary tradition. The indeterminacy between the real and the fictional thus becomes a crucial element in resisting a political orthopaedics of knowledge and power – that is, a prescriptive and univocal principle of organizing reality.

For example, when Meding claims on stage that:

*You can try to identify with me and my story. And with this body.
 But, on the other hand, this is also a safe place.
 Because this here is not reality.
 Rather, it is an artificial situation.
 Because there's always the possibility of fiction¹⁴.*

the audience is invited to attempt an act of recognition which, however, remains profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, they are encouraged to enter a personal story but, on the other, a limit is immediately imposed: «This is not reality. Rather, it is an artificial situation». Such a polarisation creates a tension between reality and fiction, between identification and detachment, which becomes essential to understanding the nature of the theatrical experience. In this sense, theatre is not

question because it actually – at least strictly speaking – opposed a big part of what I wanted to discuss/open up with the play. Part of that problem was also, that suddenly people thought that I did cast Julia*n for this project BECAUSE they were queer and BECAUSE it was supposed to be a show about queerness. After all, the play is about the construction of reality and identity. For me, that's a downgrade and it is precisely the documentary strategy that I really reject, because – as you write – it 'objectifies' the person and turns them into a means to an end.

To put it another way: Julia*n's change of identity makes the piece less ambiguous – strictly speaking. Fortunately, the real theatrical experience is still stronger than the literal political representation».

¹⁴ Nikitin, *Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

a mere reflection of the world but a safe and artificial space where the rules of 'naturalizing' reality can be suspended and rewritten.

The personal story that Meding narrates *alongside/as* Hamlet, even when dealing with grief, trauma, psychiatric illness, depression, suicidal temptations and hospitalisation, always remains on the edge of ambiguity, so that Nikitin prevents his protagonist from being reduced to a mere ventriloquist's voice:

I use non-fictional material, but I invite the audience to be cautious. I do this because I believe that documentary or non-fictional claims should be approached with a certain amount of care. Because the document, in its unbroken gesture of showing or representing reality, harbors a structure that could be described as authoritarian¹⁵.

We must therefore recognise fiction not only as the antithesis of reality, but also as a tool through which prevailing narratives can be dismantled and alternative modes of knowledge and analysis can be inaugurated. This allows for a critique of the boundary between history and imagination and enables work on reconstructing scenes of subjugation without replicating the grammar of violence.

These themes are particularly relevant today for those engaged in stories of oppression, persecution and diaspora, ensuring that representation – both historiographic and artistic – does not reproduce the same power dynamics it seeks to denounce. In this sense, Nikitin appears to me to be practicing, through theatrical means, an approach that is extremely close to the historical-sociological work carried out by Saidiya Hartman. Through what she has defined as critical fabulation, Hartman has legitimised, starting with her seminal *Lose Your Mother*¹⁶, the use of fiction as a viable method in archival and historiographic reconstruction. Hartman's position is clear and radical: historical reality is compromised by biases and teleologies that make, for example, a reconstruction of the Middle Passage, the Atlantic crossing during which the forced transformation of self-determined African humans into enslaved Black Americans took place, impossible. The archival documentation on which academic historiography's disciplinary protocols regarding slavery are based consists exclusively of the words, numbers, estimates and calculations of those who organised and managed the terror. It is therefore riddled with countless gaps,

15 Nikitin, *Don't Be Yourself*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

16 Cf. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother. A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2007, and the development in the subsequent essay *Venus in Two Acts*, in «Small Axe», 12 (June 2008), 2, pp. 1-14.

omissions, biased interpretations and coerced confessions. Hartman intervenes through a process of fiction, inserting narrative elements into documentary reconstructions to imagine not only what *was* but also what *could have been*. In her words:

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis 'what happened when' and by exploiting the 'transparency of sources' as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe 'the resistance of the object,' if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity¹⁷.

A counter-history interwoven with fictional elements is clearly prone to accusations of illegitimacy. Hartman's decision to go beyond the limits of the archive and conventional historical sources, however, allows for the unveiling of the deep, psychic and material structures of violence that continue to shape the lives of Black communities: «History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence and archive. I wanted to write a romance that exceeded the fictions of history»¹⁸.

Such an approach is not merely an exercise in compassion or testimony, but a critical stance against prevailing narratives. The violence that annihilated millions of lives does not belong only to the past; it continues to confront communities and individuals here and now, everywhere.

This brings us into the same terrain in which Boris Nikitin operates. For him, post-dramatic realism, practiced through documentary theatre, ultimately flattens victims into a one-dimensional representation, essentialising them within a single adventure, a single experience, a single narrative. Just as Hartman does with the history of slavery, Nikitin seeks to 'defamiliarise' the aesthetic and political structures of documentary theatre, making the stage a space where the complexity of experiences and subjectivities can be fully manifested.

In *Hamlet*, this process unfolds, for example, through Meding's performance:

Julia*n has a special way of presenting his alter ego on stage – a particular way of moving on stage, a particular way of speaking, which on

17 Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the one hand has something aggressive about it, but also something ironic, unserious. Even if the content is sometimes documentary, its form of expression by Julia*n is anything but sober. To a certain extent, the document enters a kind of feverish state. All this, in turn, contrasts very strongly with the autobiographical, documentary quality of the text. It contrasts with the realism of the documentary¹⁹.

The contrasting double movement described by Nikitin is crucial in opening the connection between the civil persona of Julia*n Meding and the stage figure of Julia*n/Hamlet – a mode of ‘to be and not to be’ coinciding singularly with what Romeo Castellucci proposed with another solitary Hamlet on stage thirty years ago. In his *Hamlet, or the Vehement Exteriority of the Death of a Mollusk* (1994), as in this *Hamlet*, the union (the coming of ‘and’) against disjunction excluded the alternative between being and not being, instead opening the vertigo of indifference between being and nothingness. This led to the possibility for the stage to produce the sovereignty of the subject inhabiting it and to create, through the iterative process that constitutes performance and performatively constitutes subjects, the seeming paradox of an autobiography without subjective anchoring or the prospect of (re)composing a narrating self.

In the end, the request of Nikitin/Meding is clear, resting in the abyssal gratuity of an act of solidarity towards a story that does not concern us, towards a subject who might have invented everything, including the very event that had unsettled us from the beginning, the death of the father.

3. WHAT IS JULIA*N TO US AND WE TO JULIA*N?

What is real is only one of the more transient
and less recognizable aspects of infinite reality.

Antonin Artaud

In the areas of turbulence between reality and fiction within Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, there is a moment in the second scene of the second act that has become a radiating nucleus for theorizing the actor's craft and the affect theory²⁰. It occurs when, after

¹⁹ Nikitin, *Don't Be Yourself*, op. cit., p. 199.

²⁰ On this, see Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet oder Hekuba. Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel*, Diederichs, Düsseldorf u.a. 1956; Eva M. Dadlez, *What's Hecuba to Him?: Fictional Events and Actual Emotions*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1997; William W. Braham, *What's Hecuba to Him? On Kiesel and the Knot*, in «Assemblage»,

welcoming the company of travelling players who will later perform the 'Mousetrap' scene, Hamlet asks one of them to play the monologue about Hecuba. He says that the verses about the Trojan queen had deeply moved him when, in the past, he had witnessed that very actor's performance. The actor then begins to declaim, and Hamlet urges him on: «Go on, come to Hecuba».

Here, in tears, the actor describes the moment when Hecuba rushes madly to the place where Pyrrhus is desecrating the body of her husband, Priam. Hamlet, profoundly shaken by the emotional intensity displayed by the actor, comments aside:

Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his whole conceit
That, from her working, all the visage warmed,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,
Make mad the guilty, and appall the free,
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed
The very faculty of eyes and ears.
(II, ii, 528-554)

Hamlet, a masterful figure of 17th-century scepticism, shines a light on the moment when a fictional existence stirs true compassion – when art allows this disproportion, this abyss that opens between the present, the spectator's immediacy, and the fictionality of the represented story to be bridged by the recognition of a grief that transcends the limits of individual experience.

Unlike in reality, where the suffering of another somehow imposes upon us a response and an action, in the theatre, it comes from a

36 (1998), pp. 6-23; Mary Jo Kietzman, «*What Is Hecuba to Him or [S]he to Hecuba?*» *Lucre's Complaint and Shakespearean Poetic Agency*, in «*Modern Philology*», 97 (1999), 1, pp. 21-45; Barry Matsumoto, *Weeping for Hecuba: Why We Should Weep for Strangers*, in «*Journal of Gender, Race & Justice*», 3 (1999), pp. 677-689; Margreta de Grazia, «*Weeping for Hecuba*», in *Historicism, Psychoanalysis, and Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Carla Mazzio – Douglas Trevor, Routledge, New York-London 2000, pp. 350-375.

fictional figure inscribed in a sidereal remoteness. We, the spectators, face it, motionless and in darkness, free from judgment and expectation. The sense of sorrow and powerlessness that arises from recognising another's suffering explodes despite our full awareness that this is fiction – despite knowing that everything that could be done is already happening on stage, that the present allowing for action is already entirely occupied.

The compassion we feel – this possibility of grieving with and for a subject with whom we share nothing – «What is Hecuba to us?» – this paradoxical empathy for a character with whom we have no common time, space, or measure, designates theater, as Alan Read argues, as the last human venue²¹.

And here, in listening to and recognizing Julia*n, in lending disinterested attention – free from the morbid demand for truth – to his story, in acknowledging the affective intensity setting the stage ablaze, in accepting a detachment from the politics of identity, we ultimately find a way to think alongside and beyond the presumptions of possessive individualism, a way of taking a stance in favour of the queerness invoked by Nikitin. To conceive of solidarity in relation to an impersonal affect, one temporally defined by the duration of the performance, within the intimacy shared among strangers who have paid for a ticket, who remain, nonetheless, part of the logics of creative industry production and cultural consumption, offers an impure space to attempt a possibility of coexistence in which the common is neither appropriable, nor commodifiable, nor identitarian, nor productive. A space in which theater is truly the last human venue for practicing a collective form of political imagination, one that welcomes new subjectivities and relationships through the exposure to, and acceptance of, an unlimited vulnerability to which we are capable of responding.

Maybe we will be able to experience a moment of solidarity with each other tonight.

Is this space here tonight suitable for that?

The more I think about it, the more I realize that this here is maybe one of the last possible spaces where we can achieve this moment of creating solidarity

<starts screaming>

*I'M JUST ABOUT TO START DOING IT!
TO TURN MY DEFICITS OUTWARDS AND CLAIM SOLIDARITY!*

21 Alan Read, *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement: The Last Human Venue*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills-New York 2008.

AND THIS EVENING YOU HAVE THE CHANCE TO PRODUCE SOLI-
 DARTY AS
 WELL AND AT THE SAME TIME RECEIVE SOLIDARITY FROM THIS
 COMMUNITY
 THAT WE ARE TONIGHT AND THAT YOU HAVE PROCURED BY PUR-
 CHASING AN
 ENTRY TICKET.
 OR MAYBE BY PURCHASING A REDUCED-PRICE ENTRY TICKET!
 BECAUSE THIS ENTRY TICKET IS A CONTRACT!
 IT'S THE ENTRY TICKET TO AN EVENT, THE ENTRY TICKET TO
 ENTERTAINMENT,
 BUT IT CAN BE ALSO THE ENTRY TICKET TO A NEW FORM OF
 COMMUNITY THAT WILL CONVERGE HERE TONIGHT.
 WE DON'T NEED ANY SECRETS! WE DON'T NEED ANY PRIVACY!
 WHAT WE ARE MISSING IS SOLIDARITY²²

Note: I discovered much later – after watching the performance over and over, both in person and on video – that the story I describe here as central, the death of the father, was in fact true, but concerned Nikitin, not Meding. At the time, the alignment between biography and the speaking subject on stage must have seemed irrelevant to me, because that ordinary and desolate story also told of my own father's death.

Translation by Daniela Innocenti

²² Nikitin, *Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-216.