University of Sheffield

U. Canton

The Use of Biographical Material in Contemporary British Theatre

PhD Thesis
February 2007

Abstract

The thesis addresses the contrast between the popularity of plays with historical characters, i.e. characters that recognisably resemble historical figures, on the British stage and the lack of academic literature that deals with this issue. On the basis of such a practical observation, a working definition is established, in which the existence of such a characters, or the reflection about the process of life-writing are included, and the consequences of the use of biographical material are outlined.

A crucial effect is the establishment of a very different relationship between the world of the play and the world outside the theatre in which it is produced and received. This question is discussed in the light of different theories that deal with the idea of reference and a functional approach that concentrates on the way in which different modes of reference, such as fact or fiction, are used is suggested.

On this basis scripts and productions of biographical plays are analysed with regard to the way in which they present the relationship between themselves and the past lives they portray. In addition, comments by playwrights and practitioners are presented. The second section focuses on the reception of biographical theatre, establishing a theoretical model in which its particular features are described. It is then applied to the reactions of a small group of spectators who were interviewed about various biographical plays and to published reactions to life writing in the theatre. Finally the conclusions suggest that the questions that are raised in the particular context of biographical theatre go beyond this immediate field, as the relationship between performances and the world is of importance for all theatre. The theoretical and methodological framework that is established in this thesis could therefore contribute to other areas of theatrical research as well.

Acknowledgements

Similarly to biographies, which often focus on a single subject, PhD theses tend to be seen as the effort of a single researcher. Without the help and support of many other people, however, this thesis would not have been written and I am very grateful to all of them.

First of all I would like to thank Dr. Krieger at the Universität zu Köln, who discussed different suggestions for research proposals with me and did not tire in pointing out promising texts to me. Without his support I might not have chosen this topic. Both he and Prof. Würzbach, who supervised my MA dissertation on life writing in Pam Gems's plays, had a profound impact on my thinking and greatly helped with practical concerns such as references as well.

I would like to thank the University of Sheffield for support with my fees, Dominic Shellard for supervision in the first nine months, and staff and postgraduates of the School of English and the Graduate Research Centre for offering me a friendly, supportive environment. Equally important were the PhD students and academics with whom I could discuss my research at conferences and other events, and the practitioners, particularly Michael Frayn, Claire Tomalin and David Westhead, who shared their experiences with me in interviews and questionnaires. The participants of the interview study supported me with their enthusiasm, reliability and often surprising answers.

Special thanks are due to Steve Nicholson for being a fantastic supervisor who offered valuable support wherever and whenever it was needed.

My proofreaders had a crucial role in the elimination of any odd structures. Thanks to Charlotte Mathieson for stepping in last minute and sacrificing part of her holidays, to Katy Heady, who became much more than a colleague and who hopefully picked up many German colloquialism in return, and finally to Vivek Hajarnavis, whose enormous kindness can only be appreciated if one compares the number of pages he read with the few ones that might actually have been of any interest to him.

I am also deeply grateful to all the loved ones among family and friends who never tired from asking about my work, encouraged me and accepted significant neglect at times. With Sarah I shared PhD worries and fun for three years, finding that she is the best conference room mate, most diplomatic co-director and fellow lecturer, an excellent host in Sheffield and simply a wonderful friend!

Last but not least I would like to thank my close family.
Lieben Dank an die große Kleine, die mich inzwischen nicht nur in der Länge überholt hat, sondern auch zu meinem kritischsten und wichtigsten akademischen Diskussionspartner (und Herausforderer) geworden ist. Muchíssimas gracias a Roberto por haber hecho la diferencia en TODO durante este tiempo. Und schließlich ein lang verdientes Dankeschön an meine Eltern, die mich von der ersten Schultüte an in jedweder Weise unterstützt haben und allen Berichte, Klagen oder Erfolgen der Doktorarbeit das gleiche Interesse und ebensolche Anteilnahme und Begeisterung entgegengebracht haben wie den ersten selbstgemalten Bildern. Ohne Euch stünde auf den folgenden Seiten nichts.

The Use of Biographical Material in Contemporary British Theatre

Contents

Note

Publications in languages other than English are quoted in my own translation unless the bibliography refers to a published translation. Where translations are difficult due to idiomatic expressions in the source language I include the original words for clarification.

Throughout the thesis masculine pronouns are used as the generic form that refers to both, male and female members of a group.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is based on a simple observation: in contemporary Britain, a theatre ticket is all that is needed to catch a glimpse of the famous. While an evening with one of the increasing number of Hollywood stars who grace productions in the West End is relatively costly, other encounters are not limited to famous actors and a small number of theatres. The subsidised houses, small fringe venues, regional theatres and even touring companies, all attract their audiences with the promise of sharing a few hours with well-known personalities from different professions who have gained their fame through their artistic achievement, their political careers, through their pioneer work as women in formerly male areas of public life or through their advances in science. They include Vincent Van Gogh, Mozart and Mary Shelley, Willy Brandt and Queen Christina of Sweden, the first actresses on the London stage and the Victorian traveller Isabelle Eberhardt, Darwin, Einstein and Freud. These and other historical figures from various centuries are brought back to life as historical characters in a surprising number of plays.

The idea is hardly new, historical precedents range from Shakespeare's histories to Schiller's *Maria Stuart* and Brecht's *Das Leben des Galileo*, but the sheer quantity of plays that include a character based on a specific historical model is astonishing. Though a slow development, the abolition of censorship (1968), which gave the theatre free reign to portray any living or dead person, can be seen as an important step on the way towards such popularity. 35 years later, plays that include biographical material have a significant presence on the British stage: from the 297 productions that are reviewed in the first ten issues of *Theatre Record* in 2004, 29 featured characters that are based on a recognisable historical figure,[1] two further ones include characters that are collated from various historical figures and one presents the process of turning life-stories into theatre on stage (*Life Game*. 2004).

This proliferation of plays is countered by a surprising absence of academic attention – very few academic publications explore it further and unlike historical drama, no term such as biographical theatre has been coined. Some academics and reviewers use words such as bio-play (Meyer Dinkgräfe. 2003, 87), "biographical drama" (Spencer. 1994 and Jones. 1992) or biodrama (Bassett. 2003) to refer to a group of plays or individual examples as varied as *The Libertine, After Mrs. Rochester* and *Self Portrait*, but the lack of a unified name suggests that it has not yet been accepted as a form of theatre that is characterised by a shared element. The aim of this thesis is therefore to examine this phenomenon in more detail and to suggest a suitable framework for its discussion.

Based primarily on the initial observation that the use of historical material influences the way in which many spectators discuss these plays, compared to others in which the dramatis personae do not bear such a clear resemblance to historical figures, the premises from which this

---

[1] Cf. *Theatre* Record. vol. 24, issues 1 – 10. Although this thesis focuses on the UK, it is worth mentioning that Ryan Claycomb confirms this tendency for women's drama in the US, cf. Claycomb. 2004, 256.

study departs are kept deliberately simple. In order to avoid premature conclusions, a first working definition is therefore designed to include a broad range of plays: the notion of biographical theatre is seen to apply to all plays that include historical characters, i.e. characters that are based on clearly recognisable historical models. According to this definition, plays do not have to described exclusively as biographical. At the same time they can be seen as historical or documentary drama, yet there are differences between them which will be explored further in the following paragraphs. Neither is it an absolute category, as the emphasis on recognition points out.[2]

Starting with such a broad definition that reflects its origin in an observation about theatre practice and audience reactions, rather than academic concepts, this thesis attempts to develop a consistent framework in which the phenomenon of biographical theatre can be understood. Particularly in these early stages of academic study, the possible approaches and perspectives that could be adopted are numerous. Nevertheless, it also seems mandatory for a first approach to concentrate on the question of whether the idea of a biographical tradition of performance is appropriate. In other words, it has to be examined whether the use of life-writing leads to differences between these and other plays, and the chosen approach should provide a basis on which these questions can be answered. In a first step towards such a distinction, previous publications about this and related fields are presented and their contributions to an understanding of this phenomenon are evaluated.

Other Publications about Biographical Theatre

Although many plays with historical characters are the subject of scholarly discussions, this is rarely directed at their use of biographical material and it often takes place in the context of other questions; rarely are they seen as a group with shared key characteristics. Where they are treated as such, biographical aspects are often discussed in conjunction with other issues, even in the only monographs about life-writing on stage, i.e. *Fiktionale Biographien* and in *Das zeitgenössische britische Künstlerdrama*.[3] Published in German, these books are not accessible to many English speaking scholars, leaving them with no more than approximately a dozen articles and a few chapters in monographs on British history plays, as well as Sarah Rudolph's dissertation on the use of women's lives in Pam Gem's work, which is difficult to obtain in the UK.

Even though the articles contain some interesting observations about life-writing in the theatre, a major problem is again related to quantity: most of them focus on a small number of plays, ranging from one (Reitz. 1999, Moog Grünewald. 1991 and Mergenthal.1999) or two (Huber and Middeke 1995) to a maximum of four (Kramer. 1998). In a number of other articles

---

[2] This aspect is discussed further in chapter 2, where the idea of a functional analysis is developed.
[3] Kramer. 2000a. *Fictional Biographies: (Re-) Visions and (Re-) Constructions of Women's Lives in Plays by British Women Playwrights since 1970* and Schaff. 1992. *Contemporary British Plays about Artists.*

biographical plays are discussed in connection with different forms of biography, as for example in Christopher Innes's article that compares McKenna's novel and Bond's play about the poet John Clare.[4] As a result, the particular characteristics of theatrical biography are not discussed. Other texts include intertextual characters, as well as those based on historical figures,[5] thus avoiding the question of reference. A comparison of a larger number of plays with historical characters can therefore only be found in the monographs introduced above. This, and the combination of questions about life-writing with other aspects in many of these publications such as the figure of the artist (Schaff. 1992, Berger. 1985, Meyer Dinkgräfe. 2003), women (Kramer. 1998 and 2000b) or a particular period of time (Huber and Middeke. 1999), distract their interest from more general and fundamental questions regarding biographical theatre.

In spite of these restrictions, some of the texts offer helpful definitions of biographical theatre, often in connection with the idea that it is a sub-genre of historical drama, distinguished through its emphasis on an individual rather than characters who are "representative of [their] life and times" (Huber and Middeke. 1995, 135). A similar understanding is expressed implicitly in Palmer. 1998 through the dedication of a chapter to biographical drama and explicitly in Kramer and Schaff (Kramer. 2000b, 2; Schaff. 1992, 19). Interestingly, the first instance in which it is regarded as a specific group of plays can be found in Weissman's complaint about the number of plays about famous figures on the American stage, an article that stands out more for accusing these plays for lack of imagination than its interest in the phenomenon (cf. Weissman. 1959/60).

Topics of Discussion in Previous Publications

Though often limited in their scope, many of these articles still offer some insight into the variety of aspects that can be discussed in the context of life-writing in the theatre. One of the central ones is the referentiality of biographical theatre and the way in which it is influenced by the use of a historical character. Berger situates these plays in "a field opened up between the two poles of historical authenticity and poetic fictionality",[6] and others reflect his concern when they argue that the theatre allows the presentation of elements that go beyond the idea of historical referentiality (cf. Kramer. 1998, 70 – 1 and Innes. 1999, 199).

Through the nature of its reference to the world, some scholars also argue that biographical theatre cannot be understood in isolation. Innes, for example, integrates other texts on the poet John Clare into his article (Innes. 1999), suggesting that it can only be examined in the context other discourses that deal with the referentiality of life stories or with the lives of individual

---

[4] Innes. 1999; Bond. 1987 [1980] and McKenna, John. 1993.
[5] Cf. Neumeier. 1991, who includes Lochhead's play about Mary Shelley, Gems's take on Queen Kristina of Sweden, and a range of historical women in *Top Girls*, as well as intertextual characters from painting or literature in *Top Girls* and *Aurora Leigh*.
[6] Berger. 1985, 217; cf. also Schaff. 1992, 29 who describes an unavoidable "interplay of fact and fiction."

historical figures. Several publications follow this idea and present key texts about referentiality in historiography and other areas of thought in their publications. Stephanie Kramer, for example, follows the hypothesis that objectivity as the highest ideal in historiography has been lost through the work of writers such as Collingwood, White and Danto (cf. Kramer. 2000a, 31-2), and Huber and Middeke sketch the importance of postmodernism for biographical writing. Likewise, theatrical traditions are presented,[7] but both of these areas could be explored more thoroughly in a general introduction to the topic. Similarly, more attention could be paid to the audience, as it can be assumed that these discourses have an impact both on the producers and the recipients of biographical plays. Many authors acknowledge their importance implicitly, and Kramer and Schaff even confirm it directly (Kramer. 2000a, 57; Schaff. 1992, 54), yet none of them pursues this aspect further in their discussion of the specific plays.

The interest in theoretical influences on life-writing for the stage is coupled with the observation that the reflection on them is also increasingly important in the plays themselves. Stephanie Kramer includes a number of plays that present and discuss the process of life-writing on stage or reflect on it through structural devices. She describes these dramatic reflections on their own status as biography as 'meta-biography', a term that follows Ansgar Nünning's extended definition of the historical novel in which meta-history is included (cf. Kramer. 2000a, 88). Other authors follow her inclusive definition (cf. for example Innes. 1999 or Huber and Middeke. 1999), showing that this position has become prevalent in academic discussion. At the same time, the number of plays with metabiographical elements has increased significantly, leading to a rare agreement between practice and theories in this field. On this basis meta-biographical plays, which present the process of life-writing, are seen as part of the idea of biographical theatre in this thesis as well.

The articles and monographs presented here also discuss a range of other aspects. Some of them can be related to the biographical subject, putting "the traditions which define identity" (Huber and Middeke. 1999, 2; cf. also Berger. 1985, 222) into question, others explore its double time structure, oriented towards both past and present (Huber and Middeke. 1999, 6) or its impact on contemporary society.[8] The existing literature on biographical theatre thus shows the extraordinary variety of approaches to the phenomenon, but its clear emphasis on referentiality suggests that this is an essential aspect that has to be examined further in order to gain a more detailed understanding of the use of life-writing in plays.

Differences to these Texts

The existing texts on biographical theatre thus inspire a new approach to the field through their emphasis on an important topic. At the same time, their shortcomings can point towards other

---

[7] Cf. for example Huber and Middeke. 1995, 135 and Innes. 1999, 187.
[8] Plath Helle. 1989, 196 shows how it can provide role models for contemporary women artists.

important aspects that have been neglected so far. Paradoxically, the variety of aspects discussed in these texts also constitutes one of their major weaknesses, as it does not allow concentration on the defining elements of biographical theatre. In the texts that concentrate exclusively on the presentation of historical artist characters, emphasis is often laid on intertextuality and concerns related to the role of the artist. Schaff, for example, touches only relatively briefly on the references to history and its importance for the recipient's expectations. Instead she devotes the majority of her book to the way in which the artists' work is integrated into the plays and on the concepts of artistic creation that are illustrated in them. Similarly, Berger focuses primarily on the debunking of famous writers and composers and the consequences these positions have for contemporary concepts of the artist – for him biography is just one way, among many, in which their role can be examined. Rather than examining the use of historical figures, these plays thus concentrate on artist characters that can happen to be historical.

The same danger can be found in other publications that limit themselves to a particular group of biographical subjects. In those that deal exclusively with women's biography in drama, such as Stephanie Kramer's book and articles, as well as Mergenthal. 1999, feminist thought is given more emphasis than life-writing. Rather than analysing the effect of historical material on the play, its effect on other discourses about the role of women is explored. Even though all of these combinations of issues are very interesting, and may even do better justice to the individual plays, an introduction to the phenomenon of biographical theatre should avoid these distractions from its main questions and concentrate exclusively on the elements that are specific to these plays.

The two longer studies by Kramer and Schaff can be seen to make a step towards such a framework in which the phenomenon of biographical theatre is described, albeit one that can be improved. In addition to the distraction from life-writing introduced by a strong emphasis on feminist thought in Kramer's text, her objective of creating a typology leads to certain problems. Although she admits herself that there are no clear-cut boundaries between the various categories of biographical drama which she establishes (cf. Kramer. 2000a, 62), the emphasis on classification means that her book offers a good insight into different forms, but cannot explain why biographical theatre is different, and in which respects it is distinguished from other plays. Her groups are also based on very different criteria, ranging from the relationship between them and earlier versions of a life to the use of meta-biography and formal aspects of the presentation. Although she establishes these criteria as relevant aspects of the plays, she does not explore them in greater depth, nor does she formulate possible connections between them. In the context of the introduction of her first category, that of thematic revisions of women's lives, for example, she brings up the idea of theatrical illusion, but dedicates less than two pages to it before applying it to individual plays (cf. Kramer. 2000a, 118-9). An

approach that is interested in the specific characteristics of plays with historical characters, on the other hand, will have to spend more thought on such crucial elements in order to delineate clearly why these plays are distinguished from those without such a clear and specific reference to the world outside the theatre. A similar tendency towards description and categorisation rather than explanation can be observed in Schaff. 1992.

In addition, both of them share a surprising lack of interest in theatre as a performing art. Kramer acknowledges the plays' potential for performance and explains her concentration on written scripts with pragmatic reasons (Kramer, 2000a, 8 and 14), but Schaff's consistent reduction of drama to a textual form is documented throughout her book through her choice of words: she refers exclusively to the readers of plays – and, in a different context even excludes performing artists from the group of suitable biographees, as there is no "concrete tangible work" that can be included in the play (Schaff. 1992, 23). Finally, Kramer shares the limitation of many articles in their recourse to related discourses, as she only includes a very small selection of texts that deal with the problem of reconstruction and historical or biographical authenticity.[9] While her discussion of previous publications about biographical theatre is extensive, her review of neighbouring disciplines is restricted to three major voices on the concept of objectivity. Her explanation that clearly invented elements are not marked due to the disappearance of a strict standard of authenticity in historiography cannot explain why these plays are still seen to be different.

This short review of previous publications on biographical theatre thus leads to a number of important additions to the basic definition, which was based on the observation of theatrical practice. First and foremost, it is extended to meta-biographical theatre, as this form is often used on stage and is also increasingly recognised academically. Secondly, the approach adopted in this thesis will concentrate entirely on a small number of key aspects of biographical plays, leaving aside other valuable issues in order to explore the specific nature of this particular phenomenon in detail. It is also focused primarily on the way in which these plays work and on the question of why they are different, as an exhaustive description and typology of its different forms is already established in Kramer. 2000a. Finally, the great interest of many secondary works in the plays' referentiality, or in other words the relationship of reference between the play and the past, suggests that this is a crucial aspect. This is also reflected in our working definition, which distinguishes biographical theatre according to the existence of a historical character, i.e. a character that has its origin in a specific historical figure from the life world – a borrowing that is likely to provoke a change in the relationship between the two.

Ideally, the referentiality of plays that use (meta-) biographical material would be explored in a range of different theatrical forms, including collectively devised pieces and plays that do not have a script. In concession to the availability of the documentation of biographical performances, however, the focus here is put up on script-based theatre that is written by a

---

[9] In Schaff this aspect is neglected entirely.

maximum of two authors. The only exception is *Thatcher – the Musical!* which was collectively devised by Foursight Theatre. In comparison to previous publications, the mere inclusion of the productions of these plays is still a step forwards, but it can be hoped that this pragmatically based restriction is overcome in further research.

Literature on Related Genres

In the previous section, the discussion of earlier publications on biographical plays is used as a source of suggestions for a new framework in which this phenomenon can be discussed. Due to their limited number, however, it is important to consult literature on related genres in order to find further support for such a new approach. Its classification as a sub-genre of historical drama (cf. above) shows that the similarities between them are often considered to be far reaching, and the same impression is conveyed by the lack of a clear distinction between the two in the work of several scholars. Niloufer Harben, for instance, includes plays with historical characters in her discussion of history plays (cf. Harben. 1988) and Hildegard Hammerschmidt sees the historicity of characters as a possible, though not necessary, characteristic of historical drama (Hammerschmidt. 1972, 11). While a comparison of the key aspects that are discussed in the context of historical theatre can therefore contribute to a discussion of biographical plays, it can also lead to a clearer differentiation between the two, and hence to a more refined definition of biographical theatre.

<u>Historical Drama</u>

Tan declares in his thesis on the *Stylistics of Drama* that "an ongoing conversation between the fictional text and the 'real world'" (Tan. 1989) is a defining characteristic of all fictional texts, but the issue of referentiality is of particular importance in the context of historical theatre, as many texts try to define the genre by a specific relationship between the fictional world and that outside the theatre. Lindenberger observes that the discussion about a "work's closeness to or independence from its sources", found in most secondary literature on the topic, reveals that "we are thinking within a framework based on a play's relationship to the external historical reality it purports to imitate" (Lindenberger. 1975, 3), and other publications confirm this approach. A small number of authors try to describe a clearly limited area within this referentiality where "a serious concern for historical truth or historical issues" (Harben. 1988, 18) justifies their definition as historical theatre, others use it as a basis for the classification of different sub-genres (cf. Berninger. 2002, 40 and Berninger. 2006). Most scholars, however, do not set specific limits to the referentiality in historical drama, but merely see the existence of a certain degree of hybridity that results from its place between the poles of "fictional or

allegorical or [...] historical accuracy[10] as one of its defining features. In the same way as biographical elements, a reference to history is thus understood as the basis for a "tacit claim to be engaging directly with reality" (Harben. 1988, 253).

In many publications, the concern with referentiality and the ensuing hybrid nature attributed to the genre is expressed through the affirmation that, on the one hand, theatre has its own kind of truth, whereas on the other, there are limitations to the freedom with which historically inspired material can be presented. Although "the playwright's truth" is seen to be an "imaginative" (Harben. 1988, 15) or "higher truth" (Wikander. 1986, 2), the same authors see it as imperative that history plays avoid using elements that "reveal an ignorance or indifference to the facts" (Harben. 1988, 19). The freedom to pursue a higher truth and to "rearrange, interpolate and invent" is therefore seen to be curbed by the "limit of violating accepted fact or losing credibility" (Palmer. 1998, 8). The degree to which the creation of such an alternative truth is restricted differs considerably from one scholar to another. Peacock, for example, states that "the requirement of historical factuality" applies to "either, or both, character and event" (Peacock. 1991, 5), whereas Harben concedes that a "play can be centred on historical issues rather than actual characters or occurrences and surely this is a kind of history play which a definition should be flexible enough to include" (Harben. 1988, 14). She also declares that the adherence to "accepted fact" does not exclude "minor alterations such as transpositions of time and place, the telescoping of events and imposing of artistic form and movement which are legitimate dramatic devices" (Harben. 1988, 5), a differentiation that brings up the question of how she distinguishes between legitimate minor and unwanted major changes. Although many scholars share Harben's impression that some ways of dealing with historical material are better justified than others, none of them provides a detailed description of the difference between legitimate and unacceptable changes, nor do they give any reason for this distinction. While publications on historical theatre thus confirm that referentiality is an essential issue for the discussion of plays that purport to be related to the past, the reasons and unwritten rules behind its creation remain to be examined.

Nonetheless, these texts can suggest a way towards a more detailed description of this concept and its origins, as publications on historical theatre often refer to other discourses that deal with the relationship between historical writing and the past. Breuer states that "every interpretative community produces structures that determine the perception of the past and the way in which it is communicated in the relevant texts and genres" (Breuer. 2004, 52). Historical theatre is therefore considered to be dependent on the concept of history that prevails in the cultural context where it is produced (cf. also Berninger. 2002, 38) and, as a result, many scholars

---

[10] Rokem. 2000, 7; cf. also Schlicht. 1989, 8: "Theatre and historiography are probably only separated by a gradual difference. The first case is dominated by a documentary principle, the second by a fictional one."

include a discussion of some of these concepts in their work. These are more detailed than those in literature on biographical plays, but many of them still simplify the issues excessively by relying nearly exclusively on the opinion of one historian,[11] or by reducing the complexity of historiographical theory into a simple opposition of old and new history (Palmer. 1998). Others concentrate mainly on the perception of few historical events, such as the French Revolution and the Shoa (Rokem. 2000), or on the way in which a small number of playwrights use existing concepts of historiography (Wikander. 1986). Just like the texts on biographical drama, literature on historical theatre supports the suggested approach of describing the relationship to the past further with the help of other texts on retellings of the past, but again, no previous text could offer an exhaustive discussion whose results could be used directly for a discussion of biographical theatre.

Nevertheless, some publications introduce interesting concepts or ideas that could be developed in such a detailed description of referentiality in biographical theatre. Breuer and Lindenberger direct our attention to "the way that readers and audiences experience what they take to be literature and reality" (Lindenberger. 1975, x), and the discourses that "determine the general idea of what can be regarded as historical and authentic, irrespective of the correctness of such an idea" (Breuer. 2004, 76). This emphasis on the function of these concepts rather than their absolute ontological value could be expanded in a framework for the discussion of biographical theatre if it is further supported by other theoretical approaches. With respect to the concepts that shape the creation and perception of biographical theatre, it might also be of interest to pursue Freddie Rokem's idea of a mode called "as if" in which performance becomes historiography "'as if' the real and the discourse were being joined" (Rokem. 2000, 196). This could be seen as an additional mode of perception that complements the traditional concepts of fact and fiction, a concept that could be helpful in the discussion of biographical theatre. Likewise, the focus on the particular conditions under which it is evoked in the theatre, i.e. the presence of the human bodies that become the "connecting link between here and now and past" (Rokem. 2000, 12), between their physical reality and the imagined reality of the fictional story created by them, could be essential to a discussion of biographical theatre.

The three-dimensional, live presentation of historical figures by actors also offers a good basis for a distinction between biographical and historical theatre. Although the latter uses the same methods of presentation, its reference does not have the same degree of specificity. In biographical theatre, particular persons from the past are re-enacted; here the live actors incorporate the element that creates the relationship between the two worlds. In plays without such a concrete historical character on the other hand, the link between the two remains vaguer and it can be assumed that the concreteness and vividness of this connection created by the body of the actor has an effect on the production and the reception of biographical theatre. Hence, the effect of historical characters on theatrical processes can in itself be the focus of the discussion,

---

[11] Cf. Harben. 1988, who relies exclusively on Elton. 1967.

thus providing a clear differentiation between history plays in general and biographical theatre as a specific sub-group.

Documentary Theatre and Other Media

Another phenomenon that is closely related to biographical theatre is documentary drama. In the context of performances on stage, this term is often used for plays that are "characterized by a central or exclusive reliance on actual rather than imaginary events, on dialogue, song and / or visual materials (photographs, films, pictorial documents) 'found' in the historical record or gathered by the playwright / researcher and by a disposition to set individual behaviour in an articulated political and / or social context" (Favorini. 1995, xx). While most documentary plays attribute the original speeches to the historical figures who are also represented on stage, most biographical plays cannot rely on the wealth of documentation needed in order to create a performance that is entirely based on authentic speeches. Moreover, this restriction cannot be easily combined with the emphasis on private rather than public aspects of famous lives that has become prevalent in biography during the twentieth century. Therefore, most biographical plays do not establish a referentiality that is comparable to that of documentary ones. While the use of original speeches in some of the plays examined in this thesis is pointed out, it nevertheless concentrates primarily on a description of the link established by historical characters. Favorini also observes that the differences in the material used mean that documentary theatre is related more closely to oral rather than written history (Favorini. 1995, xii). Although most biographical plays refer mainly to written sources, his suggestion seems worth pursuing, as the form of theatrical presentation connects biographical drama to this genre as well.

The term docu-drama is equally applied for television plays "that depict [...] the life of a historical person, past or present" (Custen. 1999a, 22). Although Rosenthal attributes a similarly close relationship between these pieces and the life world of their viewers, again introduced by historical characters (Rosenthal. 1999. xv), their occurrence in a different medium means that they are not included in this thesis. Biographical films, often referred to as bio-pics,[12] are excluded for the same reason.

The review of previous publications thus clearly supports an approach that concentrates on the issue of referentiality and the question in how far the existence of historical characters in these plays influences their relationship to our life world. Yet, it also shows that in previous work no coherent framework has been developed that describes these consequences without resorting to terminology and concepts that have been contested in theoretical writing, such as fact and the idea of historical accuracy (cf. chapter 2). In search for such a methodology, it is thus necessary to review theories in related fields in order to develop a framework for analysis that make possible such concentration on questions related to theatrical representation of our shared life

---

[12] Cf. for example, *Biography*. 23 (1) which is entirely dedicated to this genre.

world. Rather than relying entirely on existing approaches to theatre, it is necessary to develop a new one that can address the specific problems related to the discussion of this genre.

At the same time the literature review contributes strongly to the argument that a working definition of biographical theatre should include productions that contain meta-biographical reflection. This could not only do justice to the growing level of self-reflexivity in dramatic writing, as observed in some of these publications, it could also reflect many of the theoretical positions that influence our concept of writing and representing the past. In this way, biographical theatre itself could be seen to search actively for a new way of presenting such references. Our working definition of biographical theatre can therefore be confirmed to include the presentation of past lives or reflection on this process on a meta-level.

Such a strong emphasis on a one outstanding issue, i.e. reference inevitably leads to the neglect of other aspects of biographical theatre that could be explored. While it is deplorable to leave aside such fascinating aspects as, for example, the choice of biographical subjects, their impact on a play's potential to attract audiences, or their role among various discourses on a particular historical character, the limitation to one defining aspect of theatrical biography means that this thesis can provide a thorough description of an essential element that is shared by all the plays included in our definition, thus providing a good basis for further research. Developing an approach that can point out why the use of biographical material changes the way in which plays are created and perceived, I would like to show why this phenomenon needs further consideration and to provide a framework in which this can take place. At the same time, the approach developed in this context contributes a new tool to theatrical analysis that facilitates the analysis of its relationship to our everyday world, using this previously neglected form of theatre as an example.

Outline of the Approach and the Structure of this Thesis

In accordance with the observation about the interdependence of historical and biographical theatre and other discourses about the ways in which we remember and re-write the past, theatre is regarded as one kind of cultural practice that influences and is influenced by other ones. As such it cannot be seen independently from the culture that surrounds it, nor from the people who create and receive it. William Sauter describes his approach as centred on communication, on "what is going on between stage and auditorium, and the circumstances in which this communication is taking place" (Sauter. 2000, 2), and it is this process and the factors that influence it that have to be explored in the context of biographical theatre. The interdependence between the two sides means that "the meaning of a performance is created by the performers and the spectators together, in a joint act of understanding" (Sauter. 2000, 2), an understanding that is influenced by their familiarity with other discourses. In order to explore both sides of this

process, the thesis is divided into two sections that concentrate on the process of theatrical production and reception, and their circumstances respectively.

The first section begins with an introduction to the discursive context of these plays. Although this might comprise observations about the many different ways in which we deal with the past,[13] it is restricted mainly to academic writing due to practical reasons. This restriction to the opinion of historians as those who take a professional interest in these questions might seem to contradict the fact that the concept of biographical theatre is taken from practical observation rather than theoretical concepts. In order to avoid too many distractions from the focus of this study, however, it relies to these texts on the writing of the past and past lives as the most clearly formulated and reflected opinions on this matter. First, different ways in which these scholars describe the way in which historical and biographical discourses can be related to the past are presented, together with thoughts on the ways in which they can be influenced by those who produce these discourses. An enquiry into their understanding of the biographical subject complements the research into the issue of referentiality, as it focuses on the element that is central to the establishment of a particular form of reference: the historical character. The resulting contradiction between postmodern approaches that try to abandon notions such as fact and fiction, and the observation that these concepts are not only important in more traditional concepts of historiography, but also in my everyday experience with biographical theatre, is resolved with the introduction of a functional approach.

Before this is applied to specific biographical plays, chapter 3 presents a short introduction to general differences between life-writing in prose and for the stage. Such a transfer of theories is justified by their similar referentiality, but the structural differences between the two forms lead to a number of unavoidable distinctions. Rather than discussing these throughout the next chapters, the consequences of different generic conventions, collective vs. individual creation and reception and the mode of direct presentation in theatre are outlined systematically before entering into the discussion of individual plays.

Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 8 present material from individual biographical plays, trying to analyse the understanding of biography conveyed by them. Despite the work on specific plays, however, the focus is placed on their comparison rather than the exhaustive analysis of every individual example. On the theoretical basis developed in chapters 2 and 3, this discussion outlines structural, formal and thematic concerns that are related to the use of biographical material, thus formulating a first description of the supertext (cf. Custen. 1999a, 20) that is created by the wealth and variety of biographical plays, and to which every individual example can be compared.

---

[13] A fascinating introduction to this field can be Lowenthal. 1985, who discusses our relationship with the past and draws not just on the writing and activities of historians, but on a range of different practices, taken from every area of life in which the past plays a part.

In order to allow the discussion of representative examples of different aspects in some detail, the number of plays included in the discussion has to be limited as well. The first criteria for such a selection are their potential to illustrate a particular point and their representative value. Nonetheless, practical concerns, such as the availability of productions or documentation about them, or in some cases even of printed texts, play a role as well. As a result, the popular format of biographical one-man shows is relatively underrepresented, as they are rarely published, or even reviewed, and hardly any other documentation of the productions is kept.[14] While the examples discussed here can therefore be seen as particularly interesting or representative, this does not mean that it provides an exhaustive list of all the plays that fulfil these criteria.

Another concession to practicality is the separate discussion of published playtexts and individual productions of these. As this thesis focuses on script-based theatre (cf. above), the playwrights and the texts they produce can be seen as the (temporary) first step in the act of creation that eventually leads to a complete theatrical production. It is clearly not to be understood as a contribution to the, often heated, debates about the role of text in theatre, or even less as an arguments in favour of its primacy. Its purpose is solely to disentangle the different influences on a production in order to consider separately the contributions to an overall concept of biography made by various practitioners. Beginning with a consideration of biographical play texts without (chapter 4) and with meta-biographical elements (chapter 5), the concepts presented in the introduction to relevant theories are explored in the context of individual plays. Chapter 6 concludes the analysis of scripts, comparing the results concerning referentiality and the role of the biographical subject in the plays with the opinions of playwrights on these matters. It thus closes the section on published playtexts with an emphasis on the way in which practitioners make use of life-writing, an essential aspect of the functional analysis that is undertaken here.

In the chapters on individual productions (chapters 7 and 8), the comments of practitioners are integrated into the descriptive and analytical part of the text. This is made possible by the organisation of these sections around the different contributions made by members of the production team. Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of the presentation of historical characters and the way in which it can be shaped by actors and costume designers. In a second part, the surroundings created by stage, light and sound designers are discussed. In the following, this description of various elements of the performance itself is extended to include accompanying texts. Programmes are not, strictly speaking, integral to the performance, but they are often read in conjunction with it, and the presentation of material on the historical figures that are represented in the production can have an impact on the way in which the plays' relationship to the life world is interpreted. Chapter 8 continues with a section in which observations from the previous chapters are brought together. In relation to the role of the director, possible patterns

---

[14] These are particularly popular at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. In the Fringe catalogue for 2004 alone, 13 performances are advertised as biographical one-man shows, many others are presented as containing biographical references, although the number of performers is not clearly specified.

for the interaction between the individual elements are outlined and their combined effect on the plays' referentiality is discussed.

Although efforts are made to connect the analysis of biographical plays to a wide range of related discourses, and the practitioners' own points of view have been included wherever possible, it is unavoidable that the interpretation is based mainly on the perception of a single, specialist spectator, i.e. myself. In a functional approach, however, the way in which the audience receives a play is vital for its classification as biographical – if the reference to a past life is not perceived, it will be perceived in the same way as any other play. Just as "the agreement between performer and spectator [...] is the *sine qua non* of theatre, the necessary condition" (Martin and Sauter. 1995, 10), the specific referentiality of biographical theatre has to be created by a performer who establishes it on purpose and a spectator who recognises it. The second section therefore concentrates on the consequences of biographical material on reception.

Based on publications by Willmar Sauter and Patrice Pavis, a model of theatrical communication is developed in chapter 9. Outlining the major steps in the reception process, it allows a more detailed description of the impact of biographical material, as it can now be located at specific instances of the model. While this model can explain why the recognition of biographical material leads to the assumption that a play is related to the world outside the theatre in a way that differs from plays without historical characters, it does not show that this is true for spectators other than the one who established the model. Williams's observation that the lack of research into cinematic reception makes it "eas[y] to make wild assertions" (Williams. 1980, 2) about it still reflects the situation in theatre studies. The central role of the audience in the context of biographical theatre, however, requires more than elaborate guesswork. Therefore an empirical study is conducted in order to reveal whether the reactions of other audience members can confirm the hypothesis established in chapter 9. Chapter 10 presents the methodology of the study, which consists of a series of interviews with students before and after their theatre visits, followed by an analysis of their reactions that compare their views to the theoretical model. Although the small number of recipients does not allow representative results, the interviews provide further ground for the assumptions made in earlier chapters about the impact of historical characters on the reception process. Chapter 11, finally, is dedicated to the discussion of reviews and other published comments about a number of productions, as they can offer further insight into the reception of plays by critics. As well as confirming the previous results, the sense of controversy over some plays that are discussed in these articles suggests that further aspects, such as ethical concerns, could have to be included in future analyses. The conclusion in Chapter 12 thus fulfils a double function: on the one hand, it sums up the insight that has been gained in the previous chapters into the role of life-writing on the stage. On the other hand it continues the debate by outlining ways in which these results can be

used in future research into biographical theatre and how the theoretical approach that has been developed can be extended to other plays as well. This emphasis on further research in the conclusions also reflects the idea that the field of biographical theatre remains relatively unexplored, and that this thesis can only provide a first framework in which it can be discussed.

Additional Material

The material presented in the thesis is supported by appendices. Appendix 1 contains a plot summary of the plays discussed in the thesis. As some of them are not very well-known, such a short description of the way in which biographical material is used in them can provide a background to the analysis presented in the plays where individual readers are not familiar with a play, while it does not interrupt the main text where readers do not feel the need for further information. A similar appendix (2) is provided with short descriptions of the productions that are discussed, particularly those that are included in the interview study. While some comments on individual performances might stand on their own, the additional material can place them in further context where needed. Moreover, it states whether I had the chance to visit a production, or whether I had to rely on documents such as videos, pictures or reviews, thus clarifying the basis for my observations. Appendices 3 to 5 support the analysis of the interview study. The first of them includes the structures I prepared for every interview. Although the actual conversations often developed in different order, I took great care to assure that all the aspects in these guidelines were mentioned – they therefore present a summary of the minimum issues that were covered in each interview. Generally, the interviews conducted before the productions tend to follow the prepared structure more closely, as they are based on the gradual introduction of marketing material for the shows. The information provided in both text and images in this material is often the sole basis on which the participants build their expectations, and it therefore seems sufficiently important to include them in appendix 4. The last appendix presents selected excerpts from the interview transcripts. Due to their length they cannot be included in their entirety of approximately 200 pages, but the selected paragraphs show the passages that are quoted in the analysis (highlighted in bold print) in their original context.

Terminological Questions

This outline of the issues discussed in this thesis shows that it often touches on theoretically and terminologically difficult, if not dangerous, ground. While I am very conscious of the fact that concepts such as "reality", "fact" or "fiction" are highly problematic or even entirely outdated in some theoretical frameworks, it seems impossible to discuss the difference between plays with and without historical figures without making any reference to related concepts. Though many scholars, including myself, might agree on their inappropriateness as absolute categories, most spectators nevertheless seem to perceive some distinction between plays with and without biographical material that can be formulated along the lines of the positivist dichotomy of fact

and fiction. While the conceptual problems that cause these terminological difficulties are discussed in more detail in later chapters, I would like to comment shortly on the terms used. Rather than adhering to the word "reality", I prefer to distinguish between the world outside the theatre in which the spectators live, or in Willmar Sauter's words, their life world, and the world that is created on stage, the world of the play. This distinction seems to apply to the experience of most adult theatre audiences[15] without imposing any view on the way in which they perceive one or another as more or less "real". Although I use the idea of a life world in the singular, I am conscious that this concept differs from one spectator to another - there may even be several different life worlds for the same person - but in order to avoid further complication it is treated here as a generic word for all the different concepts that might be seen as the contrast to the theatrical world on stage. With these terms, the phenomenon of historical figures might then be described as the creation of a stage character that has a clearly recognisable model in the life world.

This definition, however, raises another conceptual concern: how is the word "recognisable" defined? While the answer to this question can only be given definitely with regard to each individual audience member, I use the notion of a British audience that has recourse to roughly similar cultural background knowledge at the time of the first production in order to estimate the potential impact of biographical material. Other discourses about a historical character and their popularity are taken into account, but I am conscious that the assumptions made about the biographical nature of individual elements of a performance cannot be generalised and do not apply universally.

Finally, the notion of realism is too complex to be used without further comment. The adoption of extra- and intra-theatricality as an alternative concept that avoids many of the potential problems related to the term is explained in more detail at the beginning of chapter 4.[16] Further terminological questions are discussed in the context in which they arise, particularly in the following chapter where different discourses about the relationship between the past and its re-telling are discussed.

---

[15] In contrast to many children who fear that the actors might really be "hurt" when they suffer injuries on stage, adults have acquired this distinction.

[16] Despite being conscious of the complexity of the term theatricality, to which entire monographs are dedicated such as Davies and Postlewait. 2003, I have chosen to use it in Sauter's specific definition.

Chapter 2: Writing the Past - Theoretical Background

Introduction

If either the presence of a recognisable subject of biography, or the portrayal of the search for the life story of such a subject is seen as the defining feature of biographical theatre, a description of these elements is paramount. Rather than beginning the discussion with specific examples from biographical plays, however, this chapter places it in a wider context by presenting a range of other discourses that conceptualise the consequences of a biographical subject or other historical material for the relationship between texts and the past to which they refer. Most of these texts originate in the philosophy or theory of history and, to a lesser extent, in theories of biography, and the following discussion can only show excerpts from some of the work carried out in these vast fields. It is based on some general introductions to the topic and a closer reading of some of publications that have either acquired the status of (modern) classics in their field or that have been particularly influential for the study of historical novels or plays. A general development from an empiricist, scientific view of history and life-writing towards a new concept that is characterised by increasing awareness of the role played by the individual perspective of the author and by language in life-writing is outlined, and different positions are compared in this context with regard to their concept of the relationship between the events and lives in the past and texts about them. Although this development can be roughly seen as an ongoing process, beginning with 19th century positivism up to postmodern ideas of the late 20th century, the present situation is best described as a competition of, partly modernised, defences of empiricist historical thought and radical departures from this tradition that sometimes even argue for the abandonment of historiography as we know it.

For the sake of clarity of argument, many of the complex theories presented in these texts have been reduced to the elements that are directly relevant to the relation between the past and texts about it. In a similar simplification, there is no clear differentiation between texts that deal with history in general and those concerned primarily with biography. Although in this thesis the relationship to the world outside found in historiography and in biography is considered to be similar, it cannot be denied that not all the publications on this topic share this point of view. The distinction between the two forms can be traced back to Plutarch's *Lives* where he insists on "writing biography not history", as he "means to create a portrait of [a] man's life [whereas he] leave[s] the story of his greatest struggles and achievements to be told by others" (Plutarch. 1973, 252). Since then biography has been mainly treated as history's younger brother, because the individual behind historical events was considered to be less important than the whole. Some historians even excluded life-stories from the list of legitimate subject matter for history, declaring that "good biography makes bad history" (Carr 1962, 42). Such an opinion is echoed by other historians of convictions as different as Robin G. Collingwood and G. R. Elton, who nevertheless agree on the fact that the temporal limits and the existence of emotions and a

bodily physicality are incompatible with their notions of history as an eternal sequence or pure thought respectively (Elton. 1967, 169; Collingwood 1946, 304).

In spite of this rejection on the part of some historians, academic biography as well as biographical novels and plays, have often been defined as subgenres of academic historiography and historical novels and drama respectively.[1] A similar understanding of biography as historiography's younger brother can also be witnessed in the readiness with which many publications that deal with life-writing refer to concepts and theories developed in the philosophy of history.[2] This practice, which seems to belie the idea of "discord between historians and biographers" introduced by Ulrich Raulff at the very beginning of his essay on recent theories in the two disciplines,[3] shows that a common parentage and shared epistemological ground can be found in both genres. Thus this chapter examines the ways in which historians and philosophers of history describe the relationship between the past and historical texts, and how biography takes up – or sometimes fails to take up – the concepts developed in this discipline. In a few instances, it relates these theories to biography in drama, but a more thorough examination of the theories presented here in the context of the presentation of past lives on stage can be found further on in the thesis.

In a second step the emphasis is placed on the element that is uniquely specific to biography, the concentration on a person's life. Here again, a range of ideas concerning aspects related to the choice and the position of the biographee is explored in preparation for the discussion of them in the context of individual biographical plays.

The Relationship between the World and its Description in Historical and Biographical Texts

As most publications that deal with the relationship between the past and its description discuss written texts, this terminology is maintained in this chapter, extending the category of text to the concept of a performance text as well. The differences between the presentation of the past in the theatre and in the form of a written narrative are discussed in more detail later in this thesis before productions of biographical plays are considered.

The Correspondence Theory and Historical Truth

An understanding of history as categorically different from other kinds of literary forms developed in the 18th century, when the study of the past was first considered to be a scientific endeavour. As such it adopted the idea of describing and explaining the world, in its particular

---

[1] Cf. Shelston. 1997 who discusses biography as closely related to history, or Huber / Middeke. 1995, 2, who chart developments in historiography as background for biographical texts. A similar sense of a subcategory can be observed in Palmer. 1998, where he grants a chapter to biographical plays.

[2] Cf. Nadel. 1987, whose first reference to Hayden White can be found in the introduction, as well as Ellis's references to the work of Dilthey (Ellis. 2000, 137) or Scheuer's work on biography (Scheuer. 1979).

[3] "Zwischen Historikern und Biographen hat der Himmel Zwietracht gesät" (Raulff, Ulrich. 2002, 55).

case the past. This goal of positivist historiography is described by Collingwood as "first, ascertaining facts; secondly, framing laws" (Collingwood. 1946, 127), a method that clearly echoes the methodology of the natural sciences. The search for laws that govern history relies on the belief that the past can be retrieved and accurately depicted, and consequently, the idea of correspondence is introduced to historiography. Although the search for laws is transformed by later generations of historians into the idea of an interpretation rather than the identification of universal laws (cf. for example Carr. 1962, 82), the concept of correspondence dominates the study of history for centuries and continues to be the basis for the work of numerous present-day historians.

The idea of correspondence suggests equivalence between the past as it happened and the past as it is written. According to Epstein, it is the result of a procedure in which "a discursive track or a track of natural occurrence in the concrete world can be [...] folded into narrative" (Epstein. 1987, 33). In this folding process it is important that although the form of the original occurrence is changed in order to make it possible to represent the event in a text, this must not affect its nature; it must be recognisable as still essentially the same event. Whereas in history, this translation of the past into text has to preserve the identity of events, in biography it should also lead to "a record, in words, of something as mercurial and as flowing, as compact of temperament and emotions, as the human spirit itself" (Edel. 1973, 1). A good indication of the dissemination of this concept of presenting "the past as it actually was"[4] is the fact that many European languages, including English use the word "history" to refer to both remote times and texts that describe them.

An alternative way of describing a text which successfully establishes a correspondence between itself and a situation or event in the past is to attribute the quality of truth to this account. This reflects one of the two basic concepts of this notion in philosophy, the idea of truth as "a relation of correspondence between the contents of our thoughts and reality, or between our judgements and facts" (Engel. 2002, 14). Described by Engel as the most intuitive one among those used in philosophy (Engel. 2002, 14), this propositional definition resembles an idea of truth used often in everyday life. On the level of intuition it is also relatively uncomplicated to oppose this concept to that of fiction, regarding the latter as a characteristic of texts that prevents their reading as an accurate description of the world outside it.[5] Truthfulness then can be considered to be the defining characteristic of historical texts in comparison to fictional literature, whereas at the same time its achievement can be regarded as the main goal of the historian. In the words of G.R. Elton: in history *"omnia veritas"* (Elton. 1967, 69).

---

[4] "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (Ranke. 1867 – 1890, VIII or Powell. 1990 xv).
[5] For this definition of fictionality cf. for example Würzbach. 1984 where she lists possible indicators of fictionality.

The objective of writing the truth about the past is by no means easy to achieve, due to the fact that the past cannot be accessed directly, one of the few opinions shared by virtually all historians past and present. As a result, positivist historiography developed an intricate system that allows establishing a relationship of correspondence between the past and an account of it on the basis of evidence that survived from past times. Every detail from the past whose existence is clearly and unequivocally suggested by remaining evidence, such as written sources or relics, is established as a fact. Where the evidence is not sufficient, the technique of inference can lead the way to new facts. In this way, a true account of the past consists of a number of facts whose truthfulness can be individually established. While empiricist history has abandoned the search for laws in this evidence that characterises its positivist counterpart, it still adheres to the idea of using empirical evidence in order to reconstruct past events.

The details of the process of reconstruction of the past and of past lives are the subject of many publications, whose authors reflect, for example, on the validity of different forms of evidence or appropriate ways in which their results can be presented.[6] Nonetheless, in the framework of empiricist history, the examination of their discipline is restricted mainly to the discussion of its working methods and methodological details; questions directed at the universal objective and requirement of searching historical or biographical truth are often discouraged. Keith Jenkins, who explores the underlying assumptions of historiography, criticises empiricist history as a discipline that is based on a quiet consensus that discourages questions (Jenkins. 1997, 10). Practitioners who work in the framework of empiricist or reconstructionist history or biography often confirm this impression. Robert Blake (Blake. 1998, 75) compares the biographer's way of working with the gait of a centipede: as long as they do not start thinking about it, both can work or walk perfectly well, unnecessary reflection may hinder their progress. A similar anti-theoretical stance can be observed in Park Honan's comment that biography is "a pragmatic genre" that resists the storms of theory that surround it (Honan. 1995, 187), indirectly defending its ideal of truthfulness.

Even within a reconstructionist framework, the standard of absolute historical truth is not uncontested for biography. Its formal closeness to the novel, together with terminological reasons, leads to a situation in which different degrees of poetic license are allowed. Unlike the differentiation between academic history and the historical novel, genres that have long been the object of different disciplines, the term biography covers texts written by scholars in "plain scientific language" which rigorously apply academic standards for historical writing, as well as others in which writers present a narrative that includes a considerable amount of speculation. The co-existence of such a diversity of forms under one term gives rise to a differentiation within its boundaries. Most authors choose an adjective in order to classify biography, but there

---

[6] A good example for this overriding concern with practical issues is Clifford. 1970. Thwaite. 1998 is also typical in as far as that she concentrates on her own work as a biographer and the questions she faced in it.

is no standard terminology for this distinction. Names as different as analytic vs. narrative (Frank. 1980, 507), fictional vs. historical (Charmley and Homberger. 1988, xii) or academic vs. popular biography (Clifford. 1970, 168) can be found. Some of them are, however, prone to misunderstandings: the terminology popular vs. scholarly biography, for example, is problematic, because many biographies that obey the rules of historical writing are much more popular in the sense that they are more widely read than some experimental biographies that deviate considerably from the ideal of the genre in historical academia. Therefore I use the terms fictional and factual biography[7] in this thesis, as they seem to be the most appropriate ones for a distinction that refers to the degree in which a biography follows the requirement of historical truthfulness.

The existence of texts belonging to the side of fictional biography, however, cannot necessarily be considered as a sign of a beginning lack of belief in the objective of telling the truth. It is, on the contrary, rather regarded as a consequence of biography's hybrid nature and of influences from its fictional neighbour, the novel. Therefore, it confirms the differentiation between the two epistemologically different forms of fiction and non-fiction. Challenges to the underlying assumptions of historiography, on the other hand, undermine this difference. These theories, which are often inspired by postmodern thought and which contribute to or follow the so-called "linguistic turn" in history, question the relationship of correspondence between past events and the past as written, thus removing the basis for such a strict division.

Although today the concepts of empiricist history are still the basis for the work of some historians, many others question it as it is "tied up with a set of challenged cultural and social assumptions," including issues of "logic and reason, consciousness and human nature, progress and fate, representation and truth [...] linearity and continuity".[8] Many new ideas are developed gradually, but some of the major differences can be presented best in oppositional contrast to a clearly reconstructionist and empiricist understanding of history.[9]

Ontological Doubts

The basis for these new approaches is a renewed interest in the difference between the two meanings of history and their ontological status. Whereas the res gestae, the past, exist as situations and events in the physical world, the historia rerum gestarum, the past as written, is limited to the boundaries of discourse. This difference in the states of their being leads to fundamental questions about the way in which the two entities can be related. Contrary to the reconstructionist belief that it can be bridged through the establishing of a relation of

---

[7] These can also be found in Cohn. 1989. In addition, they also reflect my understanding of fiction as the opposite of factual information that purports to give a description of the world outside literature which corresponds to that world in every detail.

[8] J.H. Miller. 1974, 460-1 quoted in Hutcheon 1988, 87.

[9] In the second part of this chapter different steps in a gradual development are discussed with respect to the role of the author in history.

correspondence between them, however, some historians declare that it cannot be overcome and that biography "cannot duplicate the life of its subject nor recreate its character on the page" (Nadel. 1984, 102). The conviction that such a difference in kind makes the epistemological background of empiricist historiography untenable originates in a reappraisal of the role of language and its relationship to the world. Ira Bruce Nadel sums this up in the following question: "how well can language incarnate reality?" (Nadel. 1984, 155)

The doubt about the way in which language can relate to the world has its origin in Saussurian linguistics. On the basis of the observation that the relationship between sounds (signifiants) and concepts (signifiés) varies between cultures, Saussure establishes the invariable arbitrariness of language. He observed that all cultures divide the physical world into different concepts to which they attach a particular sound. This arbitrary division means that language is culturally dependent and cannot reflect anything in a universally valid and uninfluenced way. Regardless of the additional difficulties created by temporal distance, there can be no correspondence between historical accounts and the past, as history, like any other discipline, is not able to "overcome the inherent relativism of language use" (Munslow. 2000, 71). This means, Munslow continues, that "narrative interpretations can only signify the past. They can not correspond to it" (Munslow 2000, 83). Without the possibility of establishing a correspondence between an account of the past and past events, however, the notion of historical truth also loses its absolute character and the criterion of truthfulness would depend on the way in which a particular group of speakers perceives the way in which the world relates to language. In other words: "truth in this sense is always a floating currency; and the exchange rates alter through history" (Holmes. 1995, 18).

Some other factors that are responsible for making it impossible to create descriptions of the past as equivalents to past events have been established, often related to language. David Lowenthal devotes two pages in his book about the way our society deals with the past to an explanation of why accounts of the past are not just necessarily of a different quality and ontological status than the past events, but also show differences in quantity. Historical texts can capture only part of the past as they cannot recover it in its totality and are inevitably subjective. Nonetheless, they are also more than the past events, as they impose new perspectives, including hindsight.[10] Keith Jenkins compares this qualitative and quantitative difference between the two entities to a situation in which a landscape can be seen through a window: it exists but can only be perceived through the glass (Jenkins. 1991, 8), a material that is comparable to the various factors that separate historical texts from the past in its capability to shape the images given through it.

---

[10] For a complete list cf. Lowenthal. 1985, 215 – 7.

Nonetheless, language continues to be the most influential of these separating factors, particularly since it forces the disciplines to abandon the ideas of an absolute truth. A milestone in this development is Hayden White's work, which often seen as the beginning of the linguistic turn in historiography. In the introduction to *Metahistory* he explains that, after much critical attention to the scientific side of history, he wanted to "establish the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work" (White 1973, xi), treating "the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (White. 1973, x). In contrast to the empiricist notion of language as a tool that could help them to achieve correspondence, White acknowledges its influence in shaping the account of the past. Where content was supposed to generate form, he states that form generates content (Munslow. 2000, 226) through providing specific structures of tropical emplotment within which the historian is working, and which prefigure his take on the material even before he consciously tries to explain it.[11] The choice of a form of emplotment is not only of significance for the shape the historical account takes, it also provides the frame for its evaluation, as he states that any historical explanation can be of authority only to those who share its tropological strategy (White. 1973, 430). As a consequence of White's exploration of the role of language in history then, historical truth can no longer be seen as a universal concept; he provides a basis that pointed the way ahead for other historians.

Ira Bruce Nadel's publication on biography focuses on the role language plays in biographical texts. Following White's example he sees biography as "fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language" (Nadel 1984, 8). In addition to linguistic structures he also examines the importance of pre-existing plot structures which "provide sets of events with different meanings" (Nadel. 1984, 103), but his conclusions are comparable to those given by White: there is no absolute biographical truth, as the use of language, the "act of writing overtly, through stylistic and rhetorical means, and covertly, through theme, structure and interpretation, remakes the life" (Nadel 1984, 207).

Their research prompted a broader interest in the role truth plays in historiography and biography and many other authors confirmed their idea that both "historiography and fiction [...] *constitute* their objects of attention; in other words, they decide which events will become facts".[12] Some have also focused their attention on the way in which truth is used in empiricist historiography. Rather than an intrinsic property of a text, these authors regard it as an effect created by "a variety of methods and tools which imply referentiality" (Stanley. 1992, 128). Instead of a relationship of correspondence to an external reality, it is seen as a self-referencing figure of speech that is used to give the illusion that the text faithfully copies the world. The

---

[11] Cf. White. 1973, x: "On this level, I believe, the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *pre*figures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain "what was *really* happening" in it. This prefiguration may, in turn, take a number of forms, the types of which are characterisable by the linguistic modes in which they are cast."

[12] Munz. 1977. *The Shapes of Time*, 15 quoted in Hutcheon. 198, 122.

great objective of historical truth in modernist history is exposed as mere way to validate a text, rather than a value inherent in the best of historical writing.

Changing Conventions

As a result of this re-conception of the opposition between historiography as well as biography and literature, the use of conventions in both kinds of texts has also been re-examined. Although these similarities are established for literary texts and do not take into account theatrical performances, many of them refer to narrative elements that can be found in both, such as the concepts of action and character[13] or, the idea of a linear, chronological, cumulative and individualist account (cf. Stanley. 1992, 12). While these similarities are pointed out, the traditionally factual genres also experience a new openness towards experimentation with forms and devices that were hitherto deemed unsuitable for a truthful account. Thus chronology, which used to be *de rigueur* for academic biographies, is no longer regarded as one of its most essential characteristics. Most texts maintain the general idea of temporal progression, but it has lost its claim to measurable objectivity[14] and is no longer by force the ordering principle of the text. Some theorists suggest alternatives, which are often taken from practical examples, proposing, for example, the use of a "spiralling narrative" (Nadel. 1984, 4), or a combination of cognitive or affective patterns (Scheuer. 1979, 88) that take into account the perception of the biographer. The latter is very similar to another suggestion Nadel brings forward in the idea of interpretive pattern that reflects the writer's sense of the subject's inner life.

These and other deviations from the traditional form reflect various important developments in the thoughts about biography which have been outlined above. First their new openness towards forms clearly associated with a narrative tradition suggests that they understand history and biography as examples of the same praxis, not as a neutral reflection of past events. Unlike earlier fictional biographies, they do not declare departures from academic standards to be exceptions, sanctioned by the idea of poetic license. On the contrary, their conclusions drawn from the criticism of empiricist, reconstructionist history and biography seems to be that human beings "can comprehend both the past and the present only in the form of a narrative" (Maack. 1993, 170). Secondly, they reveal the influence of the author in shaping the form of presentation. This leads to another essential aspect of historical writing that has been subject to fundamental changes. Unlike the concept of historical truth, the idea of an author has not been declared to be invalid, but his role has nevertheless been substantially reviewed.

---

[13] Cf. Maack. 1991 who sees in them elements known from the novel but equally used in the composition of biographies.
[14] Cf. Lowenthal. 1985, 220-4 where he traces the rise and fall of the popularity of chronology but defends the uses of chronology if understood as a human made construct that segments time

The Role of the Author

During the heyday of positivism, historians saw themselves as mere collectors of facts about the past. In Carr's description they approached their task thinking that "the facts are available to [them] in documents, inscriptions and so on, like on the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him" (Carr. 1962, 3). In the process of recovering these, their ideal was "'to extinguish [their] own self, as it were, and to allow only things to speak and to allow the mighty forces to appear which in the course of the centuries have risen and grown alongside and across another'".[15]

While the idea of the disinterested historian continued to be the ideal of the profession for a long time, and still does for many, the concept of a passive collector of facts is abandoned earlier in favour of that of a judge who evaluates the evidence and reaches conclusions that "display the standard judicial quality of balance and even-handedness" (Jenkins. 1997, 1). The objectivity required for these judgements has its origin in a division of the thought from the thinker, of the object from the subject. Whereas an epistemologically subjective thought depends on the attitudes and the point of view of the speaker, according to Searle, objective thoughts are independent from his point of view (cf. Searle. 1995, 8). The same concept underlies Collingwood's idea that the re-thinking of a thought is possible because only the personal context of the speaker changes, not the essence of the thought itself (cf. Collingwood. 1946, 215). Such a division then allows the evaluation of historical material according to universally valid standards that are given objectively – independent of the perspective of the speaker.

Judging the importance and the validity of evidence is one step towards the new task of the historian, that of arranging the facts in a particular order and context. The notion of a necessary mediator who prepares the facts for presentation is based on the awareness that "facts speak only when the historian calls on them" (Carr. 1962, 5), but it also constitutes a challenge to the idea of complete objectivity. Choosing some facts over others means that the historian must "necessarily [be] selective" (Carr. 1962, 6), a danger that is faced by most historians with a re-affirmation of their belief in the neutralising power of proper working methods and in the objective to recreate the structures of the past in its depiction. Kalman Harris compares this process to copying a picture without knowing how the painter did it (Kalman Harris. 1992, 68), a dilemma that can only be solved by the biographer's knowledge about the "painting techniques" used in biography: objectivity and the assumption that people in the past were not quintessentially different from people today, i.e. that history always has a "rational, purposive and undivided thinking self at the centre" (Munslow. 2000, 2).

In this process of reconstruction, inference and empathy are often regarded as the historian's and biographer's most important tools. The first refers to the possibility to draw conclusions from the existing evidence as to how individual facts are connected and why they came about.[16]

---

[15] Wikander. 1986, 6 quotes quoted from Krieger, Leonard. 1977. *Ranke: The Meaning of History*, 269.
[16] For an introduction to the use of inferences in the process of colligation cf. Munslow. 2000, 46-7.

The second, of particular importance to biographers, allows the historian to recreate an individual's thought that might have influenced events; by "becoming for a while that other person, even while remaining himself" (Edel. 1973, 7), he can share that person's insights into his life or a period of time. Few guidelines are given for these methods as drawing the appropriate conclusions is often regarded as an innate ability, something for which merely "common sense" is required. Such a pragmatic approach underlies, for example, Edel's statement that "the biographer is called upon to impose logic and coherence" or Backscheider's statement that "readers seek a plausible narrative" (Edel. 1973, 58; Backscheider. 1999, 82; underlined UC). Ellis also clearly spells out these assumptions about the biographer's "intelligence and human understanding [that allow him] to draw correct inferences from our information" (Ellis. 2000, 18-9; underlined UC). Given the observation of these principles, many historians, including some who work in the second half of the 20th century, believe in the possibility of recovering the past. One of them is G.R. Elton who confirms that the belief "that the truth can be extracted from the evidence by the application of proper principles of criticism should not be doubted" (Elton.1967, 97).

The Gradual Recognition of the Historian's Influence

The feeling of security voiced by staunch reconstructionists such as Elton is gradually lost as the role of the author and language is further investigated, revealing that many underlying principles of history cannot be taken for granted. Munslow charts this development as one from reconstructionist historiography, intent on recreating the past in historical texts (cf. previous paragraphs) towards constructionism, or the idea of a dialogue between the past and the present, and finally deconstructionism. In the following, several steps in this development and their consequences for the role of the historian are traced. Two historians whose work greatly influenced historians' understanding of their role are R. Collingwood and E.H. Carr.

Collingwood places new importance on the work of the historian by defining history as a form of inquiry into the things of the past, thus stressing the need for an enquirer rather than for a finished product. In this enquiry, the past is not an entity the historian re-arranges, but "experiences to be lived through in his own mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own" (Collingwood. 1946, 218). Collingwood still stipulates that the re-enactment of the past has to lead to a picture that is not only coherent and continuous, but also reflects the thoughts underlying history in their original form (cf. Collingwood. 1946, 245). Nonetheless, his reappraisal of the role of historians and the admission that they know that they tamper with documents in selecting, interpolating and criticising them (cf. Collingwood. 1946, 235) has given rise to a re-thinking of the results of the work of such a historian as well.

The historian's active encounter with the past can also be found in E.H. Carr's work. He assigns equal importance to both "the historian and his facts", describing their relationship as "one of

equality, of give-and-take" (Carr. 1962, 24). This equality extends to their position in the flow of history: both are to be located within it. As a consequence, the historian does not have an overview of history, compared by Carr to that of a flying eagle, instead he is a participant in the procession of history and "the point in the procession at which he [i.e. the historian] finds himself determines his angle of vision over the past" (Carr. 1962, 30). Speaking from a particular position, he is unable to create an absolutely true or absolutely false statement, as his involvement prevents him from "deal[ing] in absolutes of this kind" (Carr. 1962, 114). Therefore, he argues, can "the history we read, though based on facts [...] strictly speaking, not [be] factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements" (Carr 1962, 8). The only way of avoiding a situation in which "one interpretation is as good as another" (Carr. 1962, 116) is the historian's acknowledgement of his positioned perspective, which, according to Carr allows him to rise above it (cf. Carr. 1962, 38). His perspective can thus still be overcome.

Located Authors

Postmodernist thought makes such a compensation tactic impossible. Based on the idea that all persons are necessarily influenced by their social context and their own position in it,[17] the existence of a privileged position outside of the events for a historian or a biographer is inevitably denied. "For the biographer and the autobiographer, postmodernity means understanding that there is no secure external vantage point from which one can see clearly and objectively, from where one can 'realize' the subject", according to Marjorie Garber,[18] and the same assumption is made for historians. Their perspective is created by a mixture of both cultural and historical forces, as well as circumstances directly related to the authors, such as sociological parameters like sex, age and race, and more individual personal characteristics and past experience.[19] Most of these factors do not depend upon the will of the author, and in contrast to a return to the questions that dominated literary studies before the concept of the intentional fallacy, the postmodern focus on the author is directed at inevitable and often unconscious positions. In this respect, the review of the role of the historian or biographer is closely related to epistemological questions. Texts produced by an author who is clearly located are declared to "have little to do with the 'truth' per se, but a great deal to do with prevailing moral discourses and perceptions" (Evans. 1999, 141). The new understanding of the role of the author thus confirms the doubts about the concept of an absolute truth that were introduced by postmodernists through the criticism of language. Where texts are created by positioned authors

---

[17] Cf., for example, Berger and Luckham. 1966, 21: "no human thought (with the aforementioned exceptions) is immune to the ideologising influences of its social context."
[18] Garber. 1996, 175; cf. also Stanley. 1992, 7: "*any* biographer is a socially located and necessarily partial one."
[19] Cf. also Backscheider. 1999, 106: "Writing biography is always a relative exercise, bounded by cultural and historical forces which alter, as do the personal conditions of the biographer."

in a relative language, it becomes important to ask "whose truth" is being told "by whom and for what purpose"?[20]

In the view of this new understanding of the role of the author, the previous claims of authors who saw themselves as disinterested neutral conveyors of facts have come under scrutiny. Their apparent absence in modernist history or biography is exposed as a hidden presence and influence. Unable to be neutral, modernist authors use a realist mode of writing in which they cover their authorial voice under apparently neutral formulations in order to create the illusion of the unfiltered presentation of reality (cf. Munslow. 2000, 172 and 32). Paula Backscheider analyses the writer's "magisterial voice" (Backscheider. 1999, 18) in life-writing and comes to the conclusion that a popular combination in biographies, where an author writes from the hidden position of a historian, but adopts the vivid style of a novelist, is most successful in convincing the reader of the truthfulness of an account. "The more invisible interpretation and even judgement are, the better the book reads – and the more subversive it is" (Backscheider. 1999, 3), as the reader is not aware of the influence exerted by the writer. In written history and biography linguistic and discursive structures are thus used to cover the authorial presence and to create "truth effects" (cf. Zimmermann. 2000, 5). For performative biography and history, Derek Paget observes that realist costumes and designs, as well as continuity in the action also create "an 'authentic' background [that] helps to validate the view of history being put up by the makers" (Paget. 1990, 26) of films or plays that deal with historical events.

Together with the hidden presence of the author, the guidelines for his supposedly objective decisions have been subjects of scrutiny as well. In this process, the assumptions underlying them, such as the concepts of causation, and intentionality, or ideas about human psychology, have been re-examined. Some of them are only criticised to some extent, as for example the concept of causation. Simplifications of this principle, which do not take into account the complexity of situations, are severely criticised,[21] but in spite of such objections against the way in which it is applied, the idea of causation is rarely refuted entirely. Deeply ingrained in our ways of thinking, it indeed seems to be a universally shared aspect of "common sense".
Other concepts, as for example, the notion of logic in the context of agent intentionality, are challenged to a greater degree. Regarding human actions as intentional, i.e. as expression or consequence of a "mental state" (Munslow. 2000, 141), the concept of objectivity also assumes that there are universally logical connections between mental states and actions. As with language, this idea is criticised on the basis of the cultural dependency of such concepts. Behaviour that seems to be illogical to one observer might nevertheless stem from a rational decision and be logical for others. In addition to this objection, theorists also argue that it

---

[20] Paget. 1990, 172. It is important to note that Derek Paget's book is not a publication that is greatly indebted to postmodernist thought throughout his own analyses.
[21] Cf., for example, Jenkins. 1991, 51 -2.

31

depends on a particular anthropological model that overemphasises the human faculty of reasoning, neglecting their less rational side. Other authors, such as David Ellis, investigate the basis for biographical explanations (cf. Ellis. 2000, 23), listing the possible frames of reference biographers can choose in order to account for a particular event in a person's life. By investigating and criticising the systems of belief and reference that underlie historical and biographical discourses, objectivity's inherent but silent ideology is exposed. Little different from more openly ideological systems such as Marxism, it is also based on presuppositions and (silent) assumptions about the nature of the world and of human beings. Just as language, its main tool in most forms of presentation, and its author, the methodologies of history are shown to be culturally determined and therefore challengeable.

As the re-appraisal of the role of the author in the previous paragraphs shows, some recent theories of history and biography take it for granted that "present interests [as well as systems of understanding] underlie an interpretation of the past" (Jenkins. 1997, 6) and that "post-empiricist history [is] written by a positioned author" (Munslow. 2000, 19). Paula Backscheider describes the work of such a writer as that of an "explorer, inquirer, hypnotizer, compiler, researcher, selector and writer; none of these a neutral act" (Backscheider. 1999, 119). This requires a more active and visible role for the author where his position and his working methods become more discernible. Liz Stanley suggests that such "an accountable reflexibility is achievable [...] by treating biography as a process" (Stanley 1992, 177), focussing more on the way in which knowledge about historical figures is created than on the result. Such a shift in emphasis produces an increased interest in meta-historical and –biographical elements,[22] a tendency which leads to Ansgar Nünning's call for a broader definition of biography that includes biographical metafiction (cf. Nünning 2000) – a suggestion taken up in a range of texts, including this thesis.

Is There an Alternative to these Co-Existing Theories?

A new understanding of biography, its instruments and its origin, as described in the previous paragraphs, cannot lead to any secure and universally truthful knowledge about the past. Hence the traditional opposition between historical / biographical and fictional texts can no longer be seen as a clear-cut distinction along the dividing line of truth. However, a complete abandonment of any such opposition does not seem a satisfactory solution to the problem either, because it would entail a range of difficult ethical questions with regard to the responsibility for historical acts where these cannot be truthfully established and where different versions of them clash. A typical and often cited example of such a situation is that of Holocaust deniers – in a radically relativist framework in which there is no distinction between invented events and those

---

[22] Cf. e.g. Zimmermann. 2000, 7 who sees the presence of the biographer as one of the most popular issues in recent biographical research.

that did indeed happen, their position cannot be countered.[23] Furthermore, it does not seem to correspond to the largely unproblematic way in which most people communicate in every day life, how they describe situations or events in the world, past or present, considering some of them more accurate and others less reliable. Especially with regard to the use of biographical material in contemporary plays, such a re-definition cannot explain the intuitive feeling expressed by many other spectators that these plays are different to declaredly fictional ones, a phenomenon described by Ronen in a broader context: "radical relativism does not take into account that cultures do differentiate between fiction and reality" (cf. Ronen 1994. 24).

A certain reserve against some of the consequences of a radical application of postmodernist doubt to discourses which claim to be truthful reflections of the world is shared by many theorists. In comparison to the number of publications which criticise traditional, modernist approaches, there are hardly any texts that outline the possibilities for a world that has entirely overcome its heritage of modernism. Keith Jenkins's position, outlined in his book *Why History*,[24] is unusual as it presents some suggestions for an alternative, arguing in favour of a life without history and ethics as we know them. Instead he offers an orientation towards the present and the future, and a notion of morality that is independent of the traditional understanding of ethics. Although conceivable as a theoretical argument, his book does not contain any proposals as to how it could be put into practice.

Between his position and the downright rejection of postmodernist challenges to a modernist conception of the world, as it is still held by many historians and biographers, a third possibility is given in the acknowledgement that truth has "ceased to be an unproblematic issue" (Hutcheon 1988, 223) without abandoning it altogether. In Hutcheon's approach external realism is confirmed in the sense that "the real referent of their language [is believed to have] once existed" but that it is only "accessible to us today in textualised form". Any doubt is therefore directed mainly at "our ability to (unproblematically) *know* that reality" (Hutcheon. 1998, 93 and 119). Some similar positions adhering to merely epistemological relativism (cf. Munslow. 2000, 199) establish a distinction between reality on an unperceived level and reality as seen by human beings. This is used by Epstein to establish the difference between historical or biographical events and the human-made or –perceived facts that are based on them (Epstein. 1984, 34).

In this context, it is less fruitful to try to determine which facts correspond in all detail and circumstances to the events of the past as reconstructionist history does. A much more

---

[23] This example is quoted in Jenkins.1999. in which he describes how people have defended traditional history as a necessary instrument to prevent such a situation.

[24] Jenkins. 1999; this radical position forms a contrast to the approach advocated in his earlier publications where he maintains that human beings need history in order to put their present into a context. Instead of substituting the whole system of history he argues in Jenkins. 1991 that our reading of it has to include the question for whom history is written.

33

promising approach is to concentrate one's attention on the level of men-made historical facts and to investigate the ways in which they interrelate which each other and to how they are created and used. Hayden White indirectly indicates such a possibility of different standards of evaluation in his statement that "the only grounds for preferring one [version of history] over another are *moral* or *aesthetic* ones" (White 1973, 433). An alternative approach in the context of Possible World Theory is Ronen's suggestion to see truth merely as a "semiotic standard relative to a universe of discourse" (Ronen 1994, 42). This offers the possibility of examining and comparing different standards in the context of different worlds. Christian Klein's recommendation to study biography in the realm of cultural studies can also be interpreted as a shift towards an interest in the way biographical texts and their facts function within a culture instead of paying exclusive attention to its relationship to the events of the past, and a similar thought can be suspected behind Breuer's statement that history exists "as long as there is a belief in a real or artificially created memory of the past, or something that is believed to be the past" (Breuer. 2004, 3).

Despite the clear differences between these proposals, all of them share the idea of using a pragmatic approach to the way in which knowledge about the past is discussed. Even the concept of truth, related to it through an understanding of knowledge as true information about the world, does not have to be entirely abandoned in such a functionalist way of thinking. As Pascal Engel explains in his summary of different notions of truth in philosophy: "to say that truth could be a minimal concept, with no hidden essence, does not by itself imply that there is no *point* in using this concept [...] that it does not carry with it certain constitutive commitments" (Engel. 2002, 7 – 8). His conclusion seems to be equally valid in the field of history and biography: we do not have to maintain it blindly, ignoring the arguments that seem to lead to its deconstruction, but we "need to see why it matters" (Engel 2002, 8). In order to answer this, our interest has to move away from the ontological status of knowledge to the way in which society establishes and values information about the world in which we live or the world of the past.

Such a pragmatic approach to the way in which we deal with the use and establishment of shared knowledge is the origin of many contributions in the field of the sociology of knowledge. Berger and Luckham describe their interest as being concerned with everything that "passes for 'knowledge' in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge'" (Berger and Luckham. 1966, 15). This neglect of any further questions about the universal truth value is partially explained by the belief that although there might be no "non-question-begging argument for ER [external realism]", this is not absolutely relevant as our everyday communication is based on the presupposition of external reality (Searle. 1995, 184). The primacy of function over ontological nature is thus found in everyday human

behaviour, which then serves as a basis for academic inquiry.[25] Furthermore, a sociological approach to knowledge offers the advantage of reducing the apparent incompatibility between the impossibility of having direct access to the world, including that of the past, and the everyday phenomenon of the reliance on apparently unequivocal facts. By drawing a distinction between a brute reality that exists independently from human beings and another reality of social institutions,[26] Berger and Luckham explain that the second is "a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained by these" (Berger and Luckham. 1966, 33). The process of construction is continuous, but due to the fact that it is always already begun before human beings acquire the basic shared knowledge of their society, it is still "experienced as an objective reality" (Berger and Luckham. 1966, 77). For such a paradox of "'knowledge' [that] comes to be socially established *as* reality" (Berger and Luckham, 15), the ontological status is explained and interest is shifted towards the way in which it functions.

Even though biographical knowledge cannot be classified entirely as socially constructed, the sociological approach can be useful to history as well as biography, and particularly for the study of biographical drama. Studying everything that passes for 'biographical knowledge' and the ways in which it infuses theatre, it is possible to demonstrate how ideas about past lives, even if they cannot be proven to be true, influence the thinking of those who produce, as well as of those who receive the plays in question. Such an understanding reflects the fact that theatre may be informed by theories from different areas, but that its production is also an activity closely linked to the everyday experiences of both its producers and receivers. As such, it is important to take into account that their everyday way of thinking about biography and the past, just as their perception of their social reality, is partly based on the idea of a shared common-sense understanding of them.

Here again, sociological approaches to knowledge provide an example as they acknowledge the "innumerable pre- and quasi-scientific interpretations about everyday life" (Berger and Luckham. 1966, 34) contained in the idea of common-sense. For the study of biographical texts, these insights into the assumptions underlying traditional ways of perceiving the past should not be ignored. On the other hand, a shift of emphasis from the epistemological to the pragmatic may prove more fruitful for the study of some forms of presenting the past, including that of biographical theatre. Parallel to new ideas about our knowledge about the world, and the role truth plays in this relationship, the idea of fiction, formerly the clear opposite of factual texts, has been reviewed. Here again, new attention has been directed towards the function it fulfils. The label 'fictional' is not seen as an inherent textual property, but as an assigned characteristic

---

[25] Breuer echoes this in the realm of history when he affirms that "assigning a meaning to events has to be seen as a necessary tactic of survival or even an anthropological constant". Nevertheless he adds immediately that "this does not apply to specific meanings, but merely to process of perception and interpretation per se" (Breuer. 2004, 62).
[26] The term brute reality is taken from Searle 1995 as it seemed to be the clearest one; however, a similar distinction is made in Berger and Luckham.

35

that leads to the application of "conventions dictating the status and proper interpretation of fictional" texts (Ronen. 1994, 11).[27]

The movement towards a functionalist approach is echoed in research on biography by several authors. Mary Evans states that "we are accustomed to classify autobiography as non-fiction, and yet it may be useful to think of it not as such, but as a mythical construct of our society and our social needs" (Evans. 1999, 11). To a certain extent, this idea could also be seen as the basis for an article by Jürgen Schläger, who examines the way in which biography is understood in the UK and Germany, pointing out how this is partly based the different use to which it is put in both countries (cf. Schläger. 1998). Finally Paula Backscheider suggests a reconceptualisation of the relationship between the author and the recipient of biography in the form of a contract, in which the reader takes it for granted that the author "must know what he or she is talking about" (Backscheider. 1999, 10). On this basis, the idea of truth as a property of a text could be substituted by the willingness of the recipients to trust the reliability of an author; a declaration of his intentions lead to a particular use of his writing.

Following these examples, a functionalist orientation in a study of biography in theatre can provide an additional framework for an investigation into the relationship between the past and its presentation. Thus a broad range of performances can be examined in two ways. As a first step, the results of the previous discussion concerning the possible ways of establishing knowledge in historiography and biography can be used in order to describe how the plays refer to the past. A close analysis of texts and productions helps to show how theatrical means can be used in order to establish the idea of a performance as a reconstruction of a past life or how it can put this empiricist approach into question. In the context of the latter, particular attention has to be paid to the analysis of meta-levels. In the context of fictional narrative, Patricia Waugh describes them as a place where "uncertainty about the validity of its representations, an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fiction, a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality" (Waugh. 1984, 2) can be expressed. In biography the concerns expressed by them are similar, but questions about different forms of representation gain additional importance. As Annegret Maack remarks, in recent biographical writing meta-levels often help to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, the two traditional normative systems for references to the world (cf. Maack. 1993, 170). Consequently they are an important site for the formulation of doubts about representation as correspondence and have to be included into analyses that are concerned with these epistemological questions. Describing the ways in which individual plays deal with them shows how theatre is directly influenced by thinking in other disciplines.

---

[27] Ronen. 1994, 10. A closer examination of the idea of fiction as a "pragmatically determined property" can be found in connection with the reception of biodrama (cf. Ch. 10).

A pragmatic approach, on the other hand, can demonstrate if the changes in historical thinking, often closely related to new developments in theatrical theories, affect the way in which theatre, biography, or both together work. Hence in the second part of the thesis, the reception of biographical plays is examined. Here questions about the way in which concepts of the fictional, the factual and truth have an impact on theatrical reception are explored.

The Biographical Subject

In contrast to the relationship between a theatrical production or text and the world, the concentration on a biographical subject separates biography from history. Nonetheless, there are some points of contact between these two subjects. To begin with, the existence of a central subject of biography introduces a further level on which truth is desired. In addition to a reliable rendering of the events, an authentic impression of the personality of the biographee is expected. In her essay on "The New Biography" Virginia Woolf suggests that these two goals may clash and that the truth of personality may be rendered better in some cases by a mixture of a fact with a little fiction (cf. Woolf. 1967, 229). Her suggestion indicates that the requirements for such a truth of personality are different to those discussed in the previous section, which are mainly applied to the relating of events.

The solutions proposed for this dilemma can be loosely assigned to two categories. The first, represented by Ina Schabert, is closer to the tradition of fictional biography, as it brings forward the idea of different standards of truth. Suggesting that texts can concentrate on "the essential rather than the factual reality" (Schabert. 1982, 4), she counters the idea that the strict rule of correspondence on the level of factual details applies to biography to the same extent to which academic history has adopted it. Instead she offers an approach that "makes up for these limitations characteristic of factual biography" by accepting intuitive insight into "the other as a full person" (Schabert. 1990, 4). A similar attempt at widening the concept of truth can be found in Roy Pascal's work on autobiography in which he suggests that the methods of the autobiographer do not have to lead to a truthful account that can withstand comparison to other versions. Instead the autobiographer "must necessarily establish an ideal image of himself and arrange things according to this blue-print, [to] an over-riding purpose which he finds, perhaps to his surprise, has become expressed and grasped in the shape of his life" (Pascal 1960, 139). The idea of multiple truths which include a fuller understanding of others by intuition or of oneself considerably reduces the distance between biography and fiction. As a result it is rejected by theorists who see biography in the tradition of history rather than literature. Contrary to Schabert's and Pascal's inclusive approach, they maintain that a true sense of personality can only stem from a reliable account of the facts of a life as a basis for an interpretation of a person's character.[28]

---

[28] Cf., for example, Kosellek. *Geschichte – Ereignis und Erzählung*, 567, quoted in Scheuer. 1979, 95: "Historical sources decide what cannot be said, but they do not determine what has to be said."

The decision of whether the truth of events should outweigh the importance of the truth of personality is mainly based on the author's adherence to empiricism. Nevertheless, it can also be influenced by the subject chosen for a life story and the rise of the acceptance of alternative concepts of truthfulness is closely linked to the interest in marginal lives. The equivalent to history's notion that the structures of a historical account have to mirror those found in the past is echoed in the idea that the "kind of biography" one writes depends on the "kind of man" at its centre (Crick. 1980, 15). For biographies whose subjects' lives do not show the typical traits of a linear progressive success story, alternative forms of reference may be chosen out of necessity. Many women's lives, for example, are characterised by an outward lack of eventfulness (cf. Wagner. 1994, 7). In these cases it is impossible to base a biographical account primarily on the truth of events, as there is insufficient evidence for it. Instead the authors focus on the re-creation of personality. A departure from the historic standard of a strict correspondence between the details of a life story and the life itself is therefore not always based on a clear rejection of reconstructionist biography. It could also be due to necessity, born of the inclusion of more marginal and less well-documented life stories.

The rejection, voiced among others by Virginia Woolf[29], of the traditional restriction to write biographies about great men only is also loosely related to the aspects discussed in the first part of this chapter through its rejection of normativity. Just as the idea of a normative biographical truth is challenged in favour of multiple perspectives on a life, the limited canon of possible subjects of biographies is abandoned in order to create biographies that reflect the variety of human experience. Together with the interest in lives that do not satisfy the previous requirement of public greatness, this development also prepares the way for a greater emphasis on the everyday life of famous figures. Robert Skidelsky points this out in his essay about biography, asking whether it is mainly the life or the work of T.S. Eliot which justifies a biography about him (Skidelsky. 1998, 3). As a result, life stories that do portray figures from public life often concentrate more on the presentation of personal human experience rather than a canonical list of great deeds.

Such an opening of the form away from the previous norms regarding biographical subjects can also be observed with respect to their accustomed inner unity. Traditionally, biographees are seen as individual agents whose personality influences their decision and actions. In recent biographical thinking, however, both assumptions are challenged. In the first place, the clear borders between the subject of biography and society are re-examined and the perception of it as an isolated entity, independent of its surroundings is corrected.[30] Ira Bruce Nadel observes how

---

[29] Cf. Woolf. 1967a for an early criticism of this concept, as well as Stanley. 1992, 7: "The notion of 'greatness' or 'importance' is actually a historical, temporal and above all political product associated with particular persons but not others."

[30] Cf. Alt. 2002, 31, whose concept draws extensively on Greenblatt.

various new forms of biography reflect this changed perception.[31] In contextual biographies the focus remains on single persons, but they are characterised in the context of his surroundings. This form is especially popular on stage as the characteristics of the dramatic form often lead to the description of a decisive moment in a life instead of the usual time span from birth to death. In this case contextual information has to indicate the importance of this event and its place within the whole of this life. Another possibility is given by group biographies, where the concentration of a character is abandoned and substituted by the portrayal of a group of people and their relationships with each other (cf. also Schaff. 1992, 129).

Just as the clear borders between an individual's personality and its surroundings are revised, the unity and coherence of the core of his character is also put into question. Traditionally, biography is written under "the sovereignty of anthropological humanism" (Epstein. 1987, 82), sharing the belief that it is possible to "deliver the essential person [...] if only we dig deep and long enough".[32] Although often elusive in life, such a core personality is thought to become visible to the biographer after a person's death, a point of orientation at which the fluid nature of a life becomes fixed, and which "does not allow any other version".[33] Many recent life stories, however, do not convey the impression that the life in question forms a complete whole, echoing the criticism that such a belief in a real self is countered by much psychoanalytical and empirical evidence (cf. Evans. 1999, 23). They break with the modernist tradition of "try[ing] to heal that sense of fragmentation [of the self] by embracing documentation and emphatically chronological narrative" (Evans. 1999, 26) and "break up the [historical] dramatic character" (Berger. 1985, 222). Instead the unity found in the text is visibly imposed by interference of the author, thus shifting coherence from the level of the life itself to the level of the text. Here again, the author has acquired a more active role, deciding about the degree of unity his biographee(s) are granted in the text and in which way he imposes it. The two main issues discussed in this chapter, the relationship between the world of a biography and the world outside it, as well as the role of the biographical subject are, once more, related. Moreover, both aspects have been shown to be subjected to conceptual changes that lead away from a common-sense oriented approach in which methodologies and basic rules apply independently from the author towards a theoretical framework that puts these continuities into question and stresses the importance of perspectivity, i.e. the necessity to see the past and its figures from a culturally, temporally and individually located perspective. Contemporary biographical theatre therefore originates and is received in a climate of epistemological change and has to be discussed in the context of competing theoretical positions.

---

[31] For the following paragraph cf. Nadel. 1984, 190 – 200.
[32] Kaplan. "The Real Life", 2 quoted in Nadel 1984, 180.
[33] Frisch. 1972, 87: "there are no actions or omissions that do not allow different versions in the future. The only event that does not allow any other version is death," cf. also Backscheider. 1999, 91.

Chapter 3: A Structural Comparison of Dramatic and Prose Biography

Introduction

Having established a theoretical and conceptual context of biographical theatre, it is important to take into account structural aspects as well. Most of the studies on referentiality and the role of the biographical subject that are presented in the previous chapter are based on prose texts.[1] As a result, an analysis of theatre performances in light of these issues can benefit from an understanding of the structural differences between dramatic and prose writing and their consequences for individual texts. Preceding the discussion of plays, this chapter therefore provides a short comparison of the two formats in which possible distinctions are highlighted.

Due to the variety of theatrical and narrative forms, this juxtaposition can only explain tendencies, which may apply more to some performances than to others. The same diversity may also be responsible for the fact that no extensive analysis of the differences between theatre and prose has been published – generalisations might rely on too many simplifications to lead to valuable insights. Notwithstanding this problem, many introductions to dramatic writing are based on an implicit comparison with prose as the most archetypal form of literature today, and some of their observations (cf. particularly Pfister. 1988) can be used as an outline of the juxtaposition of dramatic and prose biography. Their central concerns are collective authorship and reception, as well as the differences introduced by the use of three-dimensional, direct presentation in addition to the verbal description found in prose. In the context of biography as a genre that is situated between textual forms with fictional and factual traditions, it is also appropriate to compare generic conventions that regulate the relationship between the world and biographical discourse in both formats.

Generic Traditions and Collective Production and Reception

These differ significantly between the two genres of prose writing and theatre. Most importantly, prose has a long history of being employed equally for fictional and non-fictional texts, whereas theatrical performances are predominantly classified as fiction, particularly since the division between history and literature has led to critical comparisons between history plays and academic history. Therefore, narrative biography can be placed on the very border between fictional and factual traditions in prose: on the one hand it is influenced by the novel, on the other by academic writing, a hybridity that is often discussed in reflections on life-writing (cf. Ch. 2). Whereas every prose biography therefore has to position itself along these lines individually, the comparative lack of a factual tradition in theatre means that biographical and historical theatre is primarily regarded as fiction. They can establish a close relationship to the world, but it can be assumed that the generic influence automatically counters this link. As a

---

[1] Against Evelyn Hinz's theory about the origin of biography in drama (Hinz. 1992), this focus on prose biography confirms that the genre is mostly seen to be related to prose writing today.

consequence, the following chapter has to take into account how strong the two opposing influences are in individual texts and how the plays can manipulate their interaction. Later chapters have to examine how the previous experiences of the spectators can bear on this aspect.

Collective instead of individual authorship is another crucial difference between the two forms, particularly with regard to the postmodern premise that every text is uttered from a specific perspective (cf. p. 30). Due to its collective production, theatrical biography is not presented from a single perspective, but from a number of different points of view, beginning with that of the playwright and followed by those of the production team. For the presentation of a life, several people will read and see different documents about the subject and his period, and even if they have the same sources of information, they will interpret them differently according to their previous knowledge, general attitudes etc. In addition, each of them will be particularly concerned with one aspect of the presentation of a life, depending on their role in the production process. Scenographers, for example, will automatically concentrate more on visual aspects, whereas writers will focus more on language. As most plays discussed here are based on a script, the playwright can be seen as the first of these contributors, and this temporal order is used as the basis for the structure of this thesis[2]. The collective nature of its production, however, has to be taken into account in both sections, as playwrights, unlike biographical writers, are aware of the fact that their labour does not create the performance as a whole, but merely the basis on which others will build.

The Effect of Direct Presentation

Most structural differences between the two forms result from the use of direct presentation in addition to linguistic description, which leads to the " re-enactment, resurrection, of [...] historical material in a vital, immediate way, [...], not with bloodless abstractions, but with people on a stage who are required to move and be" (Harben. 1988, 256). Obvious though it may be, this distinction deserves closer analysis as it has far-reaching consequences for all elements of the performance. Through the use of visual and non-linguistic elements, the generalising effect of linguistic descriptions is abandoned, and all the elements presented on stage have to be shown in greater detail. Thus the description of a biographee "wearing a skirt" in a book, for example, has to be substituted with a presentation that is much more precise with regard to the colour, cut, material and fitting of the garment if presented on stage.[3] The

---

[2] This approach thus follows Roland Harweg's distinction between the two forms of existence of a play: as a book and on stage, cf. Harweg. 2001, 1: "Plays are fictional text that have, as commonly known, two different forms of existence: the one in which they exist in the form of a book and the one in which they exist on stage. I call the first one the book form and the latter the stage form."

[3] Fraser confirms this need for specificity in the realm of film, arguing that in historical films, much effort to reconstruct a past accurately can be undone by small inaccurate details (cf. Fraser. 1999, 14), and Ubersfeld sums it up in her statement that "Idealism is possible in the reading process, but less so in theatrical practice" (Ubersfeld. 1982, 272).

41

specificity of the elements that are presented rather than described is countered, on the other hand, by practical limitations concerning their recreation on stage. Whereas language can evoke everything that can be put into words, showing things directly in theatre is often more complicated. Abstraction and theatrical conventions allow the presentation of many things that could not be shown on stage in the same form they take in the world, such as fantastic beings, elements that in their original form are too big for the stage, or changes to the actor's body such as accidents. At the same time, however, the necessary changes can inadvertently point to the differences between the stage and the world – an effect that may be counterproductive to reconstructive biography, for example. For some theatrical styles, the need for detailed, direct presentation can therefore create additional problems with regard to the concept of biography.

The Presentation of Time

The presentation of time in the theatre differs fundamentally from the treatment of time in prose. Although it could be argued that reading also takes place over time, performances are governed by it to a greater extent, an experience often expressed in the idea that theatre takes place in real time. Interestingly, particularly in the context of a work that tries to describe ways in which theatre can be related to a world perceived as "real", this description of the difference between written literature and theatre as a performative art seems to be similar to the idea of "shared time". Unless one considers the time a reader spends with a book to be "unreal", an alternative formulation could describe the distinction as follows: theatre is distinguished through the simultaneous creation and reception during which producers and recipients are both present and which they follow at the same pace – in other words through the fact that it takes place in the time the performers, backstage team and audience share. The experience of reading, in contrast, is carried out after the process of production and by each reader in his own time. 'Real time' in the theatre thus becomes real through our knowledge that others produce and perceive the performance at the same moment as us and that we cannot interrupt or adapt our reception according to our own pace.

The consequences of the simultaneous, collective production and reception include limits on the time of performance. With the exception of a relatively small number of experimental productions that take place over a very long period of time,[4] or allow the audience to watch and leave the performances at their own pace, most plays are performed over a time span between one and four hours. This length is mainly due to pragmatic factors such as the strain on the performer, the concentration span of spectators, and their ability to sit quietly and without major interruptions. In turn, this limitation of the performance time imposes certain restrictions on the performed time as well. The selection of aspects of a life presented on stage has to be far more

---

[4] Cf. for example Peter Stein's unabridged production of *Faust I and II* for the Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany; it later toured Berlin and Vienna where the audience also had the chance to see it in several installments.

rigorous than that made for an academic biography, which can easily span 500 pages.[5] As a result, the traditional time span of the entire biological life of the subject where selected events that take place between birth and death are described is often given up in biographical drama in favour of a shorter time frame.

In plays which still adhere to the period of a whole life, the process of selection is more visible, partly due to the fact that plays of conventional length need to restrict themselves to fewer events, partly due to the lack of mediation by a narrator in many forms of theatre. Interrupting the linearity of time does, according to many theoreticians of drama, imply "tendencies to create epic structures" (Pfister. 1988, 254), as the explanations for gaps in the time structure or changes to a chronological order are given most easily through language. Similarly the regular repetition of actions is mainly conveyed through phrases such as "usually" or "often" – other means, such as the series of the singer's breakdowns on stage in Gems's *Piaf* which is indicated by lighting, are possible but rare. Depending on the concept of theatre, the heightened dependence on narrative or the use of epic structures can be seen as a potential interruption of theatrical illusion, a possibility that was explored, for example, by Brecht. With the increasing popularity of theatrical forms that deviate from the strictly chronological presentation of a short time period, departures from a strict standard time scheme are likely to gradually lose some of their power to distance audiences. In comparison to its prose equivalent, however, biographical drama can still be affected by this traditional restriction on the presentation of time on stage. Particularly for reconstructive biographical plays that are presented in an apparently neutral style, the presentation of time on stage is therefore more problematic than it is in written form.

Some playwrights avoid the issue by selecting only a short moment in their subjects' lives, which they see as particularly important or symptomatic of the whole. These scenes, such as Oscar Wilde's visit to a palm-reader presented in *In Extremis*, are characterised by their strong reliance on invented material, due to the lack of detailed documentation for single events from a life. This and the break with biographical tradition can thus also lead to questions about the relationship between these plays and the historical lives.

Following the traditions of both life-writing and drama, biographical theatre can either adhere to one of these structures or create alternative ones between these two poles. A popular way to integrate both of them is, for example, the combination of a plot-level with a single event, such as the preparation for a concert in *Marlene*, into which the episodic memories of the biographee-protagonist are integrated. Depending on the choice made, however, it is possible to emphasise the tradition of one genre over the other. Finally, the typical time span of biography also affects the actor's work, as the use of a relatively long period of time implies a radical ageing process of the characters. As a result, the ways in which ageing is treated in scripts and performances is an important point of discussion in the following sections.

---

[5] Part of this is compensated by simultaneous perception which allows the parallel presentation of elements, cf. below.

Simultaneity is a further issue that is related to time. Although the presentation of events on stage allows a co-existence of a range of elements on stage, which can only be described one after another in the linearity of a text (cf. below), the perception of the audience sets natural limits to the parallel presentation of events and particularly speech. Experiments are made with the presentation of different groups of people in different areas of the stage, indicating their simultaneous existence and actions, for example in *Mary Queen of Scots* by Liz Lochhead. Alternatively historical events in the background can be introduced through sound, but mostly the indication that events take place at the same time is given through language and narrative elements. Similar to the epic structures that can be used in order to convey the passing of time, however, these means can have a negative effect on the creation of theatrical illusion – the linear presentation of events that are supposed to happen simultaneously in the plot, nearly unrestricted in prose, is therefore potentially more problematic in biographical theatre.

The Presentation of Space

The distinction between prose and dramatic biography is even more pronounced in relation to space. Whereas the first is entirely textual, the second is performed in a three-dimensional space. With regard to the presentation of places in biographical theatre, the most important difference is the possibility of simultaneous perception of various areas of this space: theatre audiences can take in many elements of the stage design, lighting, props and even the actors' appearance at the same time. Existing alongside each other and the characters' interaction, instead of being presented in the linear flow of a text, spatial elements and their presentation do not interrupt the flow of dramatic action either. As a result dramatic texts can convey more information in a shorter time – a factor that partly compensates the apparent difference in length between prose and dramatic biographies. Although this often results in greater economy with respect to language, the direct presentation of space leads to greater complications when specific locations are used. While direct names can evoke a specific space in the playtext, the presentation on stage relies on sufficient visual details in order to create the same effect.

As the size of an average stage restricts the possibilities of a faithful imitation of many locations significantly, theatrical conventions are of great importance here. The degree to which the representation of space can be reduced to token elements that indicate a locale depends on the style of theatre, but here again it is possible that concessions to these restrictions call attention to the theatrical nature of the presentation of a life. The same is true for changes from one location to another. Traditionally bound to a small number of places, the frequent relocations in biography can be problematic in the theatre, particularly when they take place within scenes or in other ways that are not governed by theatrical conventions. Less conventional means of staging that allow numerous movements from one place to another, however, are more likely to undermine theatrical illusion as they can point to the theatricality of these techniques.

Although simultaneity is one of the key characteristics of theatrical perception, natural limitations are given both for the audience's auditory and visual perception. With regard to the presentation of space, this means that the inclusion of a historical background has to be achieved with different means. Not only is the presentation of events that take place in parallel more problematic (cf. above), placing the stage in a wider geographical context is too. Even if references can be made in the characters' speeches, they are unlikely to equal the details conveyed in similar descriptions in books. Sound effects are a very popular way of creating the impression that the world presented on stage continues off-stage as they can indicate surroundings, as for example an open space from which we can hear "cannon fire" from the Civil War in the background in *The General from America* (Nelson. 1996, 58). These allusions are, however, bound to be less specific than textual descriptions or the use of other media, such as films that are screened on stage.

In addition to these issues regarding the representation of space on stage, the presentation of scenes from the past raises further questions. All visual elements of productions, including those that produce the environment of the historical character, are necessarily related to time – it is impossible to have neutral furniture, props or costumes on stage. Materials, shapes and even colours are influenced by styles prevalent at the time of their production and the passing of time often marks them too. The decision as to whether the space and the objects in it reflect the world at the time of the historical figure, whether they resemble the contemporary world of the audience, or whether elements from different periods are mixed is thus essential for biographical theatre. Whereas a prose biography has to establish a contemporary relevance through comparisons, it can be sufficient to stage a play in modern surroundings in order to establish a connection to life today.

Characters and Plot

This aspect is directly related to the issue of characters in the two genres. Even though the actors' appearance can be changed in order to agree with the norms of dress or looks of the past, they automatically belong to the present as human beings who are alive in the here and now of the theatre. While the awareness of sharing time and space with the actors can thus bring the play closer to the present, it is the very presence of the actors and the greater similarity between the world of the past and the three-dimensional material reality on stage which can contribute to the impression of life-likeness, thus lowering their awareness of the inevitable differences between the original and the representation on stage.

The interpretation of the historical characters by actors can probably be regarded as the central difference between the two genres, as the three-dimensional nature of theatre allows ways of characterisation that cannot be found in prose.[6] In the context of biographical presentation, it

---

[6] Cf. Pfister's list of implicit methods of characterisation that depend on the audio-visual channels and therefore do not exist in prose (Pfister. 1988, 185).

leads to various additional concerns, such as the fact that it is impossible to give an incomplete picture of the biographee on stage, details that are not found in historical documents about them cannot be ignored and have to be invented. For subjects whose appearance and way of speaking are well-documented on the other hand, the presentation on stage can be compared to photos, pictures or descriptions of them. This juxtaposition becomes more important with increasing fame of the historical figures, but the diminishing importance of stage realism slightly counters the necessity to imitate physical appearance in great detail (cf. ch. 7). For historical characters whose voice and diction are well known, the same applies to the vocal aspects of the actors' performances – it would, for example, have an interesting effect to cast an actress who sings in the range of a soprano as Edith Piaf in *Piaf*.

The immediacy created by the presentation of the historical character by an actor rather than the description by a narrator also introduces a different perspective on them. According to Pfister, the characters in drama "are allowed to present themselves directly in their role as speakers" (Pfister. 1988, 6). Although they are the creation of the production team, the lack of comments from the particular perspective of a narrator means that theatrical characters appear to be presented in a more direct, a-perspectival way. Even if their interpretation on stage is based on particular ideas about them, the audience still has greater freedom to interpret the given perspective. Details of their physical appearance, costume, pronunciation or actions may lead to very different ideas about the character. Thus various members of the audience might interpret an actor's behaviour as either vivacious or nervous. In a prose biography, a qualifying adjective can provide evaluation of behaviour, but different readers are likely to imagine differently the details of behaviour that is described, for example, as "nervous". In theatre, the details of behaviour are given, whereas their interpretation is left to the spectators to a higher degree. At the same time, the immediacy of perceiving the character directly through their own eyes and ears helps to cover the influence of the producers of their representations. This creates a paradox in biographical theatre, where the direct presentation of the characters actually requires a higher degree of invention as far as details are concerned. With the exception of documentary drama, which relies on transcripts of the direct speech or written word of historical figures, the majority of words said and gestures and facial expressions made in biographical plays are not based on historical documentation. This may partly apply to prose biography, particularly works that use a novelistic approach and give detailed accounts of the character's daily life, but whereas writers can resort to generalisations, stage presentations cannot avoid the presentation of details. The formal differences between the two genres also influence the number of characters. In narrative biography the only limit to the number of characters is the memory of the reader, in theatre it is also limited by organisational and financial concerns that restrict the number of actors available for a production. As most lives are characterised by the subject's interaction with a range of different people, this can result in problems. Doubling can be used in order to raise the number of characters, although it can lead to confusion on the part of the audience, as

well as problems with the co-presence of characters on stage if it is used extensively. More often, the dilemma is solved by a stricter selection on the level of the characters.

Biographical plays can thus be described as more selective in various ways: they often restrict themselves to the presentation of fewer events, in fewer places and with fewer characters. At the same time, their three-dimensional nature requires a wealth of details which a prose biography can withhold. This combination produces a greater immediacy of the presentation of past lives, which is responsible for what Peacock calls the theater's "almost magical power of resurrecting historical personages from their graves" (Peacock. 1991, 11). Such a seemingly life-like imitation of the world is made relative, however, by the fictional tradition of theatre. Even if audiences might feel that they see a slice of a past life on stage, their awareness of the mainly fictional nature of theatre performances counters this impression of authenticity. Individual performances can deal with this underlying paradox in different ways, emphasising the alive-ness of theatre or its fictional tradition, but all of them inherently contain both possibilities since they are influenced both by the structure and the generic traditions of theatre.

Chapter 4: Concepts of Biography in Published Scripts I: Plays without Meta-Biography

Introduction

The development and current coexistence of a variety of notions about life-writing and concepts of the past, as well as the contradictory influences given by the dramatic form create a fertile ground for artistic expression. As stated in the introduction, the following chapters are not intended to provide a comprehensive discussion of individual plays that originate in this tradition, but aim at providing an overview of the great diversity of ways in which biographical material is used in plays. This explains the strict limitations on the discussion of each individual play – aspects that do not further the understanding of the way life-writing is used are excluded, even in the case of plays that have been treated mainly with respect to some of these other aspects in previous academic or critical appraisal. The discussion is oriented towards the issues raised in the previous chapter on theories of history and biography and relates these to the material found in individual dramatic scripts. As a result, plays are discussed whenever they can illustrate an issue related to life-writing, and some of them are taken up again in a different context later on in the text. The results of the analysis in chapters 4 and 5 are complemented in chapter 6 by an exploration of comments made by playwrights about their own work.

One possible way to divide the vast range of biographical plays is according to the criterion of self-reflexivity. Such a distinction can be made for the whole of a play, whereas one that differentiates along the lines of a particular concept of biography would be very difficult to achieve as most of them contain contradictory elements that do not clearly advocate a homogenous notion of life-writing. This chapter is therefore structured on the basis of a distinction between plays that include self-reflexive elements and those that do not, with an additional differentiation between explicit and implicit biographical meta-levels.

Realism and Reconstruction in Plays without a Meta-Level

With a few exceptions, the majority of plays without a meta-level seems to adhere to a reconstructionist concept of biography, aiming to resurrect the figures of the past in a form that avoids raising questions about the process or the role of the people involved in its production. In the following paragraphs, the affinity between reconstructionist biography and realist forms of theatre is explored and examples are presented. Exceptions from this tendency, which Pavis describes as a confusion of two separate entities (Pavis. 1982, 172), i.e. content and form, are examined in the next part of the chapter.

The impression that a "slice of life", in these cases of life in the past, is acted out on stage is supported and reinforced by the prevalence of forms that do not call attention to the theatricality of these performances. Claimed to be the typical form of mainstream British theatre and referred

to by some as realism[1], these forms, are well suited to hide the fact that the status of a play is fundamentally different from that of the world outside it: accustomed to its structures, audiences are likely to be distracted from formal aspects of the play and from the fact that they are in the theatre. Presented in a form "which slides through the mind without difficulty" (Paget. 1990, 23), it heightens their interest in its contents. Unlike Keith Jenkins's image of a glass window through which we perceive the past, this understanding of realism originates in the desire to show life as it is outside the theatre, in the idea to grant the audience a glimpse into other people's lives through an invisible fourth wall.[2]

The closeness between this concept and empiricist historiography and biography suggests a shared origin, which can indeed be found in the concept of Realism as a period in theatre history. As Postlewait confirms "the aesthetic philosophies of realism and naturalism, [were] influenced by positivism in the sciences" (Postlewait. 2003, 1114). Their shared origin, however, does not make the term applicable for plays written and produced after 1986, a long time after the end of this historical Realism as the predominant form in the theatre. In other disciplines the term has been adapted to describe a particularly close mimetic relationship between artistic forms and practices and the world outside them (cf. Williams. 1980, 1). As Armstrong observes in his work on realism in film, "realisms are relative, slipping in and out of and between other factors such as narrative, genre and audience [...] Rather than standing for a particular aesthetic, realism exists on a sort of sliding scale, each gradation of which is defined more or less by the realism which came before and went after it" (Armstrong. 2005, ix – x). Following his description, my definition of these forms is more concerned with aesthetic than with social or political aspects connected to it. In addition, the relativity of Armstrong's definition means that a definite and absolute classification of any play or part thereof as realist is impossible, as the effect it creates depends on the recipients' ideas about the 'reality' of world as well as on their concepts of representation, which are, in turn, heavily influenced by conventions.

In order to acknowledge these differences from the prevalent definition in theatre studies as Realism in a historical sense, the term is substituted in the following by the concept of extra-theatricality. This notion is based on Willmar Sauter's scale of theatricality, developed "as an indication of different ways of perceiving styles of performing" (Sauter. 2000, 62). He differentiates between the perception of plays as extra-theatrical, i.e. life-like, and intra-theatrical where the differences between theatre and our life world are emphasised. The degree to which individual performances are perceived as either one or the other then leads to their positioning on a scale between 1 and 10 that expresses their position between the (only

---

[1] Cf. Cohn, Ruby. 1992, 815: "Realism is the dominant style of modern drama."

[2] In this context it is interesting to remark that the idea of the exclusion of the audience from the "life" on stage is not only important for the effect on the observer, but can also have an impact on the imagination of the actors. In Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, the director spends considerable time on training his students to concentrate their attention on stage, teaching them to regard the proscenium aperture as a closed fourth wall through which they are not observed.

49

theoretically possible) poles of absolute life-likeness or extra-theatricality (0) and entire artifice or intra-theatricality that does not share any similarities with the world in which the spectator lives (10).

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
extra -   intra-theatrical

Sauter's terminology thus presents an alternative to the labelling of a performance as 'realist' in order to express its high degree of similarity to our everyday world. In addition it offers the advantage of underlining the relativity of such a classification, as the evaluation of a play's intra- or extra-theatricality is based on contextual parameters such as conventions, performative genre, codes of everyday behaviour "in typical and significant national patterns (such as verbal and getural expressions, movement patterns, proxemic relationships, dress codes, and colour codes)," and the social context of performer and spectator (cf. Sauter. 2000, 62). On this basis, it can explain why our notion of life-likeness in theatre today differs vastly from the ideas proposed by Realist theatre makers a hundred years ago, and the use of a different terminology avoids confusion between the idea of extra-theatricality as a seemingly invisible translation of material onto the stage and the specific formal elements in which this concept was expressed in Realist theatre.

A further clarification can be made by applying Sauter's scale not just to a performance as a whole, but by differentiation further between various aspects of a play that can be perceived as extra- or intra-theatrical. Most definitions of realism refer to both content and form, as for example Ruby Cohn who applies the term to theatrical imitations of life that are "recognisable in verisimilitude of setting, coherence of character, modernity of problems and prosaic quality of dialogue" (Cohn. 1992, 815). With Sauter's terminology, however, the difference between the two can be expressed by additional qualifying adjectives, such as formal extra-theatricality or thematic extra-theatricality. This distinction allows a more accurate discussion of biographical theatre and a more specific comparison to the idea of reference in academic historiography and biography. Formal similarities and references to a previously known life story can be discussed separately and the impact of form and content can be clearly distinguished.

In comparison to written accounts of the past it can be said that the three-dimensional nature of the theatre increases its life-likeness on a formal level, while thematic extra-theatricality is governed less by the idea of exact correspondence, but by the idea of probability. This probability, defined in a broad sense by Katherine Worth as extending from the "meticulously 'accurate' slice of life play and at the other [end] the play which only just keeps within the

bounds of ordinary [...] probability,"[3] is narrowed in biographical theatre by the audience's knowledge about a historical life. Taking this into account, along with Armstrong's observation that truth effects are created if "texts conform to what we generally believe about experience" (Armstrong. 2005, 9), it can be expected that the impression of an accurate re-construction of a past life in a biographical plays does not only depend on its contents, but can be reinforced by the use of extra-theatrical elements that do not call attention to its status as theatre[4].

Offering the possibility to address these two aspects individually, Sauter's terminology presents a helpful tool for analysis in the following chapters. In addition, his emphasis on the perception of a play as either extra- or intra-theatrical underlines the relativity of any such description: none of the observations in the following two chapters can be regarded as absolute, but acknowledging the limitations of an interpretation by a single reader and spectator who is aware of prevalent theatrical conventions, they can still indicate to a certain degree how likely it is that elements of it create truth effects (cf. p. 31) for other spectators. Just as some publications on historiography and biography identify textual elements that support the impression of an apparently neutral and objective text, the following sections analyse the way in which conventions associated with formal extra-theatricality have the potential to create an apparently faithful reconstruction of a past life as it was.

Physical and Biological Rules for the Extra-Theatrical Presentation of Characters

First and foremost, the perception of extra-theatricality in the theatre is often based on a comparison to an empiricist scientific world view, similar to that of reconstructionist biography, and as a result natural laws that apply in the world have to be respected on stage as well. On the level of the characters this means that they have to resemble real human beings. For plays, the presence of real persons on stage makes this prerequisite easier to attain, however, it is also possible to avoid it, e.g. by introducing fantastical beings or endowing the characters with supernatural forces. In most of the biographical plays without a metalevel, however, the characters are presented as human beings like those beyond the stage space. In addition to the similarities given by the presence of live actors, some plays stipulate further efforts in order to enhance this impression. This is mostly done by the production team, but some playwrights explicitly stipulate them in their texts. Winsome Pinnock, whose play *A Rock in the Water* describes various stages in the life of activist Claudia Jones from her childhood in New York to

---

[3] Worth. 1973, vii – viii. Her definition also echoes Aristotle's statement that the poet has to describe "what is likely to happen: that is, what capable of happening according to the rule of **probability** or necessity" (Aristotle. 1970, 33, bold UC).

[4] This association between extra-theatrical forms and reconstructionist history or biography is further emphasised by the traditional presentation of historical material in plays in genres that are not characterised by the prevalence of intra-theatrical elements. Such a relationship between forms of emplotment and habits of perception is also pointed out by Lindenberger when he observes that "we rarely think of history as comedy" (Lindenberger. 1975, 72) and, for written historical texts, by White and his modes of emplotment (cf. White. 1973).

her death in 1965, specifies two different roles in her list of dramatis personae: "Claudia Jones" and "Claudia Jones *as a girl*" (Pinnock. 1989, 47). Although no exact dates are given in the play, the changes of the character from a child dependent on her mother to an adult suggest an ageing process that would be harder to convey with a single actress who in the same time ages merely 2 hours. On the one hand this seems to be an attempt at life-like characterisation of the protagonist where psychological and physical development take place in parallel, on the other hand it clearly shows the importance of conventions. The splitting of a character into the two different roles of child and adult appears to be less disruptive to this aim than the presentation of children by adults.

In *Tom and Viv*, there is no indication of casting more than one actor for any of the characters, but close attention to dates and age-related symptoms in the characters suggests that the presentation of advancing age is still important to the author. In the list of dramatis personae he indicates the progress of age made by each character throughout the play. In addition, each of its parts is set in a specific year, and physical changes over time, such as Viv's menopause, are mentioned explicitly in the text (Hastings. 1985, 120). Attention to dates and the age of the characters can be observed in various plays, as for example in *The General from America* and *Columbus and the Discovery of Japan*. Of particular interest in this context is *After Darwin*, in which only the scenes of the biographical play within the play are given specific dates, whereas no precise temporal indication is given for the others.[5] Many other playwrights, however, leave it to other people involved in the actual production to decide whether and how the impression of an ageing process that imitates that experienced by humans in the world outside the theatre is provided.

Another indicator of the characters' subjection to the same biological laws as human beings is the presentation of illnesses on stage. In Claire Tomalin's *The Winter Wife* Katherine Mansfield's fight against tuberculosis is a central aspect of the play. The opposition between her mind, which complains that "there are so many things [she] want[s] to describe" (Tomalin. 1991, 37) and her body that is giving her little time to do this strongly supports the illusion that this invented character, although at this point of the process merely existent in the form of words on a page, is actually a fully fledged person. It can be supported further by the imitation of signs of an illness on the body of the actor, thus apparently reconstructing the condition of the body of the past in the present. Other biographical plays that present illnesses of historical figures in a extra-theatrical form are, for example, *The Madness of George III* and *Tom and Viv*. Death as an inevitable part of biological life, on the other hand is only rarely presented in biographical plays. *Gladiator Games* is an interesting exception, where the reconstruction of Zahid Mubarek's life begins with an image of his "body on a stretcher" – at the end of this scene he is declared dead and *"The DOCTOR pulls a sheet over ZAHID's body"* (Gupta. 2005, 35 and 42). In contrast to other plays where the audience are merely reminded of the characters'

---

[5] Cf. Nelson. 1992 and 1996, as well as Wertenbaker. 1998.

mortality through spoken allusions or through their knowledge that the historical characters on which the plays are based have died, Tanika Gupta thus presents us from the very beginning with the story of a character who, like the human being he represents, suffers death.

Having described how various texts closely imitate the effects of biological influences on the body in the form of age and illness, it is important to point out that theatrical conventions allow certain deviations from this practice without greatly undermining the impression of an extra-theatrical play. Some of the plays mentioned above contain scenes in which characters that have been reported dead reappear: in scene 22 of *A Rock in the Water*, Claudia Jones is seen again as a little girl (Pinnock. 1989, 91) after her death has been announced in the previous scene. Similarly, the voice of the dead Katherine Mansfield interrupts the fond reminiscences of her friend Ida at the end of *The Winter Wife* (Tomalin. 1991, 44). Even though these instances could be regarded as serious threats to the illusion of reality presented on stage, an interpretation chosen by Stephanie Kramer in her interpretation of Tomalin's play (Kramer. 2000b, 171), I would argue that the frequency with which such devices are used in theatre and other media, particularly film and television, could mean that audiences no longer perceive this as an intrusion of the unreal. Alternatively Katherine's voice could be understood as the audible imitation of Ida's thought. As such it would show how conventions determine which ways of making the imperceptible accessible to the audience are considered natural. In the case of Claudia Jones's return as a child, the audience have to be accustomed even more to narrative conventions, here that of a flashback. Nevertheless, such slight deviations from a strict chronology, presented in conventional ways, are not necessarily sufficient to produce a lasting distraction from an otherwise extra-theatrical performance. Such an interpretation would be consistent with the definition of formal extra-theatricality that attempts to create a close imitation of reality, albeit with conventional means.

Behaviour and Psychological Motivation

In addition to the biological rules discussed above, the psychological construction can also be of importance for the creation of the impression of extra- or intra-theatricality. Characters in extra-theatrical plays usually mirror the features considered to be essential to human psychology: they are conscious of their own existence and its limitations, endowed with the capacity to think in a rational way, they accumulate experience and use it in order to give their behaviour and opinions coherence, and they interact with other people in a way that allows successful communication. As these expectations are usually fulfilled in theatre, they mainly become visible in plays where characters are not built according to them, for example in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The rationality of characters built according to this model is often shown in scenes in which they judge a situation correctly, draw conclusions from it which can be considered to be logical

according to 'common sense', and then execute their plans based on this analysis. Although this sounds like a long and complex process, it is the basis of many apparently obvious actions and thoughts both in everyday life and theatre, which is only noticed if someone does not follow the usual procedures. Facing her advancing illness, Katherine in *The Winter Wife*, for example, concludes that *"If* I do not have long to live, I want to spend the time I have in saying – or starting to say – what I know about the world" (Tomalin. 1991, 37), a plan which is completed later on in the play when she finishes her book (Tomalin. 1991, 39). Her behaviour here follows the pattern outlined above, but it would only attract attention if she deviated from it and did something considered to be entirely unrelated or an illogical consequence, such as booking a holiday at that moment.

The accumulation of experience can be observed in the effect which memories of previous situations and events have on the characters in various plays. In *Vincent in Brixton*, for example,[6] Van Gogh's tobacco reminds his landlady of her father who also used to smoke an unusual blend (Wright. 2003, 25), and the protagonist of Pam Gems's *Stanley* is troubled by traumatic memories from the war (Gems. 1996, 2 - 3). Reporting such a background thus seems to give the characters the depth that would be expected of individuals outside the theatre.

The forms of accepted social interaction are also respected in most extra-theatrical biographical plays. The only departures from this rule are marked as deviations which, on the contrary, can even reinforce the existence of an accepted, norms of extra-theatricality. King George's behaviour in Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III* is a good example of such a clearly marked abnormality. The change from his perfectly rational and socially competent conduct at the beginning of the play to his irrational and offensive actions is announced by his medic, who attributes physical causes to it, and classified as "mad" by other characters (Bennett. 1992, 16) before it is presented on stage. After this declaration, he can show unreasonable behaviour such as accusing his clothes of being itchier than ever, ignoring the sensitivity of his legs, make indecent proposals to Lady Pembroke that counter social decorum and fail to remember names which had been part of his memory before his illness (Bennett. 1992, 20 and 17 – 18). Rather than raising questions about the concept of human character, his behaviour reaffirms these assumptions, as in this state "His Majesty [is declared] not [to be] himself" by other characters (Bennett. 1992, 20).

A last aspect of the extra-theatrical presentation of characters is the attempt to create rounded characters with a great range of characteristics on different levels who imitate the complexity of human beings and have, according to Forster who described them in the context of the novel, "the incalculability of life about it" (Forster. 1974, 81). The impression of a multi-facetted character can be made possible by showing him in various social roles and in interaction with a

---

[6] I would not consider Nicholas Wright's play a typical example of a reconstructionist biography, as the fact that it is mainly based on speculation can open up questions about the possibility of recreating the past. Nevertheless, it achieves this effect through the use of formal extra-theatricality and can therefore provide good examples of the way in which these forms can create the impression of authenticity.

range of other characters, as in *Stanley*, where the conversations between Stanley Spencer and his artist friends, as well as a short dialogue with their maid helps to show his understanding of art and his personality rather than advancing the action. Similarly, information about their off-stage activities can make the characters appear more complex: allusions to Ursula's devotion to her school in *Vincent in Brixton*, for instance, help to present her not only as self-centred due to her depression, but also as socially committed. All of the aspects examined above demonstrate how authors create their characters according to common anthropological concepts, even if conventions are often necessary to produce the impression of similarity. For biographical drama, an extra-theatrical approach to characters is a basic requirement if a play is intended to provide a truthful reconstruction of a historical life, as correspondence between the past and an account of it can only be achieved if the biographee is seen as a human being in both of them.

Speech and Language

Language, as one of the means of expression of the characters, is closely related to characterisation, and an imitation of everyday speech can acquire a "pseudo-real character" (Schaff. 1992, 29), contributing to the extra-theatrical effect that can support the idea of biographical reconstruction. Here again conventions play an important part. Dramatic language is by no means a faithful copy of spontaneous spoken language but, on the contrary, a highly artificial construct which merely copies some key features on the syntactic, morphemic and lexical levels. Some examples of this are the use of unfinished sentences, of the short forms of the verb to be, and the inclusion of colloquialisms and swear words that are considered inappropriate for a formal text, all of them features that can be found in most of the dramas discussed in this section. Furthermore, the speech of many characters in plays with a high degree of extra-theatricality is often individualised, imitating the idiolect every human being possesses. It is composed of diatopic (regional) and diastratic variations (those dependent on their social group), adaptations of speech in specific situations (diaphasic) and entirely individual speech patterns. Diatopic variations, for instance, can be observed in the speech of foreign characters such as Vincent and his sister Anna in *Vincent in Brixton*, who insert a few foreign words such as "dubbeltjies" in their English (Wright. 2003, 48), a variation which can be extended in the production through phonetic variations. Some writers, such as Edward Bond in *The Fool* also indicate regional pronunciations in their spelling. Diastratic variations are also often expressed through the use of non-standard forms: in *A Rock in the Water*, Claudia's mother and her fellow workers in a sweat shop use double negations - "I don't want no trouble" and verb forms such as "ain't" which would be avoided by speakers from a different social background (Pinnock. 1989, 56). Diaphasic differences are often caused by a change in the configuration of characters on stage which provides a new social constellation, for example when the pages of George III in Bennett's play presume that he is absent and switch from impeccable, formal English into a more colloquial style, calling their monarch "old boy"

(Bennett. 1992, 18). For biographical drama, adding unique speech patterns to the idiolect of a character on top of the characteristics that are merely typical of a particular group or in specific situations can reinforce biography's focus on an individual. In some plays these are given further prominence as in *The Madness of George III*, where the regaining of the King's "what-whatting" underlines that he has "come to himself again" (Bennett. 1992, xi), as Bennett himself points out.

While these characteristics of the dramatic language contribute mainly to the creation of rounded, individualised characters, the observance of basic maxims of communication serves to avoid attracting attention to language and, as a consequence, to the different ontological status of text, or text-based performance, and reality. Just as speakers do not tend to reflect on their communication as "a special case of purposive, indeed rational, behaviour" (Grice. 1989. 28), it is unlikely that audiences would do so, unless prompted by unexpected linguistic behaviour on the part of the characters. In his Cooperative Principle Grice makes explicit a number of rules for communication that are usually observed unconsciously, determining the quantity and quality (or truthfulness) of the information given, its relevance and the manner in which it is provided, i.e. in a clear, precise and ordered way.[7]

In extra-theatrical plays, as opposed again to more highly intra-theatrical forms, such as the Theatre of the Absurd for example, these rules are usually followed: characters give enough but not too much information that is relevant to the topic of conversation, mostly true to the best of their knowledge, and they present it in an understandable way, thus letting the underlying assumptions of their conversations and the role played by language in the plays pass unperceived.

As long as exceptions are motivated, they do not necessarily lead to further reflection on the role of language. Appropriate reasons can be given by theatrical conventions which allow, for example, answers that contain information which is not directly relevant to the question asked by another character but is of interest to the audience. When asked if he has friends in London, the protagonist of *Vincent in Brixton* answers his landlady with a long-winded self-characterisation, whose relevance exists only for the communication between those who present the play and the audience (cf. Wright. 2003, 4). In *The Madness of George III*, the King's breaches of the maxims of conversation, just as his socially unacceptable or irrational behaviour, are motivated on the level of the plot. Once declared mad he is free to fantasise and to continue conversations in irrelevant ways, and his outbursts are unlikely to raise questions about the role of language in the apparent reconstruction of this historical character. On the contrary, they are probably even more convincing as outbursts from a mad character than as careful imitation of these written by an entirely sane author.

---

[7] For Grice's presentation of these rules cf. Grice. 1989, 26 – 7; a good summary can also be found in Taylor. 1992, 139 – 41.

Besides creating a language that is sufficiently similar to that used in everyday conversations, biographical drama has the capacity to take extra-theatricality one step further from imitation to the documentation of reality, effecting a shift from probability to correspondence as it is usually understood in the study of history. A relatively small number of plays use original dialogue or texts from the historical figure they portray. In the case of *Harvey Lee Oswald*, recorded court proceedings are combined with invented conversations of a more personal nature between the characters. It could be argued that the authenticity of some of the material heightens the credibility of the new dialogue, an effect which is hardly unintended as there are no indications in the play which put the resurrection of people from the past into question. Furthermore, the popularity of flashbacks means that the switches between the court scenes and the reminiscences are unlikely to call attention to the narrative structure of the play. The exclusive use of original texts produced by a young activist in *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is another case where "direct authentification penetrat[es] into the performance text itself" (Paget. 1990, 4).[8]

Recreating Space on Stage

Whereas conventions play an important but comparatively limited part in explaining the small number of exceptions to the frequent imitation of the language and behaviour of human beings in dramatic characters, they are central for an understanding of the setting and design of extra-theatrical performances. Creating the surroundings of the biographical character, they can also contribute to the impression that the world of the past is faithfully imitated on stage. Nevertheless, the stage today is no longer seen as a place for naturalistic settings, copying surroundings in minute detail and as true to life as possible.[9] Such a narrow understanding of imitation in the setting survives in film today, but in theatre, less detailed references to places that do or could exist in the world outside are often regarded as sufficient to create the illusion of extra-theatricality (cf. Chapter 7 on design). An exhaustive discussion of the degree of similarity that is still necessary for the perception of a design as an extra-theatrical depiction of actual surroundings is only possible with references to the designs chosen for individual productions. I therefore reserve it for the following chapter, in the context of the published scripts I consider merely how the suggestions made by playwrights can suggest extra- or intra-theatrical settings.

Few authors concern themselves with details of the design. Nicholas Wright's stage directions in *Vincent in Brixton*, which indicate the different stages in the preparation of a meal, are one of the very few examples where the playwright desires a wealth of specific details of the design and the use of props, such as kitchen tools and an oven. Most authors restrict their descriptions

---

[8] For a description of the way in which the impression of authenticity is countered by formal aspects, cf. p. 66.

[9] Some good examples of naturalistic stage design at the beginning of the twentieth century and of spectacular effects can be found in Castle. 1984 where, among other examples, the staging of a train accident which involved a live horse is described.

to comments that indicate general settings and their preference for a more extra- or intra-theatrical of it. Tanika Gupta, for example, stipulates that one of Stewart's monologues in *Gladiator Games* is *"going on in STEWART's head"* and is thus placed outside any geographic location. Nevertheless she only indicates that the director and scenographer should employ *"some stage craft to signify this"* (Gupta. 2005, 95). The use of specific places which exist in the world is a strong signal for extra-theatricality in the design. Used by many authors, they differ in their degree of specificity, from a street corner in Brooklyn in *A Rock in the Water* (Pinnock. 1989, 48) to a specific house such as "87 Hackford Road" where Vincent Van Gogh lodges in Nicholas Wright's play (Wright. 2003, 3). In addition they are known to the audience to a different degrees: the house where Katherine Mansfield and Ida Baker lived during their stay in Menton and where *The Winter Wife* is set will probably not be familiar to an audience, whereas some of the scenes of *The Madness of George III* are located in famous places as Windsor Castle, Westminster and St. Paul's Cathedral (Bennett. 1992, 69, 80 and 93). The possible effect of these locations on the production will be discussed in more detail later on in the thesis. In this context it suffices to say that a high degree of precision serves as an indication for the correspondence between exact locations taken from sources about a life and those used in its representation. As a result, it points to an understanding of biographical drama as a reconstruction of past lives and suggests an extra-theatrical interpretation in the actual design chosen.

In combination with stage directions which explicitly require intra-theatrical visual effects, however, the use of specific places leads to contradictory signals. In his introduction to *Vivat ! Vivat Regina!*, Robert Bolt seems to renounce the idea of extra-theatricality, declaring that "attempts to close the gap between stage and real life by pretending that it isn't there are doomed [...] the gap must be accepted and exploited" (Bolt. 1971, xvii). Some of the staging devices he suggests seem to support this claim, such as scenery that changes swiftly and visibly, "flying" in and out. Taking into account the entire stage direction *"St. James flies out as Hampton flies in"* (Bolt. 1971, 26), however, it can be seen that the way in which these changes take place suggests a higher degree of intra-theatricality and therefore contradicts the close link to the world created by the use of famous locales. In connection with other aspects of the play, namely the high reliance on material from other sources, the characterisation and some elements of the plot, this could be understood as a rare example of a biographical play that follows the idea of a reconstruction but tries to achieve this goal with intra-theatrical devices. Yet, whether such an effect can be achieved depends to a high degree on the concrete design and other contributions in an actual production.

Performing a Life in Two Hours

The degree of extra-theatricality in the presentation of time in biographical theatre also depends on many conventions. Some plays try to reduce their reliance on them by severely limiting the time performed and thus matching it to the length of the performance (cf. Ch. 3). This can even be observed in a small number of biographical plays, for instance in *In Extremis* by Neil Bartlett, which presents a short visit Oscar Wilde is said to have made to a fortune teller. Most biographical plays, however, present longer time spans, a tendency which may be partly explained by a general lack of popularity of the unity of time in modern drama, partly by the influence of the traditional concept of biography that begins with birth or childhood and ends with death (cf. Ch. 2). Particularly for plays that adhere to this tradition in life-writing, as for example *A Rock in the Water*, which includes scenes from Claudia's childhood onwards until her death, conventions have to be used to allow a longer time span to be performed within the performance time of one evening. As described in the previous chapter, the omission of time between individual scenes that present key moments can be regarded as a conventional solution to the problem of time, which is not necessarily perceived as a clear sign of theatricality. It can be observed in *Vincent in Brixton*, where every scene shows the events of one afternoon between which longer periods of time elapse. While this discrepancy between the passing of time in the theatre and human experience in the outside world can pass nearly unnoticed, the establishment of a basic chronological order appears to be essential for an extra-theatrical presentation of time. In reconstructionist biographies, as well as in extra-theatrical plays, it serves to suggest a faithful reflection of the way time passes in the world, and the great majority of plays without a meta-level observe at least a mainly linear procession of time. The chronological order of events in these plays can be observed in references to time, as for example Eugenie's correction of Vincent's assumptions about her baby in *Vincent in Brixton*: "This is a girl. The first was a boy. He's two-and-a-bit. You need a calendar" (Wright. 2003, 61). Alternatively the effects of previous actions or events can indicate if and how much time has passed: following his plans to go to "Lausanne to visit Gibbon [...] to Weimar to see Goethe" (Bennett. 1992, 5), Fox in *The Madness of George III* is reported to be "be abroad at present" (Bennett. 1992, 6) in the next scene, an indication that time has passed and he has put his plans into action. The linearity of the actions is made even clearer in plays where specific dates are indicated for individual scenes in the stage directions. In the scripts of *A Rock in the Water* and *Tom and Viv* a year is given for each part of the play, and *Vincent in Brixton* Wright gives the time span of 1873 – 1876 at the beginning of the play, specifying the exact setting of each scene according to the time of the year, day of the week and time of the day.[10] Specific dates additionally strengthen the link to the world outside the theatre, as they indicate a particular moment rather than a general period of time, once again evoking the notion of

---

[10] "*Winter. Sunday Morning*" (Wright. 2003, 3).

correspondence instead of probability. As dates of events in famous lives are not always widely known, the effect of authenticity provided by a date may even work for invented ones.[11]

Extra-Theatricality as Invisible Translation

In conclusion to these observations, it is possible to compare the concept of extra-theatricality to translation: just as translations between languages aim at maintaining the sense of the original text to the greatest possible degree in the target language, the idea of extra-theatricality in the plays discussed her to show the essence of life as it is on stage. In order to do this, translators and theatre makers change the form of presentation according to their target medium. This transfer of the material is bound to have an impact on it, and some of the necessary theatrical conventions have been described above. Just as idiomatic expressions, some elements of life cannot be translated literally onto the stage, but as it is widely thought that a good translation should not give the strange feel of a text originally written in a different language, formally extra-theatrical plays try to convey the impression of being life-like rather than being an art form. The invisible translation process[12] in extra-theatrical theatre can thus fulfil a function comparable to that of the neutral, academic language in prose biography. The difference in the conventions of the medium, i.e. the tradition of probability instead of correspondence, may explain the greater tolerance towards deviations from complete equivalence in every detail without endangering the overall impression of a truthful account. Moreover, the awareness of the gap between the past and its presentation can also be counterbalanced by the three-dimensional nature of theatre and the presence of live actors on stage. Taking into account the suitability of some theatrical conventions as an apparently "neutral" or "invisible" theatrical style, it is interesting to observe how some biographical plays written in this tradition still have the potential to undermine reconstructionist biography. The possibility of questioning the neutrality of representations and other aspects of traditional empiricist biography in plays without a meta-level is presented in the following paragraphs.

Intra-Theatrical Elements in Plays without a Meta Level

Although only a few examples were used to illustrate the close link between formal extra-theatricality and reconstructionist biography, a great number of biographical plays fall into this category.[13] In the next paragraphs, however, exceptional plays without a metabiographical level are presented. Some of them can also be described as formally extra-theatrical, but in contrast to those discussed previously, here they are employed in order to contradict the idea of reconstructionist biography. Using an apparently authentic form for the presentation of material

---

[11] Examples of audience reactions in which non-authentic material is perceived as historical can be found in Chapter 10.

[12] The possibility of other, visible translation processes is acknowledged, for example, by Niloufer Harben's discussion of *Early Morning*, where she tries to show how its intra-theatrical form can nevertheless relate clearly to historical antecedents (Harben. 1988).

[13] Cf. *The General from America, Columbus in Japan, Futurists, In Extremis, Total Eclipse* and others.

from a life which is not supported by evidence or even contradicts it, they undermine the traditional understanding of life-writing. Through the contrast between the extra-theatrical forms of presentation and a higher degree of intra-theatrical content they also have the potential to expose the seeming objectivity of other outwardly neutral versions of the past.

Alternative Versions

This potential is not always at the heart of changes or additions to the material documented in other historical sources. Shirley Gee, whose play *Warrior* narrates the story of Hannah Snell who lived her life as a man and soldier, admits freely that she uses mainly one historical source, but would not know "whether every word of it is true".[14] In addition to her uncertainty about the authenticity of her source, she introduces a small number of changes which include an entirely new ending that contradicts the previous version: in *Warrior*, Hannah Snell flees before she is brought to Bedlam. Gee's alteration does not necessarily have to be received as criticism of reconstructionist biography as it only concerns a small detail and the author is concerned to point it out as an exception to her general faithfulness to the source. The reason she gives for this exception, however, is revealing. Explaining that she "pressed Hannah in [her] services" (Gee. 1991, xi), she puts greater emphasis on her contemporary perspective and the wish to see Hannah as a successful example of a self-determined female life-story. Rather than challenging the possibility of reconstruction, Gee chooses to direct her attention towards the use of biography and its responsibility towards its contribution to today's society, a step that can already be seen as a departure from the pattern of reconstructionist, extra-theatrical plays described in the previous section. Alternatively, the fact that her changes are integrated neatly into the plot can point to the fact that life-stories may appear to be coherent and whole, when in fact they can only show one of the possible paths they might have taken.

Vincent in Brixton contains more invented material than *Warrior*, but in contrast to Gee's play there is no clear indication that the new elements are counterfactual. In his programme note, the playwright states that, although *Vincent* is based on "bits and pieces of evidence", his "speculat[ion] about what might have happened" is still aimed at providing at least a likely version of the unknown events in the artist's life.[15] The available documents contain just a few general descriptions of his surroundings, and the only elements explicitly mentioned in the letters are a short visit to Mrs. Loyer on the occasion of her birthday after he had moved away, as well as his knowledge of the quotation by Michelet. In the play Vincent relates it to Ursula and writes it underneath his drawing of her: "A woman is not old as long as she loves and is loved" (Van Gogh in *Programme for Vincent in Brixton*, 5). All the other elements of the plot

---

[14] Gee. 1991, x; the source she cites is Dugaw. 1989.
[15] Wright in *Programme for Vincent in Brixton*, 5. The considerable extent of his conjectures can be deduced from Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, which are also printed in the programme for the National Theatre production (cf. Chapter 8).

and the characters are additions designed by Wright to be in line with the available evidence.[16] At the same time, Wright's text suggests a high degree of extra-theatricality in its staging: the play is set in a single room and is firmly rooted in everyday life through various household activities; with the exception of the last of the four scenes only a short time elapses between them, and the protagonists are presented as rounded, psychologically motivated, life-like characters (cf. above). The contrast between the impression of absolute authenticity created through the mode of presentation and the information that the play presents only one possible version of Van Gogh's youth shows how the feeling of truthfulness in many biographical plays is constructed by formal means. This echoes the shift from the idea of truth as an intrinsic property of a text towards an understanding of it as an effect created by some kinds of text (cf. Ch. 2). Even if nothing in the play itself interrupts the impression of life-likeness, a comparison with other discourses shows the artifice that is necessary to achieve this formally highly extra-theatrical re-presentation. Thus *Vincent* can challenge the traditional concept of biography without departing from its form.

Tales from Hollywood by Christopher Hampton presents a variation on this discrepancy between form and content. In the first scene, his protagonist Ödön von Horváth describes the accident in which the historical Horváth got killed, but in the play another, anonymous person is struck down by a falling branch. For a short moment the play is given a metabiographical edge when Ödön reflects on his accident and realises that "no political theory or philosophical system [...] takes into account the workings of chance" (Hampton. 1983, 13). From this point on, however, the play uses extra-theatrical forms to present Horváth's life as it might have been had he lived longer, and the role of chance in life and life-writing is not examined further. As many German writers did, Ödön the character emigrates to Hollywood, and his imagined encounters are given further credibility through Hampton's careful research into this period and his fellow characters, among them Brecht and the Mann brothers.[17] Meetings between some of these characters, which, even if they sound unlikely, are nevertheless documented in further historical material, are presented in the intra-theatrical style of caricature. The characters of Johnny Weissmüller and Greta Garbo, for example, are based mainly on their famous screen appearances as jungle dunce and irresistible seductress with a foreign accent, and the script gives the respective actors ample space for comic performances.[18] The opposition of formal intra-theatricality and the thematic extra-theatricality of historically documented encounters suggests a complete dissociation of the idea of authenticity from style, thus undermining one of the pillars of reconstructionist biography.

In *Insignificance*, the discrepancy between formal extra-theatricality and material that is partly invented is indicated neither in the script itself, nor in any accompanying material. At first sight,

---

[16] A comparison with a few biographies of the painter confirms this impression.
[17] Cf. Hampton. 1983, 8-9 for a list of the most important publications that have influenced his play.
[18] Hampton. 1983, 15: "TARZAN: Me Johnny Weissmuller, you Thomas Mann." and 16: GARBO: "Ve vant to be alone."

the presentation of a meeting between the four characters could be seen as a typical reconstructionist account, such as those presented in the first section of this chapter. Yet, the incompatibility of some of the characters' actions and character traits with widely held assumptions about their famous models has the potential to inspire doubts about the authenticity of the material presented. On the one hand characters can be easily identified: the Jewish professor of physics who is called "Daddy of the H bomb" and who had to avoid Dachau (Johnson. 1986, 6) resembles Einstein. The Senator who describes his job as scaring those invited to talk to the House Committee for UnAmerican Activities (Johnson. 1986, 6) reminds the audience of McCarthy, and the blond actress who has her white, pleated skirt "blown up around [her] goddam ears" while filming in New York (Johnson. 1986, 8) and her baseball player husband share many similarities with Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio. On the other hand, their fame stems from entirely different realms of life, making these icons apparently incompatible with each other. As a result it seems unlikely that the audience should accept the plot of the play as the theatricalised version of a real-life encounter, even though the author provides a range of authenticating elements: he includes a specific time and place in the stage directions (Johnson. 1986, 3), provides references to real events, places and persons in abundance and generally adheres to the conventions associated with extra-theatricality.[19] The great comic effect achieved by *Insignificance* through the discrepancy between general assumptions about the historical figures and their presentation in Terry Johnson's play, however, suggests that reflection about the blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction and the role played by the style of presentation is of less importance to the play. Mixing the general perception of a famous life with unexpected elements here predominantly proves to be a great source of entertainment.

Nevertheless, by contradicting or surpassing the information available about historical figures in other documents, the previous plays have the potential to undermine the idea that figures of the past can be resurrected on stage, which is described in the first part of this chapter. Without explicitly or implicitly discussing the concept of biography they prove that at least a momentary impression of authenticity can be created by the style of presentation alone. At the same time these plays are of great interest to the study of the reception process of biographical plays. They provide specific references to the world outside the play, but unlike those in other plays, these cannot easily be combined with further background information and studying this incompatibility can illuminate the impact which the connection between the world and the theatre can have on the audience's approach to a play (cf. Ch. 10).

---

[19] The reasons given by individual spectators for their lack of belief in the play's authenticity are discussed in more detail in Ch. 10.

Indicating Perspective through Time Structures

In a range of other biographical plays without a meta-level, intra-theatrical elements serve to point out the aspect of creation rather than reconstruction in biography. Several of them attract attention to the role of the dramatist and his influence on the presentation of a life. Alternatives to a extra-theatrical patterns of presenting time, for example, can reveal the playwright's selecting presence without establishing a metalevel through his direct presence or constant references. In *Queen Christina*, the long temporal gap between the first scene, in which the King decides to make his daughter fit to reign after another male child is born dead (Gems. 1982, 2), and the presentation of Christina's adult life gives particular prominence to the only childhood scene included in the play. Apart from demonstrating clearly that the scenes in this play do not follow a "natural" order but are carefully selected, the emphasis on the decision in the first scene also spells out the perspective which the playwright gives to her account of Christina's life: her inner conflict caused by her education in another gender role. This focus is consolidated by the selection of key moments that further illustrate her conflicting roles as King and fertile woman. Although taken from a long time span, the scenes are closely connected and no events of the time that has passed between them are related, thus indicating their lack of importance compared to this central conflict.[20] Without any clear reference to the author, this time scheme nevertheless demonstrates the highly selective version given of Christina's life in Gems's play. Against the playwright's affirmation that she wanted to correct the image of the Swedish Queen as a graceful woman with a man's political talent and courage, conveyed by the film starring Greta Garbo (Mamoulian. 1933; Gems. 1986, 47), it supports Harding's claim that the play is "oddly enough, only really concerned with historical accuracy when it comes to correcting the misleading, physical image [...]. In other respects, the drama is about as free with history as the Garbo film itself" (Harding. 2000, 180). Instead of seeing it as flawed in its historical accuracy, this can also be regarded as the expression of an alternative concept of biography as one possible account of a life written by a positioned author, who in this case is frank about her perspective. Such an interpretation is supported by Gems's repeated use of this technique: *Piaf* begins with an image of Edith Piaf breaking down on stage (Gems. 1985, 11), before it returns to the moment when she is discovered by Louis Leplée (Gems. 1985, 12). The success story is thus always seen in the context of the personal troubles she suffered later – the revision of the myth from a specific perspective becomes evident.

This technique is developed further by John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy in *The Hero Rises Up*. Before the major events unfold, three of the characters present themselves, the background to their story and their position in the following conflict. Each of them takes the role of narrator and presents his or her individual perspective, often in the form of songs or poems (e.g. Arden / D'Arcy. 1969, 17 and 20). A summary of their points of view, provided by scene titles such as

---

[20] For a more detailed discussion of the time scheme of the play cf. Canton. 2003. unpublished MA dissertation.

"The Hero Utters His Complaint" or "The Heroine Utters Her Defiance" (Arden / D'Arcy. 1969, 16 and 18) further emphasises their different positions. The exposition concludes with an announcement by Captain Nisbet that introduces a return to the past where the story told in the play begins.[21] Although the time structure is not particularly extra-theatrical throughout the play - some events are summed up in a song or description whereas other passages take place simultaneously (e.g. Arden / D'Arcy. 1969, 50 - 51) - this moment marks the beginning of a linear progression of time. The structure of *The Hero Rises Up* could thus be interpreted as a story of Nelson's love life preceded by an introduction to a range of points of view from which it can be seen. Through this, the variety of positions from which a life can be examined is brought to attention, and additional epic means further underline the shaping influence of the author. Emphasising the importance of perspective, these plays change the praxis of biography from an apparent reconstruction to a positioned account without establishing a discourse about its form.

Other Intra-Theatrical Elements

In the plays discussed above, the existence of formally intra-theatrical devices facilitates an emphasis on the selecting presence of the playwright or other members of the production team,[22] just as the choice of counterfactual, or thematically intra-theatrical, material in connection with specific references directs attention to his imaginative contribution. Yet, in *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, a production about the young human rights activist who was killed by an Israeli tank, the influence of the editor is made more conspicuous by the extreme fidelity to the subject's own words and the lack of more editorial changes to the pre-existing material. With the exception of the eyewitness's report of her death, heard in the voice of a second actor at the end of the performance, all the texts in the play are taken from emails, diary entries or messages on answering machines by Rachel herself and are therefore extremely extra-theatrical. Even if these formats could be successfully integrated into extra-theatrical dialogue, their combination into a series of monologues standing on their own constitutes an unusual textual basis for a theatre performance. As a result the play appears to be a deliberately assembled collage as opposed to a life-like reflection of moments in Rachel Corrie's life. The influence exercised by the editor Alan Rickman is again emphasised, although here it is achieved through the uncommented use of fragments of original historical sources rather than the deliberate creation of thematically intra-theatrical elements. Another play in which the use of verbatim quotation contrasts with intra-theatrical devices is *Stuff Happens*. In the published version of the script, the use of some verbatim material is further endorsed with a picture of George Bush Jr. and

---

[21] "So let us place it. After the Battle of the Nile, Naples was technically neutral. King Ferdinand was the abominable monarch... *Enter the King* [...] So, King Ferdinand, being abominable, fled" (Arden /D'Arcy. 1969, 21).

[22] As this is less likely to be indicated in the script, their contributions will be discussed in the context of individual productions in chapter 7.

Donald Rumsfeld on the cover. Within the text, however, no reference system is used to back up the play's claim to use original material throughout large parts of it. On the contrary, following his statement that "what happened happened", which can be read as a claim that the play deals with known figures and events, Hare's introductory note proceeds to tell its readers that "when the doors close on the world's leaders and on their entourages, then I have used my imagination" (Hare. 2004. no page number). The lack of a clear differentiation in the author's note is furthered by the proximity of both elements in the play: although private conversations are invented according to Hare's own definition, they are presented together with an exact date in the text, which is reminiscent of formats that use only verbatim quotation: "**Bush** Donald I need to see you alone. **An Actor** On November 21st 2001, George Bush leads Donald Rumsfeld into an empty office next to the Situation Room" (Hare. 2004, 31). Markus Wessendorf observes this contrast in the play, declaring that the lack of a clear distinction between "verbatim quotes from historical figures and conjectured dialogues between them [could] blend so well that they almost make for a certain unease [...]. Reality and fabrication seem inseparable and suggest a perfectly believable simulacrum of the 'stuff' that really 'happened'" (Wessendorf. 2006). It could thus be argued that the play uses original text in order to raise the expectation that the play as a whole presents these events accurately.

Nevertheless, this impression is countered by the opening scene that introduces the Real as "what will strike you as really absurd" (Hare. 2004, 3) and thus initiates reflection about the concept of reality. Other elements further support such reflexivity and emphasis on intra-theatricality. One of them is the recreation of narrative structures: speeches by historical characters are introduced with phrases such as "A friend says" (Hare. 2005, 5), a method reminiscent of Brecht's He Said / She Said exercise. In the same way, actors add short explanations about the lesser-known characters, adding phrases like "George Tenet. Director, CIA." (Hare. 2004, 12). This leads, according to Wessendorf to "the permanent oscillation between a simulacrum of historical reality and the metatheatricality of the play itself" (Wessendorf. 2006). The use of formally intra-theatrical elements in these plays thus counters the idea that the use of verbatim quotation always creates an impression of authenticity, and it remains to be seen whether form or content are more important for the felt credibility of biographical plays.

On the level of characterisation there seems to be, at first glance, an opposite development. The presentation of a character whose thought and behaviour are irrational could be ascribed to a less intrusive author, who presents a subject as it is without imposing his own standards of rationality. In contrast to *The Madness of George III*, in *In Ruins*, for instance,[23] there is no other character who, in lieu of the author, helps to indicate the difference between the King's

---

[23] Although his play was premiered on BBC Radio 3, a later performance at the Old Vic theatre seems to justify its discussion in this thesis.

mad ramblings and more reliable information about his life. Here the character George's account of his own life, just as his rendition of Händel at the beginning of the play, "starts to degenerate [and] before long is barely recognisable" (Dear. 2000, 103). Even though he maintains references to historical persons, places or events known to or experienced by him, such as his wife Charlotte, St. James's Palace or the loss of the American colonies (e.g. Dear. 2000, 107 and 119), he intermingles them indiscriminately with those he did not meet, as for example biblical Noah (Dear. 2000, 111). The meaning of his speeches is further confused by an absolute disregard for semantic affinities shown, for instance, in phrases such as "bite the music" (Dear. 2000, 105). Leaving the audience to judge the degree to which his monologue provides reliable information, Nick Dear seems to step back into the role of the apparently disinterested writer who presents his subject as he was. As the perspective chosen is, however, unusual, it does attract more attention. It is therefore likely that Dear's influence is even more prominent than Bennett's.

Even if the number of plays discussed in the second part of this chapter is smaller than that of highly extra-theatrical, reconstructionist biographies presented in the first section, the diversity of forms found among them suggests that the dissociation of a particular concept of biography from a specific form leads to the creation of highly varied work, varied both in their use of references to the world outside the theatre and in their choice of theatrical techniques. This observation supports the understanding of biographical drama as a hybrid which is influenced by our understanding of theatre as well as of life-writing, both areas which have experienced greater heterogeneity in the last couple of decades. The rise of new theoretical approaches to the writing of the past, now co-existent with the once mandatory standard of objectivity, and the substitution of the standard of the well-made play as the main form of respectable theatre has thus produced a wealth of new forms of biographical drama. The new variety underlines further the need for a new approach to the genre, one that regards the genre's hybridity as a complex interconnection of different influences from theatrical and biographical concepts rather than a simple opposition between the poles of fictionality and factuality. Such a concept also offers an appropriate context for an analysis of another innovation to the genre: dramatic metabiography.

Chapter 5: Concepts of Biography in the Published Scripts II: Meta-Biographical Plays

Biographical meta-levels can be seen as the consequence of a shift in which theoretical arguments about different ways of dealing with the past are moved from secondary literature into the plays themselves. It is another development that can be seen as the result of the demand for more reflection about historical and biographical methodology, as well as an increasing tendency towards self-reflexivity in theatre. Distinguishing meta-drama from isolated instances in plays that interrupt the fictional world created in them, Patricia Waugh defined it as plays which "self-consciously and systematically draw attention to [their] status as [...] artefacts in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh. 1984, 2). In addition to the requirement of a constant self-reflexivity, a further restriction is made for the discussion in the following chapter: even though some biographical plays reflect on their status as plays or as pieces of art in general,[1] the focus here is put on meta-biography.

Plays with an Explicit Meta-Level

Following Stephanie Kramer, I divide this discussion of the different aspects of meta-biography in theatre into implicit and explicit meta-levels,[2] focussing first on the latter, where, according to Kramer, the past becomes the object of remembrance or of investigation" (cf. Kramer. 2000a, 127) through the representation or discussion of biographical activity on stage. Theoretically it is possible to argue in favour of a reconstructionist notion of biography on such a meta-level, for example by presenting a biographer whose objectivity is uncompromised. Such an attempt still has to accommodate the possibility that the simple presentation of the process of writing a life can disturb the apparent neutrality of the account. It is therefore not surprising that most plays that could be considered to present a reconstructionist search for a past life use verbatim quotation from original documents, one of the most powerful indications towards thematic extra-theatricality.

In *Gladiator Games*, this promise of verbatim material is reinforced by the use of a citation system, explained in a "List of Sources" (Gupta. 2005, 32), that relates the majority of the speeches to the documents used in the Inquiry into Zahid Mubarek's death[3]. It is further supported by the portrayal of an official inquiry in the play, as this introduces a context in which the idea that language can convey the truth about a past event is not questioned. As in tribunal plays, most of the original texts quoted in Gupta's script were given in a situation where lying,

---

[1] *The Art of Success* could be described as meta-artistic, whereas the play in the play in *Playhouse Creatures* constitutes a good example of meta-drama.

[2] Cf. Kramer. 2000a, 126; this differentiation can also be justified by differences in the challenges to traditional biography presented in the two groups.

[3] Some conversations among Zahid's family members are, here again, excepted from this referencing system. Through the rigorous use of references for the verbatim material, however, they are clearly presented as exceptions that confirm the thoroughness of the citation system. In addition, Gupta's acknowledgement of the help which she received from the Mubarek family in writing this play suggests that these parts may not be based word by word on their conversations but do not contradict anything the family might have said.

i.e. saying something that does not reflect the events of the past as they happened, can have extremely serious consequences for those involved. Despite editorial interference with the context of these quotations, it is thus likely that the idea that language can convey truth, which is uncontested in the original situation, is seen to be imported together with the quotations from it. When the character of Imtiaz, Zahid Mubarek's cousin who takes over the role of representative for the family and driving force behind the inquiry, is presented in a role similar to that of a biographer who researches part of his cousin's life (or here rather his death), he does so with the backing of an officially recognised investigation to find out the truth. The process of writing the events of Zahid's and Stewart's lives is thus embedded in a situation that is unlikely to direct the audience's attention to the role of the biographer and his influence on the re-telling of past events.

A similar embedding of a search for the past in a frame that suggests a faithful reconstruction of a life can be found in *Letters Home*.[4] Aurelia's introduction to her collection of Sylvia's correspondence at the beginning of the play, given in the setting of a public reading, evokes the context of a publication of letters, and with it the idea of truthfulness original words of the correspondents. As a result of this inner dramatic motivation, it is less likely that the use of written language throughout the play leads to a higher degree of formal intra-theatricality in the same way that is suggested for *Rachel Corrie* (cf. p. 65). In addition, the basis for a comparison between the play and the world can change: if the situations in which Sylvia and Aurelia write their letters are presented in an extra-theatrically presented frame, it is likely that the presentation of the letters that originate on this level of narration is understood as a familiar theatrical convention.[5] The frame thus provides the play's structure and therefore the point of orientation for spectators' interpretation of its degree of extra-theatricality. In spite of this shift of emphasis from a reconstruction of the past to a re-telling whose authors are clearly identified in these two plays, the embedding of these retellings in extra-theatrically presented situations that motivate their search for a past life means that the use of meta-biography does not necessarily lead to a heightened attention to the process of life-writing.

A similar effect can be achieved in *Guantanamo*. Borowoski's and Surgiera's reading of the play focuses on direct audience addresses, the lack of a meta-narrative in which the speakers are placed comparable to that of tribunal plays and thus the lack of motivation for their accounts. Consequently, they describe *Guantanamo* as a play that is presented in "a form that bears clear traces of [...] epic influence" (Borowoski and Surgiera. 2005). Its first production at the Tricycle Theatre, however, does not evoke the distancing effect that could be expected from these elements. On the contrary, one could argue that the authenticating effect of the use of verbatim quotations from interviews with the families of the Guantánamo detainees is further supported by the lack of acknowledgements that their testimonies are, in fact, recreated on the

---

[4] *Letters Home* was written by an American playwright, but is included in the section on audiences in a British student production. Therefore it is discussed here as well.
[5] For a production that supports this idea, cf. p.147ff.

stage. Instead the audience is addressed in the same way in which the interviewers would have been – all actors clearly direct their speeches towards the audience and deictic markers of dialogue are maintained in the script: "MR BEGG: I told **you** in the beginning [Moazzam] was very much interested to help people all the time" (Brittain and Slovo. 2004, 12; bold UC). Without any interaction amongst characters on the stage, however, these addresses do not interrupt the illusion of an inner-dramatic world that is created on stage. Here the fictional world implies the audience as witness to the testimonies that are given by actors that represent those who gave them in the first place. The distance between the re-enacted and the original testimonies is further reduced by the lack of a curtain call as an indication of the play's status as theatre. In combination with the use of verbatim quotations and other elements that emphasise the way in which these speeches are anchored in our life world, such as the use of a dot matrix that specifies the date and time of speeches, the spectators' involvement in the process of retelling the characters' stories thus makes it unlikely that they should interrogate the process of reconstructing the past. Through the absence of any openly acknowledged meta-biographical frame that indicates the fact that these speeches are not direct testimonies the impression of a reconstruction gains even more immediacy.

In many other plays, however, the presentation of meta-biographical material is combined with an explicit exploration of the theoretical background and the methodology of biography. In this form, they often point out problems associated with a reconstructionist approach to life-writing.[6] Some of these problematic concepts and their treatment in biographical plays are explored in the following paragraphs.

Biographers as Characters

The apparently objective position of the author of biography is one aspect of this concept that is subjected to criticism in a number of plays. Many of them introduce biographers as characters, whose work is shown to be influenced by various motives, thus indirectly suggesting generalisations about the locatedness or individual perspective of biographers in general, including the people involved in the production of the plays themselves.

Snow Palace by Pam Gems is one of these plays about a biographer, in this case the Polish playwright Stanislawa Przybyszewski, a historical figure. The play contains three time levels: Stanislawa's present in which she writes the play, her memories of the past, and the events of the play she is writing. The latter ones are clearly shown to depend on her writing process, while she "*sits at her table* [and] *Writes rapidly* [...] *Robespierre enters swiftly*" (Gems. 1998, 45) as if commanded to do so by her writing. In voiceovers, heard while she is writing, she imitates the

---

[6] As a consequence most metabiographical plays concentrate primarily on the production of biography. An exception to this tendency is Sheila Yeger's *Self Portrait* in which the origin of biography is ignored, and its possibility to influence the life of a present-day character is explored.

style of speech of her characters, putting words into their mouths, and she is seen to change the plot of the play according to her needs, as for example in the case of Eléonore, whose relationship with Robespierre she dislikes and who is consequently removed from the play: "Get her off. (*She picks up her pencil, bends over her page, mutters to herself.*) Farewell Eléonore" (Gems. 1998, 16). Equally, the events of her past depend on Stanislawa and are shown as her memories that are often evoked by events in the present. Anna's invitation for dinner, for example, leads to memories of her father because she remembers that "He bought [her] pheasant" (Gems. 1998, 37).

Stanislawa's command over the events on the other time levels assigns her responsibility for the form these take, and the similarities between the writer's own life and that of her biographees therefore seem to be imposed by her. After her former admiration for her father is turned into hate, due to his initial lack of interest which then turns into sexual violence (Gems. 1998, 41 and 48-9), she sees him – and Danton – as traitors to their cause who have no consideration for other people's commitment and the sacrifices made for it. Just as her Father dismisses her admiration for Robespierre's idealism, calling him a "Masochist" (Gems. 1998, 44), she has Danton provoke Robespierre, asking if "any of [his followers] matter[s]? You think their lives are worth one hour of Danton's existence?" (Gems. 1998, 63). These similarities are enhanced by the doubling of the two characters and the transition from one to the other on stage (cf. Gems. 1998, 39). Robespierre, on the other hand, is idealised into a hero whose sacrifices extend to the point that he would "kiss [...] Danton's shoes...should France demand it" (Gems. 1998, 28). Stanislawa identifies with this reflection of her own willingness to sacrifice everything, including her health, to her play, feeling the danger of her hero as a shared one: "they want to guillotine the lot of **us**!" (Gems. 1998, 66, bold UC). The clear division of good and bad characters in her play and the apparently divine justice of Robespierre's final triumph are thus presented as the result of the wishes of a biographer who sees historical events and figures entirely in the light of her own experience. Although this is not explicitly extended to other biographers, it can be read as an argument against their seemingly neutral stance.

In *Variations on a Theme by Clara Schumann* a comparable effect is achieved with slightly different means. It concentrates on the research process of the fictional biographer Louise. Her interest in Clara Schumann and the pianist's relationship with men is likewise fuelled by personal experience. Her father's abuse, presented on stage in flashes of memory and in the imaginary conversations with her psychotherapist (Yeger. 1991, 205), is the origin of her problems relating to men and a fear of their authority which she can only overcome in dreams.[7] Based on her experience she sees Clara as a "grave, wooden, unchildlike" (Yeger. 1991, 184) girl practising the piano with a chiroplast, a victim of her father's exaggerated ambitions who

---

[7] Even small actions such as dipping her finger in an empty cup of chocolate, regarded as bad manners by her father, are only possible in the character's dreams. While awake, she refuses the cup of chocolate brought to her (Yeger. 1991, 194).

still hopes that one day she will earn his approval. The form of expression of this wish, "I wanna be loved by you" (Yeger. 1991, 184), a twentieth century song made famous by Marilyn Monroe, can be seen as a first indication that Louise perceives Clara's life through her own experiences. When Louise finds material which suggests that the pianist, unlike her, overcame her father's training for success and followed her desire into a relationship with Brahms, the writer admits in one of her imaginary conversations with her subject that her biography is in fact much more concerned with her own experiences (cf. Yeger. 1991, 203). As a result she abandons the whole enterprise and empties a briefcase containing her precious work into a bin (Yeger. 1991, 205).

Even though this gesture might be understood as a capitulation to the insight that neither Louise nor other biographers can overcome the inherent perspective from which a biography is written, it seems important to avoid reading this scene as an appeal to give up biography. Having understood that the biographical process originates in her, Louise is able to take a fresh look at her own life and can finally break out of her experience (Yeger. 1991, 204). In Yeger's play then biography does not lead to an absolute truth about Clara Schumann's life, but it enables a present-day woman to come to terms with her own. From a one way investigation into the past, biography has become a dialogue between the past and the present, influencing both of them. Thus *Variation* seems to suggest a new concept of life-writing and biographers.

Whereas the previous two plays show biographers who inadvertently impose their own perspective on their work, a number of other plays which draw attention to the biographer present writers who consciously choose a particular point of view. The title of the play within Howard Brenton's *The Churchill Play* indicates such an objective: called "The Other Second World War" (Brenton. 1970, 158), it expresses the group's consciousness that their perspective on the national icon is different. Embedded in the main plot of the play, in which a group of prisoners devises and rehearses the play, it becomes clear that it is their position on the margins of society that leads them to adopt another view on Churchill. Weighing the winning of the War against the brutal oppression of the Welsh miners in 1910 (Brenton. 1970, 113), and emphasising Churchill's lack of appreciation of the enormous contribution of normal people to the war effort (Brenton. 1970, 170), they decide on a presentation that seems adequate from their perspective, even if it is regarded as a "disrespect to the memory of that great man" (Brenton. 1970, 118) by members of the ruling class. Through this explanation given by the context, *The Churchill Play* mediates a position that is unlikely to be that of the audience of Brenton's play. It thus could be seen as a call to accept alternative versions of past lives as an expression of other, in this case marginalised or even suppressed, ways of seeing them.

Spoken in Darkness by Frances Gray is a play about a biographer who is conscious of the fact that her own middle-class perspective makes it harder to understand the life of her subject and who attempts to overcome it in order to do justice to her murdered friend. Based on a book by

Anne E Imbrie, the character of Ann is given centre stage in the play. Her inquiry into the events in Lee's life confronted her with parental neglect and later physical abuse by her husband (Gray. 36 and 37). Discussing her project with her mother, Ann accuses her of raising to observe standards of social decorum that required her to turn away from her school friend's suffering, leaving her helpless and not "know[ing] what to do" (Gray. 37). Becoming conscious of her socially acquired perspective helps her to overcome it – in one of the last imaginary conversations with Lee her friend confirms that Ann has found her (Gray, 88).

In other plays biographers have less noble reasons for their wish to shape the story of a historical figure in a particular way. In two plays these characters, none of them based on a historical figure, are shown to arrange their material in a certain light in order achieve personal gain. The chance to make himself a name in academia instead of continuing with the daily drudgery of his career in insurance is the bait for Sydney in *Kafka's Dick* to accept pioneering the suggested changes in Kafka's biography that could bring about a "breakthrough in Kafka studies" (Bennett. 1986, 42). Presented with the unusual opportunity to interact with his long dead subject, Franz Kafka, and his family, he sees Herman K.'s offer mainly as a way to achieve social recognition. Such a prospect of fame makes him throw aside all scruples about historical accuracy, and he follows Herman's version against his better knowledge. In spite of the impossible situation presented in the play, the temptations of the biographer are credible enough to allow some reflection about the role it might play in the world outside the theatre.

In the same way, Tom Stoppard uses the comic behaviour of the biographers Bernhard and Hannah in *Arcadia* in order to make a serious point about life-writing. Both scholars combine the hints they find about their subjects' lives in a way that promises to have most impact on the research community. Trying to establish a new connection between Byron and life at Sidley Park, the setting of the play, Bernhard constructs a spectacular version of the events, linking Byron to a duel that was possibly fought there. The second time-level, where the events of the past leading up to the dual are presented, clearly shows that Bernhard's wishes rather than convincing evidence are the seed of his thought. His determination to find the story he wants is confirmed by his working methods. He relies on rhetorical means, such as choosing words that indicate a high probability, e.g. "likely" instead of "conceivable" (Stoppard. 1999, 80), as well as on rhetorical questions that do not allow conclusions other than his dubious hypotheses to back up his interpretation. When his rhetorical powers prove insufficient he resorts to his imagination, concluding that there could be "a platonic letter which confirms everything – lost but ineradicable" (Stoppard. 1999, 82). Finally he exercises his authority as a biographer and demands absolute confidence in his intuitive knowledge of his subject, claiming that others simply "have never understood him [i.e. Byron]" (Stoppard. 1999, 85). The source of much hilarity and an equal amount of criticism from other characters, Bernhard's approach is at first balanced by the apparently more rigorous standards of the second biographer. Over the course

of the play, however, Hannah succumbs to her wish for her version to be true and also abandons the use of evidence in favour of intuition: "I *know* it's them. [...] How? It just *is*. 'Analysed it', my big toe" (Stoppard. 1999, 89). Both of biographers in *Arcadia* eventually defend their own preferred stories against the evidence they find. [8]

The misbehaving biographers in Bennett's and Stoppard's plays are all explicitly or implicitly criticised, but their faults are never directly generalized. Equally, the conscious or unconscious presentation of biographical material from a very specific perspective of a particular character in the previous plays is never explicitly presented as an unavoidable characteristic of biography in general. None of these plays offers an unequivocal challenge to the standard concept of an objective and disinterested biographical author, but the presentation of individual characters who fail to live up to this ideal can be seen as fertile ground for doubts that may lead to a more general revision of this theory.

The explicit references to the activity of the writer are taken one step further in *Making History*. Here Lombard combines his own practice of writing the life of Hugh O'Neill, the protagonist based on the historical Irish chieftain, with an explicit formulation of his understanding of biography. He states that he has set out to write the history of O'Neill and the Irish Resistance to English occupation according to what "the country needs" (Friel. 1989, 68). In his view of biography, there is the possibility for various versions of the past. Feeling that "now it is the time for a hero" he decides to "offer [...] them Hugh O'Neill as a national hero" (Friel. 1989, 67), denying his last wife Mabel and his domestic life the prominent place which O'Neill wishes her to have. Still, he states that at a later point in time, an alternative version of Mabel's story in the form of "a domestic story [...] a very beautiful love story" (Friel. 1989, 69), might be equally necessary and useful. Explaining his choice to O'Neill, Lombard formulates many concerns of postmodern historiography and biography: he asks the question of whether "truth and falsity [are] the proper criteria" (Friel. 1989, 8), affirms that "histories are stories" (Friel. 1989, 68) and denies any expectation to find "one 'true' interpretation just waiting to be mined" within "a period of history – a given space of time – my life – your life" (Friel. 1989, 15). Yet, seeing life-writing as "determined by the needs and the demands and the expectations of different people and different eras" (Friel. 1989, 16) and only by these, he seems to be more interested in manipulation than the postmodern notion of the inevitability of perspective. Contrary to his frank discussions with Hugh, there is no indication that Lombard intends to reveal his aim of creating a hero in his writing, thus denying his readers the chance to share his insights into the working of biographical texts. This omission is not in accordance with

---

[8] A comic variation of these self-interested biographers is the character of Hermann K, Kafka's father in *Kafka's Dick*. Sensing a chance of being judged more favourably by posterity, he tries to convince Sydney to re-write his son's biography. Once he realises, however, that nice and average parents are all too easily ignored by biographers he makes a volte-face. Although mainly a source of entertainment, the insight that "all the evidence about Kafka's father comes from Kafka" (Bennett. 1986, 42) could be seen as a challenge to the idea that documents can ever be neutral.

postmodernist concepts of history or biography and their emphasis on perspective. On the contrary, one of the most arduous defenders of postmodern history, Keith Jenkins, argues that the existence of a silent, undeclared ideology in lower case, i.e. objectivist history means that it suffers from similar problems as upper case history that is explicitly written in an ideological system (cf. Jenkins. 1997, 15). Thus Lombard's apparent practice in the play contradicts his idea of postmodernist history as he is merely aware of the variety of frameworks for history, yet without acknowledging the one he has chosen. Both positions undermine the extra-theatrical presentation of the life of O'Neill and Lombard in *Making History*. The metabiographical discussion of the role of biographical authors in Friel's play thus suggests that this apparently simple re-presentation of the life of an Irish icon must be seen in a new light.

In the context of metabiographical reflection about the role of the author in biographical plays, the discussion does not have to be limited to playwrights. Other members of the production team are, however, rarely found among the dramatis personae of metabiographical plays. Towards the end of *The Libertine* the character based on the historical Earl of Rochester attends a performance of *The Man of Mode*, but in his encounter with Harris, the actor playing Dorimant, the latter is merely worried about his costume change - the focus is clearly on Rochester's comments about his fictionalised self on the stage. The only play where the actor's task of presenting a historical character is more central is Timberlake Wertenbaker's *After Darwin*, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. Compared to this neglect of the contributions from other members of the production team, the variations on the perspective of the playwright are astounding.

Autobiographical Narrator Figures

Just as the presence of a biographer on stage can attract attention to the process of life-writing, the presence of an autobiographer or narrator of his own life story may achieve the same effect. As this discussion is restricted to biographical drama, autobiographical one person shows, such as Francesca Beard's *Chinese Whispers* or *Holy Dirt* by Marcos Martinez, are not taken into consideration. Instead the focus is placed on biographical plays that use a narrator in order to present a pseudo-autobiographical narration. Plays such as *Amadeus*, *Colette*, or *Saint Oscar* are not included in J.A. Cuddon's definition of autobiography as an "account of a man's life by himself" (Cuddon. 1977, 61) since they are not written, directed or acted by the historical figures whose stories they tell. The identity of the narrator and the biographical subject, however, is created on the level of the characters, i.e. it only exists inside the fictional world.[9]

---

[9] Another example of such a deliberately created impression of autobiography is the use of original material by a historical character which is then edited and performed by others, a technique used for *My Name is Rachel Corrie* and *Letter's Home*. As its power to draw the attention towards the selecting presence of these authors, or editors as Rickman is referred to on the cover of the published version of the script, has already been discussed with the example of *Rachel Corrie* on page 66, they will not be discussed further in this context.

As in the case of the biographer-characters their influence on the presentation of events has been deliberately created. The playwrights can use the stance their narrators are shown to take on their own lives as a tool for their characterisation, or in order to emphasise the fact that these lives are told from a particular perspective.[10] The latter could be seen as another indication that perspective is becoming increasingly important to life-writing.

This interpretation seems particularly appropriate for plays in which the narrator's re-telling of their lives takes an unusual form as well, and in the following examples where the use of an autobiographical narrator figure is combined with unusual structures are presented. In *Marriage in Disguise* the biographical character is split into three different roles, Young Molière, Middle Aged Molière and Elderly Molière, who all comment on their life, but nevertheless do not seem to recognise each other. Opening up further questions concerning the anthropological assumptions behind biographical writing and the form of the biographical subject (cf. p. 82), it suffices to say in this context that this constellation is guaranteed to direct the audience's attention to the role of the autobiographical narrator(s) and his (their) respective perspectives.

Another play in which the structure supports the emphasis on this aspect is *Hello Dalí*. In Andrew Dallmeyer's play the character Salvador Dalí presents monologues about aspects of the painter's life that do not evolve in a chronological, but a thematic order. Moreover, some of the topics chosen do not follow common ideas about the contents of a biography, as for example "Dalí's Fetishes and Phobias" or "Orifices" in which the character explains the painter's relation to various parts of his body. More standard topics are presented in an unusual order: the play begins with "Death" and ends with "Birth". Between these fixed points, Dalí asks the audience to choose cards that sum up each section under one heading and thus to determine the order in which he expands on them, implying that there is no preferable arrangement for them. The character's idiosyncratic way of narrating his life is again an outstanding feature of the play, and consequently likely to inspire more thought on the role of the importance of the narrator or author and the appropriate forms for life-writing.[11]

Alternative Ways to Emphasise the Importance of Perspective

As it is a central concern in approaches to biography that give an insight into the process of writing biography in order to deny the possibility of a universally valid perception, perspective is not only picked out as a theme with regard to the figure of the author. In some plays the approach chosen for the presentation of a life is formulated explicitly by one of the characters without a direct relation to an author - character. In *The Libertine*, it is the protagonist himself

---

[10] Cf. Palmer. 1998, 206: "narrators serve, to a varying degree, as an anti-realist device; denying the illusion that the events depicted on stage represent an objective recreation of history."

[11] A variation on the use of a character as an autobiographical narrator can be found in *Virginia* by Edna O'Brian: here the character Virginia Woolf alternates between interaction with other characters and her role as a narrator, without ever openly acknowledging the latter. Unlike the clear mode of narration adopted by the other characters, Virginia never directly addresses the audience in the text, presenting her text as memories spoken to herself rather than deliberate storytelling. In production the effect reached depends to a great degree on the actress's interpretation of O'Brian's text.

who comments on the concerns the playwright wanted to address with his play. Including a presentation of Etherege's earlier biographical play about the historical Earl of Rochester in *The Libertine*, Jeffreys uses this play within the play as an opportunity for his main character to comment on the "gaping gulf" he perceives "between the ideal and the real" (Jeffreys. 1998[2], 74), his impersonation in the play within the play and himself as a character. Contrasting himself, i.e. the character Rochester as created by Jeffreys, and his physical decline caused by his excessive lifestyle to the depiction of a rake still "in the tip-top pink of health" (Jeffreys. 1998[2], 74) in the play within the play, he explicitly formulates the differences between Jeffrey's and Etherege's interpretations of the historical Rochester. The divergence between them was further emphasised by the presentation of their plays in the same season, which allowed audiences to watch both within a short time.

Brontë contains a similar metabiographical device to explain the approach to the historical figures chosen by the playwright. Lacking a play within the play, the presentation of the life of the Brontë sisters here is preceded by an introduction spoken by the actresses. It begins with their questions: "how did it happen? How was it possible" (Teale. 2005, 13). While they change into period costume they raise some of the apparent paradoxes of the Brontës' lives, such as the origin of the passion described in their books if they lived unmarried before writing it (Teale. 2005, 14). The actresses thus transform themselves slowly from biographers, who pass on the information they found in books, the famous family portrait and the Brontë museum, into their subjects themselves, adopting a Yorkshire accent and using the inclusive personal pronoun "we" (Teale. 2005, first used on p. 15). Although it is likely that many of the issues they raise were discussed in the rehearsals as well, the similarities between Teale's programme note and introduction to the published script suggest that this introduction serves as an open acknowledgement of the perspective from which *Brontë* is written.

Finally, awareness of perspectivism can also be raised by the juxtaposition of various views on a life or parts of it in biographical plays. Showing contrasting versions, however, is not necessarily an indication of metabiographical reflection, whether it may be perceived as such depends on the way in which the differences are presented in a play. *Self-Portrait* is an example of a play where the divergent ideas about Gwen John, the protagonist modelled on the English painter, are not given equal value. The dismissal of her work by the male characters (cf. Yeger. 1990, 14, 30, 36) is opposed to the women's appreciation of it (cf. Yeger. 1990, 15, 21), yet the obvious rejection of the superficial attitude expressed by the men suggests that the play does not present alternative perspectives, but rather constitutes a revision of the dominant perception of a famous painter.

In *Gladiator Games*, such a revision of perspective is further supported by the structure of the play. The comparison of the reports made by prison officials with scenes from Zahid's prison

life seems to show two entirely different versions rather than a juxtaposition of the direct presentation and the description of the same situation.

> JAMIE: I asked about moving cells again. ZAHID: Any luck? JAMIE: Said he was 'too busy'. ZAHID: Ask again JAMIE: Alright, *SKINNER* [prison official] *steps forward.* [...] I knew Zahid from working on Swallow Unit. He used to come over and chat to the officers working on the unit when it was association time. During these conversations with Zahid he never expressed any concern about his safety or indeed his cellmate (Gupta. 2005, 78-9).

The contrast between these two versions is further emphasised by the mode of presentation. While the audience only hears the official's report in the form of a rather impersonal statement, the direct presentation of Zahid and his fellow inmate as likeable, three-dimensional characters conveys the impression that spectators can 'see with their own eyes' what really happened'. The privilege of the family's view of the events is further reinforced by other structural elements: the family of Zahid Mubarek is portrayed in more depth; time is devoted to their description of their relationship with Zahid, their history and it is their personal correspondence that ends the play, emphasising once again the personal side to this public inquiry[12]. The officials from the Home Office and Feltham prison, on the other hand, are only shown as representatives of a system; none of them is developed as a unique character. The opposing perspectives in *Gladiator Games* are thus clearly evaluated and do not offer equally valid versions of the same event.

In other plays, however, heterogeneous points of view are presented as equally valid or plausible. Such a dilemma of conflicting points of view is at the heart of the conflict depicted in *Hysteria*. In a fictional encounter, one of the characters confronts the character Sigmund Freud with an alternative interpretation of his work, seen from the perspective of one of his patients. Jessica cites excerpts from letters in which the historical Freud claims that he "identified signs of psychoneuroses"[13] in his sister Marie and that in his dream he desired his own daughter Mathilde.[14] Connecting these passages to the renunciation of his theories in the same year, she suggests that he changed his mind about the origin of neuroses because he feared that he might denounce his father or himself. From the perspective of his patients, Jessica suggests, such a change was not a revision but an act of betrayal that left his clients with the guilt of imagining sexual acts rather than admitting to the possibility of being a perpetrator himself. Even if the farcical form and the presentation of the episode as a dream take away some weight from the criticism of the biographical character, the possibility of this alternative interpretation is endorsed by the urgency with which the fictional visitor presents her case and her personal interest in it, as she claims that her mother committed suicide after Freud's change of mind. Contradicted by the long tradition of seeing Freud as one of the icons of modern culture, the

---

[12] Gupta. 2005, 108- 10; quotations from Zahid's letter end the play on p. 211
[13] Johnson. 1993, 77. According to Clark. 1980, 161 these later proved to be wrong.
[14] Cf. Johnson. 1993, 78. The original Freud describes this dream in his letter to Fliess from the 31st of May 1897, cf. Clark. 1980, 160. For the complete letter cf. Appignanesi and Forrester. 2000, 141-2.

play might still inspire some doubt about this generally very favourable view of him given in major biographies. Ultimately, however, Freud's own theories might mean that this question cannot be decided, as his concepts allow the interpretation of his decision as one that is influenced by a range of conscious and unconscious factors. In other words, a decision in favour of one of the two perspectives presented might be impossible – the idea of one true version of his life is countered.

Whereas *Hysteria* did not cause any outrage on the part of Freud's admirers, the controversy about *Copenhagen*, another play in which no definite version is given, might be explained by the ambivalence of the perspectives presented in the play. Although the characters can agree on the fact that particular events took place, they differ in the description or evaluation of them. Schrödinger's visit, for example, remains in Bohr's memory as marked by the "slight feverish cold" of his guest with whom he had "a calm debate about their differences [...] Perfectly politely". Heisenberg and Margrethe on the other hand remember that Bohr did "go on at him from first thing in the morning until last thing at night", until Margrethe had to "dose [...] him with tea and cake to keep his strength up" (Frayn. 2000, 64). Their description is, however, countered by the general impression of Bohr as calm and considerate which makes him an unlikely candidate for relentless insistence.[15] The lack of a universal perspective is shared and felt by the biographees. Margrethe and Niels Bohr's argument about the question of whether Heisenberg is an enemy because "Firstly, Heisenberg is a German.", or whether he is not because he opposed the Nazis in his teachings and "stuck with relativity, in spite of the most terrible attacks" (Frayn. 2000, 9) is not unequivocally solved by the presentation of Heisenberg's behaviour. The audience is left to evaluate the possible points of view and to make up their own mind - they are given some of the tasks of traditional, empiricist biographers. The fact that it is impossible to solve this problem by giving a universally valid answer is underlined by the comparison to physics. The allusions to Einstein's physics call into mind the premise that everything is relative and that no phenomenon can be perceived independently from the position of the perceiver. The reference to science, the very discipline positivist biography tries to emulate, helps to invalidate some of its premises, showing that they are no longer tenable in both of these fields.

Challenges to the Anthropological Assumptions of Reconstructionist Biography

Multiple perspectives alone might provide a strong challenge to traditional biography. In some plays, e.g. *Copenhagen*, metabiographical criticism is further supported by doubts about the anthropological assumptions on which reconstructionist biography relies. Although divergences

---

[15] As this example shows, the delicate balance between different perspectives is dependent on choices made for individual productions, such as in this case the acting, to an even higher degree than other aspects discussed here. While it is important to keep this in mind, the discussion of acting in individual productions is nevertheless reserved for Ch. 7.

from this standard do not directly address the issue of biography, they take away the basis for many other unacknowledged premises. The lack of rationalism, which becomes evident in *Copenhagen*, for example, is impossible to reconcile with the idea of logical behaviour or common sense.[16] Michael Frayn's play demonstrates this connection by showing the characters' efforts to interpret each other's behaviour. Heisenberg's visit, which Bohr considers as a perfectly normal "invit[ation to] an old friend to dinner", is considered dangerous by Margrethe as to their fellow Danes it "might appear to be collaborating" (Frayn. 2000, 9). If the intentions behind actions determine how these are judged, it is paramount that people are at least likely to make a fairly accurate guess about the motives for our actions. This is of particular importance for biographers, who cannot verify their interpretation in direct communication with their subject. In order to arrive at valid conclusions, however, it is necessary to share a similar concept of logic, which can be used to trace possible intentions and decide on their probability. Whereas most empiricist biographers rely to a great degree on this possibility to use their "common sense", *Copenhagen* demonstrates that this is not always possible as often humans do not consistently follow rational lines of thinking. The characters in the play are often unable themselves to determine their true intentions amid the multiplicity of possible reasons. Heisenberg compares his recollection of the possible motives for his visit to Copenhagen with the blurred image that he retains of the presence of his fellow physicists during a dinner there. The possible reasons appear as blurred as the faces of his colleagues, so that he cannot tell them apart or decide which ones were really present (Frayn. 2000, 7 and 77). Instead of explaining it with a failing memory, however, Bohr says that he "doubt[s] if [Heisenberg] ever really knew himself".[17] This remark indicates that Frayn's characters are aware of the limitations of rationality and the fact that humans do not do everything for a particular reason. This insight is also contained in their use of the term "Elsinore" as an expression for the state of mind in which this "darkness inside the human soul" (Frayn. 2000, 58) becomes visible. It is further confirmed by a comparison to physics. Borrowing from the theory of indeterminacy, Margrethe likens the behaviour of human beings to that of particles: reflection about their intentions alters their behaviour just as particles cannot be observed without being deflected. Retrospective explanations, however, have to be found without observing the original actions – just like the particles, the reasons for human behaviour are therefore ultimately indeterminate. The consequences for life-writing are directly visible in the play: the characters in *Copenhagen* cannot establish a single, true version of their past, the ones they find are mere approximations or a compromise which is not necessarily accurate but acceptable to all.

A similar concern with rationality as the basis of agent intentionality is revealed in *Marriage in Disguise* and *Arcadia*. In Dromgoole's play, memory is also an acute problem for the

---

[16] For their role in reconstructionist biography, cf. p. 29.
[17] Frayn. 2000, 4. This is echoed by Margrethe: "The person who wanted to know most of all was Heisenberg himself" (Frayn. 2000, 35).

characters' attempts to reflect about their lives, but Elderly Molière also admits that "to this day I'm not sure of my true motives" (Dromgoole. 2000, 27), indicating that they might not have been entirely rational and conscious. In *Arcadia*, the link to biography is again clearly established. The two biographers in the play fail to see the possibility that their subjects might have done things without any apparent reason and ignore alternative explanations, which they do not regard as logical. The results for their projects are disastrous: Hannah bases her entire book project about the hermit at Sidley Hall on the existence of a hand-drawn hermit in the plans for the new garden without taking into account that it might have been added for any other reason than the hermit's existence. Bernard, for his part, believes that Septimus Hodge cannot have written the review about Chater's book, as a note in a copy of the book thanks him for helping the author. For him, the two contradictory acts cannot be assigned to a single person without assuming irrational behaviour on his part. The events on the level of the past, however, prove both of them wrong: it is revealed that Thomasina scribbled a hermit into the plan out of sheer boredom (*Arcadia*, 25 and 40) and Septimus's sudden change of mind about the value of Chater's poetry is explained by his desire to avoid a duel with him. Here again the consequences of an inappropriate anthropological concept for biography are presented as one of the reasons for the failure of the characters' attempts to reconstruct events from the past.

Yet not all explicitly metabiographical plays criticise the anthropological concepts of traditional biography. *Albert Speer*, for example, confirms the idea that human beings necessarily accumulate experiences. The protagonist's attempt to begin a new life after leaving Spandau prison is made impossible by his and his fellow being's incapacity to forget his Nazi past. Speer himself cannot overcome his former experiences and is still haunted by dreams (Edgar. 2000, 85), while those around him cannot detach the present man from his past actions, as the critical questions of some students show during one of his lectures (cf. Edgar. 2000, 122 - 8). Similarly, the different Margarets in *Thatcher - the Musical!* seem to represent the same character at various stages of her life rather than aspects that cannot be integrated into an overall personality. Their continuity is expressed visually through their wigs and the transition from one to another is clearly explained, often through their interaction. Thus the third Margaret, the newly elected Prime Minister, takes over from the second, the young politician presented as Twin Set Maggie, explaining that her decision to adopt a new style of dress is a step consciously taken in order to indicate that "I meant business" (Foursight Theatre. 2005, 13). In the same way, Twin Set Maggie takes over from the young Grantham girl when she discovers that she needs a more decided attitude to gain acceptance in the "Gentleman's club that is politics" (Foursight Theatre. 2005, 6).

Among other metabiographical plays, however, the accumulation of experience and its integration into a unified subject, two basic premises of traditional life-writing, are put into question or even explicitly negated. In *The Invention of Love* and *Marriage in Disguise* the

fragmentation of the characters is expressed visually through the use of two actors for the same character at different stages in their lives. In Stoppard's play the old Alfred Edward Housman (AEH) is distinguished from Housman, his younger self, through the experience he has accumulated. Recapitulating his life from a later perspective, he is given the chance to give advice to his younger self, warning him, for instance that his idea of leaving university as "a rounded man, fit for the world" is indeed "Humbug" (Stoppard. 1997, 30). His attempts to change young Housman's negation of his emotional side[18], however, do not seem to fall on fertile ground as he is no longer able to see the situation in the same way as his younger self and therefore cannot address his momentary concerns. Changing the course of his own life seems to be impossible due to Housman's incapacity to distance himself from his experiences while undergoing them. This suggests that it is possible to see developments that changed a biographical subject retrospectively, but that every formulation of a coherent identity made later cannot have access to the immediate perception of a situation lived earlier on. To a certain extent the earlier personality is therefore divided from the later one as Stoppard's images shows.

In *Marriage in Disguise*, the posthumous conversations of the three Molières seem to take place between three people unknown to each other: the younger ones cannot imagine that they really turn into these older versions and, worse, the older ones cannot remember and recognise how they were when they were young:

> ELDERLY / YOUNG MOLIÈRE: Who the hell are you? [...] YOUNG MOLIÈRE: My God! Am I going to grow into this pompous, conceited egomaniac? ELDERLY MOLIÈRE: Was I really quite as bombastic as that? (Dromgoole. 2000, 12)

The similarities they can discover between them are limited to little more than sexual pleasure (cf. Dromgoole. 2000, 13), and their conversation is characterised by insurmountable differences, which are exemplified very well in their different opinions about women in general and Madeleine in particular. They describe the transition from one phase to another as a process of killing the predecessor (cf. Dromgoole. 2000, 47) and explicitly address the visible division between them, doubting whether it is appropriate to talk of "'my' *life* [as] that word my implies one person, one personality, one man in charge" (Dromgoole. 2000, 10-11). The lack of a character with accumulated experience in Dromgoole's play implies that the differences between various selves at different moments are more prominent than the aspects that give coherence to an individual. His practice thus suggests that biographers who maintain the unity of their biographees merely cover up these divisions.

Other biographical plays put less emphasis on changes over time and concentrate on the possibility of the lack of a core identity at any one point of a life. Not all of them use these different aspects of personality in order to establish meta-biographical doubts; caused in some

---

[18] Stoppard. 1997, 37: "You had better be a poet."

plays by conscious role playing of the characters, an activity that can be combined with the idea of a core identity. The protagonists and autobiographical narrators in *Amadeus* and *Colette*, for example, make it clear in direct addresses to the audiences that they only assume different roles in order to fool other characters. Commiserating with Mozart over the problems with his opera and promising to "speak to the Emperor [...] and ask him to attend a rehearsal", Salieri does not hesitate to inform the audience as soon as Mozart has left the stage that "needless to say [he] did nothing whatsoever in this matter" (Shaffer. 1985, 79). His falseness towards the other characters is, however, clearly contrasted to the confessional style of his interaction with the audience, introduced, for example, by the title *"The Death of Mozart or Did I Do It"*.[19] Such honesty towards the audience, in contrast to the conscious role-playing with other characters, is also found in *Colette*. Prompted by a letter asking her for an interview, the protagonist of the play presents her memories to the audience, explicitly pointing out moments of her life when she was "not entirely honest" (Freeman. 1995, 72). The contradictions in the behaviour of these characters are therefore explained by their efforts to give a false impression of themselves, not by the lack of a core personality.

In other plays, however, they are no longer resolved and in these the biographee's character traits seem irreconcilable with the idea of a central, coherent and unified subject. Oscar Wilde's mother in *Saint Oscar* assumes that her son hides behind the pose as an aesthete that "saves [him] from looking at [his real] sel[f]", but her hopes are doomed to fail: in the course of the play it is revealed that Wilde's self - definition as an illusion (Eagleton. 1989, 16) is the only one that can be maintained and that it is impossible to abstract any core identity from his behaviour. This Oscar Wilde merely plays his roles according to scripts (cf. Eagleton. 1989, 17) and can therefore convincingly proclaim that his "life *is* a theatre" (Eagleton. 1989, 34). An indirect allusion to the actor's task in biographical drama, this conception of the historical character also means that the premise of modern biography that the real personality behind the myth can be found is denied. Instead the play attacks the myth of a coherent identity by substituting it with an agglomeration of roles. For such a multi-faceted but incoherent biographical subject the idea of finding out the Truth about him becomes obsolete and Eagleton has confirmed this, stating that the utmost he can be asked to produce is the "illusion of sincerity" (Eagleton. 1989, 21). By way of denying the idea of a core identity, Eagleton's play puts into question the methods and objectives of reconstructionist biography. Instead of a single truthful version, he offers a kaleidoscope of different aspects of his biographical character which reflect on his personality in different ways. A similar effect is created by a mixture of explicit and implicit means in the structure of *Hello Dalí*, which consists entirely of short comments on

---

[19] In Milos Forman's film the implicit role of the audience as confessor is transferred onto a character who serves the same function on screen. Confession is one of the ur-motives of autobiography, and its religious connotation is still found in Rousseau's *Confessions* that are generally considered to be the first autobiography and in which he also pledges to reveal the complete truth about his life: Rousseau, Jean Jacques. 1964, 3: "Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature, et cet homme sera moi [...] je viendrai le livre à la main, me présenter devant le souvereign juge."

individual aspect of the painter's life, but never attempts to give an all-encompassing, unified picture of him. Thus these plays contribute to the deconstruction of the biographical subject in its traditional form.

The Consequences of Explicit Meta-Biography for the Concept of Life-writing

All the plays discussed in the previous section thus address issues related to the process of life-writing through their explicit self-reflexivity. The great variety of forms and concerns found among them lends further support to a broader definition of biographical drama in which metabiography is included. Although the first part of this chapter about scripts has shown that it is still popular to present a single version of a past life that is deemed authentic, the diversity of plays in which this approach is questioned suggests that playwrights no longer see their role mainly in dramatising accepted histories. Instead, they are questioning the way in which these versions are created, often concentrating on the question of perspective. The emphasis on the role of authors, both in the guise of author figures or through the presentation of various points of view that do not compete but exist in parallel, might be explained by their own position and concerns, as well as the lack of a clearly defined role model for their work. It is surprising, however, that this exploration is rarely interested in the specific situation of communication in theatre - multiple perspectives, for example, are never portrayed as the consequence of collaborative creation of biography. While theatrical means are used to a certain extent,[20] the examination of the role of the author and the impossibility of a universal, objective point of view is presented in general terms - in the cases where it does involve an author figure, this is mainly a traditional writer rather than a production team. In the second major area of interest, the biographical subject and the way in which its presentation is shaped by anthropological assumptions, theatre as a medium of presentation is taken into account to a greater degree. The explicit formulation of questions about the fragmentation or unity of human character is often connected to the idea of role playing, a concept that can be related to theatrical practice.

Nonetheless, this connection is not made explicit in the scripts themselves, which restrict their innovations mainly to the presentation of a particular character. This points to another common trait shared by many of the published texts discussed here: although named "explicit" metabiography on the basis of the techniques used to create a meta-discussion of life-writing, the criticism is often specifically aimed at an individual occurrence and refers merely indirectly to the genre as a whole. Only in Brian Friel's *Making History* is the biographer's objectivity entirely rejected, in most other plays it is discredited through the practice of individual biographer characters, or limited through the indirect admission of the playwright's own limited perspective. These scripts do not deal with biographers or playwrights in the plural. Such an approach seems to be oriented towards raising questions rather than towards a new agenda for biographical writing, an attitude that reflects the current situation in theoretical thought about

---

[20] This will be of more importance in the section on implicit biography.

dealing with the past. Although it is hard to say whether biographical theatre is primarily influenced by theoretical writings or whether these take up tendencies from the practice of life-writing, their close relationship can be regarded as further confirmation of the necessity to discuss these plays as a cultural phenomenon.

Assuming that mutual influence between theory and practice is possible, the small number of plays that takes criticism one step further and offers alternatives gains particular importance. *Copenhagen*, for instance, ends on a positive note with the hope that the characters might overcome their estrangement, even though the existence of a universal perspective is strongly negated. On the basis of the understanding that they will not find out the Truth about their meeting, they negotiate a version which takes into account their individual positions. Here the understanding that the idea of complementarity does not only apply to physics, but also to human behaviour where the same situation can be perceived, let alone remembered, very differently by various persons makes it possible for them to re-appraise their own positions. Accepting that things might look different from other perspectives, they can reconcile the differences between their versions and once again embrace each other and each other's world as "dear friend[s]" (Frayn. 2000, 93). Knowledge of the impossibility of absolute truth here does not lead to a situation in which "everything goes", but to a new possibility of seeing the truth in terms of the present, guided by the wish for mutual understanding. Reflecting the idea of ethically rather than historically correct versions (cf. p. 34), the characters' solution in Frayn's play could be regarded as an alternative to empiricist biography that is oriented towards its function rather than its ontological status.

Implicit Meta- Biography

Reflection about biographical processes is not restricted to explicit meta-biography, it can also be found in its implicit form. Here it is established through other means: instead of direct references to the play's status as a construction, it contains thematic patterns (cf. Hawthorne. 1994, 117), intertextual references, or elements related to the use of language and the presentation of space, time and characters (cf. Kramer. 2000a, 130 -1) which can disrupt the impression of extra-theatricality and therefore draw attention to its inherent theatricality. In some plays these complement explicitly metabiographical elements, in others the inclusion of self-referring elements in the production is not accompanied by explanations, leaving it to the spectators to translate the structural aspects into statements and ideas about biography – in Stephanie Kramer's words: metabiography is produced in these texts ("Inszenierung von Biographie" Kramer. 2000a, 129), not explained. In accordance with the differences in approach compared to explicit metabiography, it is possible to observe variation with regard to the aspects of biography that are highlighted as well: some of those discussed in the previous chapter, as for example the role of the author, are rarely found in these plays, whereas other elements, such as language or intertextuality, are examined more often. This shift in the areas of interest can be

partly explained by the nature of the topic presented, as some of them are more suitable to explanation or exemplification.

The Role of the Author and Perspective

Nonetheless, this tendency does not lead to absolute categories. The role of the author, for instance, is challenged through implicitly metabiographical means in David Pownall's *An Audience Called Edouard*, where Edouard Manet, the biographee, never appears on stage, but is continuously addressed in the place of the audience by fellow characters. Diverting the biographical gaze onto an imaginary subject located in the auditorium, the audience's gaze is returned onto the spectators themselves, a device that negates the neutral, direct perception of biographical subjects and emphasises the fact that autobiographical elements cannot be eradicated from biography. The multiplicity of voices that contribute to the fragmentary description of the painter, some of which have clear personal interests connected to Manet, further supports the prominence of perspective.

This is another aspect that seems to lend itself to both explicit and implicit treatment. In *Copenhagen* both methods can be found, and their complementarity gives the criticism of a single, apparently neutral perspective particular force. The effect of its explicit discussion and comparison to physics is enhanced by the plot structure of Frayn's play: instead of a linear development that leads towards a solution, the same situations are repeated in various versions, none of which is given particular preference. The last of these versions, to which all of them can eventually agree, is a mixture of the previous ones, the solution propagated is a story that is influenced by multiple perspectives.

In Frayn's following play, *Democracy*, the examination of the point of view at the origin of life-stories is shifted entirely to an implicit level. In many cases Günther Guillaume takes over the role of the narrator and gives an account of the events from his point of view, but some of the events presented on stage took place in his absence. Due to the fact that the text does not support the interpretation that Guillaume gains omniscience and can add things later on, the opinions voiced during the meetings in which he is not present have to be regarded as those of his other characters. They can be divided into two groups whose opinion of Brandt is fairly contradictory. Whereas Guillaume and Brandt's allies present events as the success story of a charismatic politician who "passes among them like a Messiah" with the power to make "the outstretched hands" of his followers "more clamorous to touch him" (Frayn. 2003, 50), the inner party opposition to him regards them as symptoms of a slow agony in which the party is put at risk. Instead of Brandt's immense popularity, they see his time in office as "another four years of indecision" and of personnel decisions that are based on the applicants' connections to the party leader (Frayn. 2003, 58). Both groups are given the opportunity to express their views: Brandt can voice his dream and vision of finding mutual acceptance for both German states (Frayn. 2003, 31) and his opponents can criticise him as "the great peacemaker", whose "dream

[of] life without conflict" (Frayn. 2003, 31) prevents him from governing the country effectively. As in *Copenhagen*, however, no point of view is given more prominence than another. The play's emphasis on report in addition to or instead of presentation further contributes to the relatively equal position of various perspectives. Comments on events, even if accompanied by silent gestures, as in the case of Brandt's famous kneeling in Warsaw (cf. Frayn. 2003, 52), are visibly given from a clear perspective which can then be juxtaposed to others. As a result of this structure in which various perspectives are compared and contrasted, *Democracy* seems rather like a jigsaw in which various points of view contribute to the impression of the whole.

The idea of a universal, objective way of looking at past lives can also be implicitly undermined through the juxtaposition of different temporal levels in which historical and contemporary thought are compared. Anna Furse combines this with a general opposition of points of view in *Augustine*. The medical interest of the character Dr. Charcot, based on the famous director of the Parisian Salpêtrière hospital, is directed exclusively on physical observation, because he believes that "we won't find the answers in her chattering [...] and certainly not in dreams. No, the answer lies IN THE BODY" (Furse. 1997, 34). Although this attitude was generally accepted in the times of the historical Charcot, in post-Freudian times it seems hopelessly ignorant. To a modern audience, who most probably have a basic notion of Freudian psychology, his healing methods such as the use of an ovarian compressor on a sexually abused woman might even appear sadistic. His 19th century perspective and the point of view that can be expected to prevail among audiences at the end of the twentieth century thus form a clear contrast. The playwright and director highlight this further by introducing two characters with a modern attitude. Highly conscious of her role, occasionally behaving more like an actress who "has to suffer for [her] art!" (Furse. 1997, 29), Augustine's interpretation of her position echoes recent readings of Charcot's practice rather than the point of view his historical patients would have had. The temporal incongruity of her opinion is particularly salient in her remark that Charcot "doesn't understand a thing. He never listens!" (Furse. 1997, 37), in which she indicates a level of consciousness that cannot be easily combined with her lack of direct words for her traumatic experiences.

Freud's function in the play is to provide an interpretation for the historical Augustine, who according to the playwright is a "classic Freudian symbolist,"[21] which, historically, was produced only after her disappearance from the hospital. Their fictional encounter thus underlines the opposition between the perspective of the past and that of the present. Although the interpretative alliance of these two characters outweighs Charcot's arguments, the presentation of his power and position serves as a reminder of the fact that as a highly respected

---

[21] Furse. 1997, 4: "Was Augustine a classic Freudian symbolist before he even had located his theories in the matter?"

specialist, his version would have been the dominant one during their time. As a result, time is shown to be an important influence on perspective, and the idea of a time-less objective point of view is negated.

In *Tyger*, particular temporal perspectives are no longer bound to individual characters. Interacting across the temporal boundaries, the characters are conscious of events that take place after their lifetime: in a conversation with Byron, Shakespeare puts him into his place with a reference to their afterlife and a reminder about "who's got the biggest critical response around here?" (Mitchell. 1971, 68). Similarly Blake's friends Palmer and Fusili inform him of his posthumous fame, telling him that people "are bidding for your laundry bills at Sotheby's. PALMER They're lecturing about you. [...] You can buy Blake T-shirts" (Mitchell. 1971, 59). As the following examples show, these anachronisms are placed in an environment where the events of Blake's life are presented in the context of modern institutions, technology and social issues. The agent who is supposed to spy on Blake is sent by the Home Office (Mitchell. 1971, 21) and in order to get more money, Blake has to apply to a "British Cultural Committee" (Mitchell. 1971, 36), whose selection criteria sound strangely familiar to anyone who has ever applied for a grant in the arts. Blake's fame is partly based on his appearance on BBC2, and some of the contents of other discussions could easily take place in today's television programmes as well, such as the complaint about "the Blake people" uttered by his artistic and political opponent Sir Joshua. Instead of arguing directly against Blake's work, he laments that his "respectable house / In a respectable street / in Wolverhampton" has been taken over by Blake and his fellow artists until his "Non-Blake tenants moved away" (Mitchell. 1971, 77). Substituting elements of the world in which Blake and his contemporaries lived with their modern equivalents makes his role in society more accessible to modern audiences. The opposition to his later place as one of the greatest authors in English literature. and his role as a rebel against and outcast of middle class society in his times can thus be appreciated even by audiences whose knowledge about the artist is limited. At the same time as clarifying Blake's position, the reactions of the audience to these anachronisms might reveal how perspectives change considerably with time. The likely prevalence of middle class audiences in most British theatres, including the National Theatre where the play premiered, suggests that the majority of the audiences will not be entirely unfamiliar with the reactions of Blake's opponents who defend the hegemony. While these could be easily rejected and Blake excused as a genius if presented in a historical context, Mitchell's focus on class differences between the poet and his opponents in a social environment similar to todays creates the impression of an irreconcilable contrast. This can incite criticism of today's society, but also questions about the factors that have brought about such a change of perspective, particularly time. In contrast to plays that attribute modern thoughts and conflicts to historical characters, such as *Queen Christina*, in which Gems uses the monarch's story in order to comment on the situation of modern women,

Tyger does not merely use Blake in order to criticise contemporary society. Offering a historical life from various angles, it also belies the idea of an a-historical point of view.

Such a recognition of time as an element that always has an impact on the perspective from which a life story is told can be observed in *Brontë* as well. In addition to the explicit reference to the playwright's approach (cf. p. 77), the shift from a modern perspective towards the past is accompanied by the actresses' change of clothes. Together with their corsets and dresses, they adopt the mental framework of thought that influenced their biographical characters; removing these garments at the end of the play, they return to the world of contemporary thought outside the fiction. The way in which explicit and implicit self-reflexivity work together in *Brontë* shows, within the boundaries of a single play, the diversity of forms that can be used in order to emphasise the importance of perspective.

Intertextuality

Intertextual elements are another implicit device through which the constructedness of biographical accounts can be emphasised. In *Tyger*, the indiscriminate use of references to elements that exist in the world in which we live, and to those that are created by other media and literature helps to blur the distinction between them. Literary and film characters, for example Batman, are named in the same breath as historical figures such as Ronald Reagan – in Mitchell's play both of them are supposed to work for the Home Office (Mitchell. 1971, 20).[22] Further references to other art forms also give support to the close link between the play and non-fictional discourses. On the level of the characters, for example, the name of Blake's monster "Freddy" can be read as an allusion to the famous horror film *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Another way of linking the two is the imitation of fictional forms and aesthetic styles, for instance through a fight over an artistic controversy that oscillates between slapstick and James Bond.[23] In addition to film, the discourses invoked range from the recital of poems at his birthday party (e.g. Mitchell. 1971, 53) to the sex tips in women's magazines, which are echoed in Kate's explanation of how Blake can increase her sexual pleasure (cf. Mitchell. 1971, 32). Although not a fictional form, the similarities to the jargon of publicity can also express the influence of a given style on the contents which are expressed in it:

> We are now in the process of following up those prototypes. World War Three will be a combination of the most spectacular features of One and Two, plus nine secret new ingredients. And, what is more, it will be available to all. (Mitchell. 1971. 74)

---

[22] Even though Reagan's earlier occupation as an actor and television presenter might suggest an extended intertextual reference, it is, however, very likely that in 1971 most spectators would think of him primarily in the role as politician and governor, and thus as a part of the political rather than the cineastic world.

[23] Mitchell. 1971, 18 – 9; in a later scene a fight is described in the stage directions as a slapstick fight (Mitchell. 1971, 69).

Such use of conventionalised textual forms in unconventional contexts in the play can draw attention to the importance of form for the perception of the context. As an amalgam of many different styles, *Tyger* shows how these can influence the contents even before Hayden White makes this observation in secondary literature about historiography (cf. Ch.2).

In Tom Stoppard's work, the sources for intertextual references are fewer than in *Tyger*, but they still shape his theatre to a great extent. In *The Invention of Love*, he refers mainly to the poetry and translations of his biographee Alfred Edward Housman, as well as to Victorian texts and styles. Using a famous image from Jerome K. Jerome's novel *Three Men in a Boat*, for example, he narrows the gap between this fictional format and his biographical play. The intended visual reference of the three students and later Jerome himself with fellow Victorians in a boat is made explicit in the text through the quotation of the book's title in the stage directions as "**Three Men in a Boat** row into view" (Stoppard. 1997, 84, bold UC). With the integration of this motive taken from literature into the presentation of two historical lives on stage, one of them connected through thematic motives, the other one through his function as inventor of the image, Stoppard successfully blurs the boundaries between the non-fictional and fictional format of the two genres.

The references to Greek and Roman poetry, Housman's area of literary expertise, can fulfil the same function and close the gap between biography and literary forms. It is, however, possible to take this interpretation one step further and to see it as a technique that serves the protagonist's characterisation. Due to its form as a memory play with an autobiographical narrator, the allusions to classic texts can also be attributed to the level of narration within the play. According to this understanding, old AEH applies motives such as that of Ligurinus running over the fields of Mars, taken from a poem by Horace, to his beloved friend and athlete Jackson in order to create a positive role model for his own feelings. Rather than a device used by the playwright in order to point to the literariness of biography, it could be seen as an attempt by the narrator to use the literary models and conventions familiar to him in order to describe his own life. Such an understanding suggests that not just written (auto-) biographies, but our perception of our and other people's lives is influenced by the kinds of storytelling familiar to us. It is not only impossible to tell a life story without resorting to literary and other conventions, it is even impossible to perceive it without them. Such an interpretation is particularly convincing since a possible motivation for Housman's creation of these parallels can be easily found: as positive images of male intimacy, the motives he uses can help him to develop a more favourable evaluation of his own feelings. Such a reading is not necessarily incompatible with one that regards the use of intertextual quotations as a reference to the literary nature of the text, the two merely focus on the impact they have on different steps in the process

of life-writing. Both of them ultimately confirm the influence of literary texts and forms on biography and autobiography.

Stoppard gives another demonstration of the influence of literature in his earlier work, where he experiments with the substitution of the familiar structuring principle of biography by forms borrowed not only from a literary genre, but from a concrete theatrical text. *Travesties* presents the preparations for a performance of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, adopting its plot structure and characterisations as a frame for these preparations at the same time. Some scenes echo not just the constellation of characters and events, but also the phrases used in Wilde's play, as for instance the first meeting between Gwendolyn and Cecily, which the characters begin with extremely similar words:

> Cecily Cardew? [...] What a very sweet name. Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong (Wilde. 1954, 209).
> Cecily Caruthers! What a pretty name [...] I'm never wrong – Something tells me that we're going to be great friends (Stoppard. 1975, 90).

Stoppard further emphasises these similarities by a few changes that bring together different parts from Wilde's play. The substitution of a "light snack", which Algernon believes to be "customary in good society [...] at five o'clock", by the words "cucumber sandwich" (Wilde. 1954, 254 and Stoppard. 1975, 41) in a similar quotation in Stoppard's text is such an additional reminder of the model for the play.

The similarities are also found on the level of the characters. Although using the name and a few facts about the historical figure of Henry Carr, Stoppard admits that the character is based less on the "meagre facts about Henry Carr" and more on the things he "conjured up" from them (Stoppard. 1975, 13). In addition to this mainly non-factual basis for his character, his similarity to Algernon from Wilde's play further supports the idea that this is not a faithful portrayal of a historical character. Having inherited an affinity for the habits of good society and cucumber sandwiches, old Henry Carr's identification with Algernon reaches a point at which he cannot distinguish between himself and his role in the play within the play anymore, confusing his memories of his "performance as Henry – or rather – *god dammit* - the other one [...] that was Algernon – *Algernon!*" (Stoppard. 1975, 64). None of the other characters, many of them also based on historical figures such as James Joyce, Lenin and his wife and the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, suffers from comparable problems. Nevertheless their proximity to a character such as Carr, a pastiche of a famous fictional character with the name of a historical figure, implies that they too are not faithful imitations of their namesakes. This impression is strengthened by other similarities between their behaviour and forms of artistic expression associated with them such as Joyce's presentation of himself in the form of limericks (Stoppard. 1975, 33).

These implicit intertextual elements in this play are complemented by explicit metabiography and intertextuality. Cecily lectures on Lenin and his theories (Stoppard. 1975, 66 – 68), and old Carr plays with possible titles for his memories of "the James Joyce [he] knew" (Stoppard.

1975, 22). Through the explicit thematisation of biographical writing in *Travesties*, the creation of close proximity to non-fictional forms through implicit intertextual devices can be understood as a comment on life-writing in general, not just in relation to this individual play. In addition, the use of these structures demonstrates how historical lives can be perceived and presented on the basis of patterns borrowed from other theatre performances. Rather than searching for an inherent organisation found in the lives of his biographees, Stoppard imposes an alternative one. As the objective of *Travesties* is not the faithful reconstruction of a period in the lives of its subjects, it cannot be argued that this new arrangement of biographical references can be seen as direct competition to more traditional biographies. Nonetheless the presentation of (partly) familiar material in a new form can raise questions about the relation between form and content and the origin of the structures of life-writing in general.

Challenging the Traditional Structures of Biography

Other plays continue this implicit enquiry into the structural basis of biography, often by challenging the strict adherence to a chronological order of events as the basis of biographical accounts. In *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* this is done mainly through the violation of this often mandatory principle of linearity. Even though some of the events do seem to happen in chronological order, as they can be related to each other through cause and effect, the transition between them is often uncommented and quite sudden, as the stage direction that "*suddenly we are with* DARNELY *in bed*" indicates. (Lochhead. 1989, 35) Notwithstanding this vague sense of a temporal sequence, the main ordering principle of the play is the comparison between Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots. Apart from the alternate presentation of events in their lives, the frequent use of simultaneous scenes creates the impression that this contrast is the axis around which the play evolves. The juxtaposition is also expressed visually, as "MARY *and* ELIZABETH [are] *raised up at either corner*". (Lochhead. 1989, 12) While promoting an alternative structure, Lochhead weakens the importance of linearity further by including dreams, which are always situated outside the boundaries of time. A final blow to conventional structures of time in biography is dealt in the last scene, in which contemporary children exclude a small girl called Marie from their game, singing a rhyme about the decapitation of Mary Queen of Scots. Here the chronological sequence of the events in a historical life as the main ordering principle of life-writing is abandoned entirely.

The structure of *Variations of a Theme by Clara Schumann* abandons the chronology of external events in favour of an alternative structure based on the consciousness of its protagonist Louise. The journey to an archive in Berlin, which is shown as her present, is combined with scenes on levels that cannot be integrated into a linear flow of time, such as her memories or dreams. The scenes between the subjects of her biography, as the encounter between Clara Schumann and Brahms, are presented as existent on a virtual level that is dependent on Louise's thought.

Similarly, the presentation of scenes from the past, for example the conversations with her mother (Yeger. 1991, 191, 199 and 200), are marked as her memories, presented from her perspective, rather than flashbacks from the past. With Louise's present as the main level from which the other ones are evoked, Yeger's play imitates human experience of mental activity that can create bridges between the past and the present rather than a scientific idea of the strictly linear passing of time.[24] Interestingly, the shifts between the different levels of consciousness are indicated by lighting, a theatrical means often used to point out changes in time and place.[25] As in Lochhead's play, a linear development over time is not entirely abandoned in *Variations on a Theme*; the presentation of Louise's travels is interrupted by dream and memory sequences, but through her advancing journey the passing of time is still occasionally discernable. It is not completely abandoned as a structuring principle but subordinated to other alternative patterns, in this case a theatrical stream of consciousness. Through this new variety of ordering principles in biographical drama, these plays acquire additional diversity, while the idea of a universal standard is weakened. Without such an uncontested norm, however, it is more difficult to declare any particular kind of presentation to be the most objective one, as their multiplicity automatically implies an element of choice. Experiments with the structure of biographical plays can thus raise indirect questions about the form in which a life is presented, about the form of the original events and the way in which they are related. Ultimately this can lead to questions about the relationship between the world in the play and that outside the theatre, and about the way in which the first is created.

The Role of Language

Another element that is essential in this context is language and, as one of the main tools for the production of life-writing, it is also a suitable object for implicit problematisation. Any deviation from the conventionally extra-theatrical style of language described above has the potential to call attention to the textual influence on biographical drama. As Brecht describes in his concept of alienation, the distance created by freeing theatrical devices from "the stamp of familiarity" (Willet. 1978, 192), and making well-known elements feel strange allows greater awareness of the way in which they are used, instead of merely listening to what is said on stage and how this contributes to the story, the audience is encouraged to think about how it is said. Unlike Brecht's idea of using this in order to promote changes in contemporary society, the conclusions drawn from this process in biographical theatre contribute to a new understanding of the way in which language influences the way in which we see the past and past lives. Instead of discovering similarities to the things we know in seemingly strange theatrical images, as

---

[24] This reflects the concept of a "reality *par excellence*" in Berger and Luckham. 1966, 35, which can accommodate other, dependent levels of reality.
[25] Cf. Yeger. 1991, 184. Examples for changes in time and place can be found in Gems. 1985. *Piaf* and R. Bolt declares in "A Note to the Designer", published with *Vivat! Vivat Regina!* that "the lighting, not the properties will create the changes of time and place and mood" (Bolt. 1971, xxv).

Brecht intended, the audience can find discrepancies between the original and what they might expect to be a faithful representation.

In *Tyger*, attention is drawn to language through its unexpected use in the form of verse and song, as well as through playing with words, for example by presenting individual words in alphabetical order rather than in a syntactical or associative environment (Mitchell. 1971, 28). In the scene where Blake applies to the Cultural Committee, the repetition of the phrase "(ir)responsible" is used to create a nearly lyrical sound pattern that differs considerably from the typical phrases that would be used in a comparable situation of an interview. In the same scene the apparent extra-theatricality is undermined further when another applicant presents her case with contemporary phrases and expressions, but ends her speech with the old fashioned words "Bless you! Bless you! You are all so gracious" (Mitchell. 1971, 39). Just like the anachronistic time structure of the play, these devices hinder a naïve reception of *Tyger* as a straightforward and neutral re-creation of Blake's life, inviting questions about the way in which the play uses the biographical material.

In *Tyger* the focus is more on the conscious selection of language, other plays question whether it can convey experience appropriately. In *Augustine,* the role of the patient is doubled by a violinist, according to Furse her *"doppelgänger* who [...] could express pure pre-lingual emotion and her nervous condition" (Furse. 1997, 10). Even though her speeches, based on the words recorded in Charcot's work (Charcot. 1888 -92), are more accessible to modern audiences that are likely to have some basic knowledge of Freudian symbolism, the use of music to convey her experiences demonstrates a certain distrust of language. Similarly her bodily convulsions are seen to be an expression of her suffering, in spite of her tendency to regard them as her performances (cf. above). Furse thus provides two additional means of communicating traumatic events which cannot be expressed in language[26] – at least not solely. Nevertheless her play is not a rejection of language, as Freud's attention to Augustine's "chattering" (Furse. 1997, 34) as Charcot terms it, provides the key to understanding her physical symptoms. Language is presented as one way of referring to the world, but one whose code has to be learned, just as Freud learns to decipher Augustine's words. It is also seen as one among a variety of communication systems, competing with others such as music and mime. Applied to biography this suggests that a spoken or written account of a life is always just one way of representing it.

The gap between experience and language can be observed in other plays too. In *The Invention of Love* A. E. Housman can literally not come to terms with his love for Jackson, as there is no

---

[26] Caruth. 1995, 153: "The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness of horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge [...] the event cannot become [as Janet says], a 'narrative memory' that is integrated into a completed story of the past." A similar definition is given by Pierre Janet in the same volume.

word that expresses his feelings. A taboo in Victorian society, the characters can only allude to homosexuality, yet most of the 14 different expressions for homosexuals and homosexual activity used in the play are derogatory or refer solely to sexual encounters. Only in Latin and Greek, two foreign, dead languages, can Housman find positive expressions for his own thoughts: remembering his admiration he describes it with Horace's verse about Theseus and Pirithous: "My greatest friend and comrade Moses Jackson. *'Nec Lethaea valet Theseus abrumpere caro vincula Pirithoo'*" (Stoppard. 1997, 5). The same image is used to confess his love to Jackson (Stoppard. 1997, 76), and in order to express his longing he borrows from Horace: "At night I hold you fast in my dreams, I run after you across the Field of Mars, I follow you into the stumbling waters, and you show no pity" (Stoppard. 1997, 49). Using a language which his friend does not share, however, makes it all the easier for him to dismiss Housman's declaration: "I never took to it, you know – all that *veni, vidi, vici...*" (Stoppard. 1997, 101). Chamberlain, the second gay character in the play, makes this inadequacy of language explicit, but underlines the possibility of understanding beyond language when he states that Housman expects Jackson to "reply in the same language" to "what cannot be spoken".[27] As in *Augustine*, this discrepancy reflects the gap between experience and language, showing that the first is not automatically and naturally reflected in the latter. Towards the end of the play, however, it is suggested that it is possible to explore this distance: as Chamberlain puts it, they "aren't anything till there's a word for it" (Stoppard. 1997, 91), but with the invention of the word homosexual they hope to influence the way they are perceived in society as well.

Whereas the coining of a new term in *The Invention of Love* still expresses the hope that language, even if it is not a copy of reality, can close the gap between experience and the way in which it can be reflected in language, their separation is confirmed by the character of Tristan Tzara in Stoppard's earlier play *Travesties*. The arbitrariness with which words are assigned to phenomena in the world outside the theatre is the basis for a dispute over the meaning of the term "art". Accused of using the word for "whatever [he] whish[es] it to mean", Tzara points out that society does "exactly the same thing with words like *patriotism, duty, love, freedom, king and country, brave little Serbia* [... that] words are taken to stand for opposite facts, opposite ideas" (Stoppard. 1975, 38 - 39). On the basis of his conviction that language does not have any necessary connection to the world, Tzara reduces it to mere sounds and unconnected lexical items, for example when he invents new poems by recycling and reshuffling the lines of a Shakespeare sonnet (Stoppard. 1975, 53). His behaviour thus confirms his explicit criticism of one of the pillars on which the idea of a reconstruction of the past is built. Though countered by the other characters' adherence to the idea that they can reflect the world in language, Tzara's

---

[27] Stoppard. 1997, 6. The latter is a clear reference to "the love that cannot speak its name", Oscar Wilde's famous description of homosexual love.

use of language introduces doubts about the main tool of biography and contributes to the idea that life-writing can also be based on a creative use of biographical material, suggested by other elements of the play (cf. above).

<u>Naming</u>

The shift from focusing on the meaning conveyed by language towards its form in *Travesties* is also supported by its inheritance from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As the title of Wilde's play indicates, the most important characteristic of a future husband is his name: "My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest" (Wilde. 1954, 263). When the very same admirers, whom Cecily and Gwendolyn knew as Ernest, turn out to be called Jack and Algernon, they immediately lose interest. Contrary to Shakespeare's famous line, a name is everything here, and the sound of a word outweighs its function as a reference to a particular entity. Even though in *Travesties* they are not rejected merely on ground of their name and the characters also see other "intellectual differences [that] are an insuperable barrier" for their successful marriage (Stoppard. 1975, 94), the superiority of a name over its bearer is still clearly echoed. In a biographical play this motif raises some additional questions as it draws attention to the relationship between names and specific entities, one of the basic premises of biography. In *Travesties* the relation between them is turned upside down, the name is the main point of reference, and a corresponding entity is assigned freely.

The concept of naming as one of the pillars of biography is subverted to an even greater extent in Edward Bond's *Early Morning*. The list of dramatic personae contains many names that are familiar to an average British audience, such as Queen Victoria and Albert the Prince Consort, her two sons Arthur and George, Florence Nightingale and the Prime Ministers Gladstone and Disraeli. Not just the familiarity of many of these names suggests that this play contains references to well known figures, the fact that they also all belong to the same historical context seems to exclude any possibility of possible confusion, even if there were more historical figures of the same name. The ensuing expectation of an unambiguous reference, based on the experience that names are "word[s] or phrase[s] that identif[y] a **specific** person, place or thing" (Crystal. 1997, 112; bold UC), is not entirely disappointed, as the characters in the play still share some features of their famous namesakes, most importantly their positions as Royals or Prime Ministers.[28]

A number of changes to the characters of these names, however, violate the rule of trans-world identity (cf. Ronen. 1994, 59), i.e. the assumption that entities of the same name exist equally in a fictional world and the world in which the readers or spectators live. The existence of Siamese twins among Victoria's offspring, the conspiracies in which different members of the Royal

---

[28] The combination of these similarities and little favourable imagined attributes are also partly responsible for the fact that Bond's play was the last one to be banned in its entirety by the Lord Chamberlain (cf. Harben. 1988, 231).

Family plot to murder each other and the lesbian love affair between Florence Nightingale and Queen Victoria, for example, cannot be reconciled with any other representations of these historical figures. The discrepancy between the recognisable elements and those that do not fit into a biographical reading opens up room for questions about Bond's play and the status of the characters in it, as well as about trans-world identity in theatre in general. These are of great relevance to biographical drama, as the majority of plays use names as reference to entities that exist outside the theatre in order to establish a closer relationship between the two worlds.[29] A problematisation of this link between the name and the designated entity can thus be seen as an indirect challenge to it, as it shows that there are different degrees of similarity which are not fully described by distinction between biographical or entirely fictional material.

Instead of matching new characteristics to a familiar name, *An Audience Called Edouard* questions the use of language in biography by giving a recognisable character a new name. The reason for the deliberate confusion is explained by the character himself towards the end of the play when he reveals that he "came in illegally" (Pownall. 1979, 59) and therefore had to remain incognito. In spite of this retrospective motivation within the plot of the play, the device leads to an inversion of the audience's activity. Instead of establishing a link to a historical character through a famous name and acquiring new information about this character throughout the play, the audience is given the name of "Hugo Moor" (Pownall. 1979, 33) which does not evoke any famous person. The link to someone familiar to them is created with the help of indications in the text, where it is revealed that the character is a Prussian "man of ideas" (Pownall. 1979, 45 and 46), who, after being thrown out of most European countries due to his involvement in "some trouble in Paris fourteen years ago", now lives in England (Pownall. 1979, 42) where he works on a book about economics (Pownall. 1979, 48). In a production, the use of allusions to an iconic picture of Marx as a model for the character's physical appearance could, however, reveal his identity almost straightaway.[30] In both cases the idea of a biography as a source of knowledge about a famous person is inverted; rather than acquiring new information, the audience has to use its existing knowledge in order to recognise the allusions made in the play. As this variation of the use of names in biography is less likely to provoke any thought about the use of biography, it suggests that criticism of reconstructionist life-writing is not the only possible aim of experiments with biographical form. Alternatively they might be inspired by playfulness and their potential to create comic situations, or, before 1968, the wish to avoid

---

[29] *Insignificance* by Terry Johnson is one of the very few plays where such a reference is established without the help of names. In other plays, such as *Tyger*, preserving the unity of the name Blake with the entity one expects helps to create the impression of a play based on people in the past even if they are put into a new context.

[30] An image from the first production, however, shows that this was not done there.

problems with censorship.[31] In the case of *An Audience Called Edouard* it is also likely that the rewarding effect of recognition contributes to the play's success.

The Biographical Subject

This issue of naming shows that the relationship between the world created in biographical plays and that outside the theatre is not the only aspect that is challenged by implicit metabiography. The second main area subjected to scrutiny through these elements is again the nature of the biographical subject. At the heart of any concept of the subject of life-writing lie questions about the biographee's identity and their relationship with others around them. These concerns have indirectly been raised in the discussion of *Travesties* where many of the characters are not only based on a famous historical figure, but also on a character from *The Importance of Being Ernest* (cf. above). Creating these flat characters that are subordinate to the plot, Tom Stoppard not only suggests the importance of literary influences on biography, he also points to a motive that is taken up in other plays as well: the loss of a unique identity.

Whereas Stoppard creates this effect through a mixture of images and textual elements, Liz Lochhead indicates it through a decision about the repartition of roles in *Mary Queen of Scots*. Two actresses play the Queens, as well as the other female roles, thus emphasising the parallels between the characters, who, as women, all find themselves under similar pressures and expectations. This visual connection is explained by the text: La Corbie, the narrator figure, makes it explicit in a question that accompanies the first transition from Elizabeth into Bessie: "when's a queen a queen / And when's a queen juist a wummin'" (Lochhead. 1989, 16). Later in the play the thought is echoed in a conversation between "MAIRN, *a wee poor Scottish beggar lass* [and] LEEZIE, *her tarty wee companion*" who see Mary in a procession and imagine what they might look like as Queens (Lochhead. 1989, 32). Finally the lack of differentiation between the characters is reinforced by similarities between Mary and Elizabeth and their maids Marian and Bessie which extend further than their names. When transforming from one into the other they only change between the proud demeanour of a Queen and the modesty of a Maid (e.g. Lochhead. 1989, 17), their inclinations and aspirations, however, remain similar: Mary's romantic ideas are reflected in Marian's advice to her mistress to marry for love (Lochhead. 1989, 24-5) and, just as Elizabeth, Bessie becomes another accomplice in Mary's downfall when she provides Bothwell with information (Lochhead. 1989, 44).[32]

The combination of textual elements, stage directions for the actresses' performance and the doubling of two actresses for all the female roles in the play (with the exception of La Corbie the narrator) thus create a strong connection between the female characters. This is contrasted

---

[31] For further information on this aspect, cf. for example Nicholson. 2003 and 2005. *The Censorship of British Theatre*, vol. 1 and 2. Exeter: UP,

[32] Elizabeth's role in the conspiracy against Mary is less active than in other accounts, but her statement that her advisers "would have to trick [her] before I would consent to sign a warrant for her death" (Lochhead. 1989, 63) can be read as an indication that, although she does not want to accept any guilt officially, she is not adverse to being duped into participating in Mary's downfall.

through the male characters and it suggests a reading that concentrates less on the two Queens as individuals and more on the role of women in society, whose freedom of action is limited by male dominance. Portraying them mainly as representatives of a social group, Lochhead's decision echoes the voices that advocate the inclusion of a person's social context into life-writing. At the same time, the coherence and unity of the biographical subject are implicitly disputed as its outer boundaries are threatened.

Variation on a Theme by Clara Schumann presents divisions within a character that prevent its perception as a coherent and unique whole. Instead of assigning several roles to a single actress, different aspects of the protagonist's personality are presented by various performers. A note by the author indicates how this relationship between the different roles should be indicated by the costumes in production:

> The costumes of **Rhea, Laura, Vera, Marilyn, Anna K** and **Polythene Woman**, whilst being distinctive to each character, should also unmistakeably echo that of **Louise**, to the extent that we should be able to imagine that, given different circumstances, any of them could be **Louise** (Yeger. 1991, 174).

This visual connection is once again echoed by details of their characterisation. Apart from Rhea, all of them share a degree of dependence on men or fears about their relationships with them, thus echoing Louise's own state of mind. Her eagerness to please men is reflected in Marilyn: her desire for acceptance, expressed in her song "I wanna be loved by you" that is repeated throughout the play, has turned her into the incarnation of men's dreams and an object of admiration for the other women in the play (cf. Yeger. 1991, 202). Louise, while striving for success that could guarantee her father's love, is also anxious about the possible consequences of other relationships with men. This fear is expressed in Laura's and Anna K.'s stories, who are both rejected by their families after having illicit affairs, and in the complaint by the Polythene Woman, who accuses men of "throw[ing women] out like yesterday's papers" when they grow old (Yeger. 1991, 196). Finally, Vera echoes Louise's reaction to her problems as she too tries to avert any blame from her father (cf. Yeger. 1991, 191 and 192).

These parallels between Louise and the other women characters also extend to her wishes. Anna and Laura describe their affairs as filled with "such passion" that Louise, whose desires are constantly suppressed by her, joins them, expressing her wish "to feel more than most, to suffer more than most", speaking in unison with the two (Yeger. 1991, 197). Unlike Clara Schumann, whose appearance on stage is shown to be dependent on Louise's idea of her personality (cf. above), these characters are not presented as part of the protagonist's imagination, but rather reflect aspects of her unconscious. The only female character who, in spite of her similar costume, seems to be independent is Rhea. Doing everything that Louise does not dare to do, such as travelling without money while Louise took great care to exchange some beforehand (Yeger. 1991, 179), Rhea represents the unrealised potential hidden in the protagonist. Her connection to Louise thus only becomes visible when Rhea returns on stage after a long

absence. After coming to terms with other aspects of her selves, Louise can then join her for her journey into the opposite direction of her planned trip (Yeger. 1991, 206).

Using various parts to present individual aspects of a character, *Variations* inevitably raises doubts about the coherence and unity of human personality. Unlike the women characters in *Mary Queen of Scots*, it is not the permeability between the world and the self that endangers the traditional concept of a unified and unique identity, but questions about the way in which it is held together. A few of the character traits given to Louise can appear to be contradictory, such as her simultaneous desire of and aversion to sexual relationships. In a conventional presentation as one character, however, they would not necessarily stand out as irreconcilable and it is the visualisation of the divisions that communicates doubts about the possibility to justify the idea of one coherent identity if it can harbour such opposing tendencies. It is interesting to observe in this context, that Yeger does not use the subject of biography as the example for the lack of a unified and coherent identity, but the biographer. The reason for this could be the playwright's interest in the effect of biography, which is also visible in her previous play *Self Portrait*, where she focuses solely on the transforming power of biography on a human life. For a spectator or a reader, it is nevertheless, possible to transfer her ideas about human character from one to another.

David Pownall's experiment in *An Audience Called Edouard* creates a biographical subject who is only perceived through his environment and whose core personality is hard to discern from the fragments of information given by the other characters. Presenting the friends and brother of Edouard Manet as they are modelling for his painting *Déjeuner sur l' herbe*, he defies the tradition of putting the biographee centre stage and merely insinuates his presence as the creator of this work. The title *An Audience Called Edouard* indicates that he is situated in the auditorium, and his imaginary location is confirmed by the fact that the other characters address themselves to him when speaking into the direction of the audience: "Yes, **you** did specify. Édouard, it seems **you** are out" (Pownall. 1979, 15; bold UC). They even leave pauses after asking him questions,[33] but his participation in the dialogue is left entirely to the imagination of the audience. As a consequence, the biographee in Pownall's play is a product created by the characters around him, he does not exist independently from his friends and family.

In addition to addressing Manet directly, the other characters also talk about him. His family background is explained during their discussion about the inheritance after the death of Manet's father (cf. Pownall. 1979, 12-14), and they mention his illegitimate son and some of his affairs (e.g. Pownall. 1979, 22). The main topic, however, is his art. This focus is well integrated into the plot of the play - as the other characters sit for one of his paintings, it seems plausible that they discuss the outcome of this undertaking. At the same time it reflects the traditional

---

[33] Cf. e.g. Pownall. 1979, 46: "How about that idea? (*Pause*) You are unmoved."

approach in which artistic achievement is the reason for a biography and where the relationship between the artist's life and his work is essential. Some of their comments defend his approach, particularly those by Ferdinand,[34] while others are more critical, as for example Victorine's complaint that Manet's sense of mimesis means including all her little imperfections (Pownall. 1979, 17). There is, however, no voice that unites all the different comments, and the biographical subject exists mainly in fragmented pieces of opinion and information. This suggests that human beings might not possess the coherent and unified personalities they are often supposed to have, but the particular constellation in Pownall's plays also allows seeing this situation as the consequence of the absence of a biographer who can impose coherence upon the biographee.

The Interaction of Explicit and Implicit Meta-Biography

The two alternative interpretations of the situation in *An Audience Called Edouard* do not just show that the criticism of biography depends to a great extent on the spectator's (or in the case of the published text) reader's contribution to it and the question about which one they prefer. It also shows that some concerns are common to plays with explicit and implicit levels of metabiography and that these often interact. Before returning to their relation, however, it is of interest to compare the examples of implicit metabiography discussed in this section to the explicit techniques presented before. As the last paragraph shows, the role of perspective and the nature of the biographical subject are of importance in these plays as well, but they are accompanied by a higher number of other emphases: the construction of life stories is not shown as often on stage, but intertextual elements and an unexpected use of language are employed in order to point to the influence of literary and linguistic conventions on biographical writing in any form.

Here again, however, references to theatrical conventions are rarely indicated in the text, and plays such as *An Audience Called Edouard*, where their role is implicitly acknowledged and questioned in the play texts, are exceptions to the rule. Further references can be introduced through other means in the production, but the notable focus on language, other literary genres and the process of writing in the published scripts add to the tendency to see the biographical elements as mainly derived from other discourses. At the same time, however, the use of theatrical means rather than language in order to convey the challenges to the predominant concept of biographical literature, makes implicit metabiography inherently more genre-specific than many explicit forms of it.[35]

---

[34] The model who sat for *Le Déjenuer sur l'herbe* is Ferdinand Leenhof, Manet's future brother in law, also a sculptor.

[35] The main exception in this context is the use of contradictions between (historical) descriptions and the presentation of actions on stage, which can be found, for instance, in *Arcadia*.

Implicit metabiography, as its explicit counterpart, often criticises the traditional empiricist model of life-writing, whereas suggestions for alternative ways of presenting the past are rare. Yet, it can be argued that the use of implicit means automatically leads to a revision of reconstructionist biographical methods, as the new techniques already constitute an alternative way of integrating biographical material into a theatrical performance. Even if the central aim of changing the means of presentation is to criticise the former standard, the newly created devices inevitably become an alternative. To a lesser extent this is true of explicit metabiography as well, as even a discussion of the practices of life-writing itself within a play results in a change to the empiricist avoidance of self-reflexivity. Implicit meta-elements, on the other hand, are already built into the very structure of the play. The two forms of metabiography can therefore be seen as united in their capacity to challenge a concept of biography that dominated the writing of history and historical lives for a long time, while they differ with regard to the means they employ, as well as the intensity of their effect.

Conclusions and *H.I.D.*

The discussion of a number of plays in the last chapters has shown that scripts for biographical plays are mainly characterised by their variety as far as content, forms and theoretical background are concerned. This reflects the number of theoretical positions on the ways in which we deal with the past. Just as it is helpful to summarise the latter as a general development from a relatively unified, empiricist, objectivist towards a more multi-perspectival, post-modern understanding, it can help to describe some general tendencies in biographical playwrighting as well. A play that can illustrate some of the key aspects of such a summary is *H.I.D.* (*Hess Is Dead*). As the re-appearance of some of the plays in both sections that deal with metabiography shows, the clear distinction between implicit and explicit forms is merely a useful tool for analysis, while in practice they often appear together and reinforce (or sometimes even contradict) each other. Brenton's play is rich in both, and shows their interplay very well. The challenge it thus produces to a traditional concept of objective biography is strong, but at the same time, *H.I.D.* also implicitly evokes the concept which it takes on. As a result, the major tendencies that can be observed in biographical theatre can all be found in this single play. As a means of conclusion to this section, I therefore identify them in Brenton's play, showing how they represent many of the key points made above.

The involuntary change to the story of Hess's death by two scholars is clearly presented as an abuse of history, indicating that its proper use forbids falsification and is oriented towards the search of truth. When asked to prepare a statement on the death of Rudolph Hess, the two scholars realise only too late that they might have produced wrong history when a colleague presents them with the possibility that the man who died in Spandau was not Hess after all. In this context they explicitly acknowledge that this error will be hard to retract, as "it was on the

news tonight" (Brenton. 1989, 60) and has therefore entered the collective memory of authorised versions of the past. Yet, Brenton does not simply formulate the possibility of abusing history, and thus defines the ideal of historiography by contradiction. Presenting the search for the true identity of the Spandau prisoner in a range of various media, none of which seems particularly trustworthy, he uses an implicit metalevel in order to emphasise the fragility of the concept of Truth.

The declaration and work of the scholars, for example, is presented both on video and on stage to the audience and to Palmer, the investigating journalist. The expectation that video is a technology that can record an objective image of reality, an idea that is supported by some of its uses, e.g. in judiciary systems, is clearly countered in Brenton's play.[36] The tape and the conspiracy theory shown in the play are provided by Charity, the widow of a deceased historian whose personal circumstances do not recommend her as an objective witness: she lives in a home for the mentally unstable (Brenton. 1989, 6), is said to have killed her second husband (Brenton. 1989, 65), gives evasive answers (Brenton. 1989, 12) and has all the necessary technology to edit videos on hand (Brenton. 1989, 16). Suspicions about the tape as a mere recording of the past are intensified when it seems to change after each viewing. Having spotted a small figure in 17th century costume that disappears through a trompe l'œil system of doors on the tape, Palmer rewinds the tape several times, only to see that the figure changes on each occasion. This implicit denial of the unspoken expectation that video can provide a true version of the events is strengthened by a character's comment that on the basis of fake videos future generations would even belief in a meeting between Hitler and Churchill (cf. Brenton. 1989, 49).

Having thus discredited video as a means to preserve the past, its reconstruction on stage is not presented as much more credible. The presentation of the same actions could give the audience the impression that they are observing them with their own eye. The potential of a greater degree of felt immediacy and therefore authenticity is, however, countered by deviations from an apparently extra-theatrical reconstruction. The artificiality of theatrical actions is, for example, emphasised through the use of language that would be deemed inappropriate in a similar situation. The scholars' speeches are interrupted by sequences in free verse or asides that explain the characters' personal thoughts about their conversation (e.g. Brenton. 1989, 33, 53). As a result, both the stage action and the video appear to be created, just as Charity's narrative of the events is influenced by her own perspective. With implicit and explicit means the play denies the possibility that the character of the journalist, or indeed anyone, can find a true version of Hess's story or even his true identity.

This pattern can be seen as a summary of the most prominent tendencies in the scripts of contemporary biographical plays: although the ideas of a reconstruction and a unified identity

---

[36] Williams. 1980, 2 refers to this idea as the belief in "film's almost scientific accuracy in reproducing the visible circumstances of life."

are often challenged and rejected, in many cases through metabiographical means, these innovations exist as a reaction to this tradition. As a consequence, the tradition lives on both in plays that still adhere to this concept, as well as in the reactions against it. The variety of ways in which empiricist ideas of history are introduced and then challenged in *H.I.D.* points to the diversity of forms in biographical theatre, which not only testifies to the creativity with which different playwrights have approached the question of how we can use past lives in contemporary plays, but also seems to belie such an apparently simplified summary. Being conscious of its limitations, however, such an overview can serve as a point of orientation in the discussion of biographical plays. Finally, *H.I.D.* presents a number of characters who are asked to or take it upon themselves to write Hess's life. While neither the two historians asked to produce a statement on his death, nor Luber with his x-ray photo or Palmer who follows Luber's trail are successful in their undertaking, the sheer number of historical writers in the play testifies to the great interest and importance accorded to their activity. As such, Brenton's play can again be regarded as symptomatic of biographical theatre: in spite of all uncertainty regarding its methods or even its goal, writing about the past continues to be immensely popular. At the same time, the epistemological doubts open up the field to new methods and approaches, thus creating new challenges for writers of historical or biographical theatre. The previous analysis of the scripts of biographical theatre proves that it has fallen on fertile ground, but it remains to see how playwrights see their new role themselves.

Chapter 6: Playwrights on their Work

The interpretations of biographical plays in the context of theoretical discourses about the way in which we deal with the past have shown interrelations between the two areas. In an approach that deals with theatre as an act of communication and that is interested in the way it functions, however, it is equally important to explore the attitudes and concepts of life-writing of those involved in the theatrical event, as they can point out the communicative intentions behind the production of life stories. In conclusion to the discussion of scripts, playwrights' comments on their work are described. This does not mean that the intentions of the writer are seen as the ultimate goal of an interpretation, as was the case before the establishment of the intentional fallacy, but for an examination of the ways in which biography works, the conscious or unconscious decisions taken by those who produce life stories are of importance.[1]

The first question that has to be addressed concerns the focus on the biographical material: do playwrights conceive the use of biographical material as a central aspect of their plays that justifies its treatment as a group of plays with shared characteristics, and does their practice therefore support the approach taken in this thesis? Furthermore their understanding of the referentiality they create through the use of biographical material is of interest and it has to be seen how far this is influenced by genre traditions and broader cultural frameworks, as e.g. standards for historical writing. The answers to these questions can offer an additional insight into the question whether the makers of biographical theatre attempt to convey a particular view of the past, and if they are conscious of the use they make of the past. The contributions by other members of the production team are presented together with the discussion of individual performances.

The Centrality of the Biographical Material

With respect to the question about the centrality of the biographical material, the playwrights' opinions are as varied as their plays: some of them see their work in the tradition of life-writing, others declare that they merely used biographical elements in order to cast light on another topic. The first end of the spectrum is represented by writers such as Alan Bennett and David Edgar. *Albert Speer* is based on Gitta Sereny's biography of the Nazi architect and Edgar strives for the greatest possible faithfulness to this model. In an "Author's Note" to the published script he declares that he is "hugely grateful for the chance to **retell** the story Gitta Sereny told so authoritatively in her book" (Edgar. 2000, ix, bold UC) and in the following disclaimer he stresses his sense of duty towards the historically rigorous original (cf. Edgar. 2000, ix). This is

---

[1] This approach also supports the idea of biographical theatre as a cultural phenomenon, as it takes into account its historical specificity, brought to it through the author's (and other practitioners') integration into a culturally and historically specific context, cf. Knowles. 2004, 3 and Burke. 2002, 202.

even acknowledged in many reactions that describe his approach as "over-respectful" (Taylor. 2000, 685), or even as "cut-and-paste job on Gitta Sereny's Speer biography" (Foss. 2000, 686).

Alan Bennett also regards the use of a historical figure as the central element of his "two plays around if not altogether about Kafka" (Bennett, Alan. 1991, vii – viii), even if the character of Franz Kafka is rather marginal in his television play *The Insurance Man*. In *Kafka's Dick*, the playwright's own evaluation is less surprising, as the Czech writer is one of the central characters, albeit recently returned from the dead. A particularly interesting example of a playwright who sees her play in the tradition of life-writing is Claire Tomalin whose *The Winter Wife* is based on a part of her own prose biography of Katherine Mansfield (Tomalin. 1987). The dramatisation is inspired by her impression that "there was a sort of story within the life of Katherine Mansfield, which was intrinsically dramatic, which was really about her relationship with Ida [and which was also] contained within place and time" (Canton. 2004). Tomalin's clear distinction between the two different forms demonstrates that while the theatre is not seen as a direct comparison and competition for full length biographies, several playwrights nevertheless consider it as a good medium to tell stories about famous or less famous historical figures.

Michael Frayn represents the position at the other end of the spectrum, where the use of biographical material is not regarded as an end in itself, but as a means to illustrate other topics. According to him, his long-term interest in German history led him to think "about the story of Brandt and Guillaume", which "began to seem to embody something both about German history and the complexity of how human beings ever do anything".[2] Equally, *Copenhagen* is inspired more by reflection about quantum mechanics, and the story of Heisenberg's visit in 1941 was chosen mainly because it seemed "to encapsulate something about the difficulty of knowing why people do what they do and [the] parallel between that and the impossibility that Heisenberg established in physics, about ever knowing everything about the behaviour of physical objects" (Canton. 2004a). Here the life stories of historical figures are not employed for their own sake and the plays are not primarily about them. Instead they are considered to be representative of a more important central topic, such as complexity or human motivation.

Many other playwrights occupy a middle territory between these two positions. Nick Dear, for instance, explains in the programme to *The Art of Success* that he "wanted to write about William Hogarth, because it seemed to me that the choices facing him were peculiarly modern. He stands at a turning point" (Dear. 1986). Here a twofold interest, which bridges the positions described before, is revealed: on the one hand it is directed towards the mindset of people who live in times of epistemological change. On the other the general attraction to this period and its

---

[2] Canton. 2004a, cf. also Spencer. 2003: "Here, in his own words, he has written a drama about complexity."

systems of thought leads to a specific interest in the life of Hogarth, as he shows how one individual person coped with this situation. Rather than putting one aspect first, Nick Dear seems to weigh a more universal message and the individual story of a life at an equal level. Although the life of the biographical subject is less central in Dear's and particularly in Frayn's plays, their choice can, nonetheless, not be read as a clear negation of the idea that biographical plays are notably different from other forms of theatre. Frayn's rejection of the idea that he wanted to write his plays for the sake of his biographical subjects shows that he implicitly acknowledges the possibility that audiences might expect him to do just that. In other words, he is conscious of the influence of traditions of life-writing that are evoked by the use of historical characters. The idea that the use of historical characters introduces certain expectations thus seems to exist regardless of whether life-writing is at the heart of a play or a rather marginal aspect in it. While the role of biography in a play is likely to influence the degree to which these expectations are developed, the fact that they are generally assumed to arise can be seen as support for the definition of biographical theatre used in this thesis, in which the referentiality introduced by a historical character is seen as one of the vital conditions for biographical theatre. In the following the playwrights' opinions on the situation of reference in their work is examined in further detail.

Respecting the Facts or Playing with the Past?

The frequency with which this issue is taken up in authors' comments on their plays suggests that they grant particular importance to it. Here again there is a whole spectrum of opinions, ranging from those who see it as their duty to adhere as closely as possible to the idea of a correspondence between the world inside their plays and that outside the theatre, and those who reject the idea of a closer reference altogether. Claire Tomalin can be found on the end of the scale that is usually associated with traditional biography. Her work has been described as based on observations made "with the astute eye of the biographer" to the extent that she is not "entirely successful in making the leap of imagination necessary to turn this from a literary exercise into a theatrical event" (Gardner. 1991, 279). This impression of her work is confirmed by her own description of the writing process, which she sees as one of finding evidence and then "struggling with what material there is" (Canton. 2004b) in the process of shaping and selecting it. Her determination to find "inherent" structures (Canton. 2004b) echoes the ethos of empiricist, reconstructionist historians, an attitude to reference that is clearly marked by her previous activity as a writer of non-fiction.

Terry Johnson can be positioned at the other end of the spectrum. He denies any intention of producing a reference to particular historical figures when he declares any possible similarities

to be pure resemblance.[3] Arguably, this declaration should not be taken at face value and, considering the enormous similarities between the characters in *Insignificance* and some very famous Americans, it seems to be very tongue in cheek. Nevertheless, it testifies to Terry Johnson's declared lack of concern over any additional referentiality introduced by the historical characters and his freedom to play with the expectations of his audience.

Many other playwrights are influenced by both, the adherence to the ideal of reconstruction and the use of biographical material without any regard to authenticity. Most of them do not formulate an explicit agenda for their writing, but their comments on their work often provide good clues about their attitude. Alan Bennett is among those who perceive a stronger link between their work on historical characters and the world. Early on in his career he describes his writing as "primarily concerned with [...] the substance of life" (Bennett. 1976, 631 – 2), and the long and detailed introduction to *The Madness of George III*, in which he lists his sources and the changes he made to the material, confirms his respect for the historiographical standards he acquired as an undergraduate student of history. Nevertheless, some of his work contradicts the impression that he subordinates his work as a playwright to these rules. On the contrary, *Kafka's Dick*, itself unorthodox as the dead biographee meets one of his later admirers, reflects on and finally seems to reject the idea of empiricist history (cf. Chapter 5). Similarly Howard Brenton declares his desire to be accurate about his biographees in *Bloody Poetry*, but concedes that this desire only extends to the presentation of their personality, not the presentation about every detail of the historical events surrounding them: "I wanted it to quite accurate about them, realistic in that sense" (Wu. 2000, 24). His awareness of a different situation of reference is thus expressed in a feeling of responsibility towards his subjects rather than history as a discipline.

A variation of these writers' awareness of the possibility that their plays might be expected to present the historical characters in a truthful way is exemplified by Christopher Hampton. He affirms clearly that "it's the job of the writer to seek out the truth" (DiGaetani 1991, 129). Yet, with regard to *Tales from Hollywood* he states that "all those things", including the meeting between Thomas Mann and Tarzan, or Harpo Marx and Schoenberg "are true. [...] The only thing that was invented was the survival of Horváth" (DiGaetani. 1991, 128). In this context, his invention of additional life time for Horváth seems to be justified by the ulterior motive of reconstructing the situation of the historical émigrés, and the imagined events are seen as a way to bring out the truth about their lives. Stephen Jeffreys follows him in the conviction that playwrights have the right to add invented material, albeit for a different reason: "since you don't know enough about the past you have to invent more. You *have* to imagine, there's nothing more given you" (Sorcini. 1999, 207). Unlike Hampton's, his opinion seems to be

---

[3] "Mr Johnson says [in the programme], 'there are no impersonations in this play. The life of each character is based on a handful of facts ... those facts are the only resemblance.' Come, come now" (Cushman. 1982, 381 – 2).

based on necessity, rather than the conviction that changes can convey a different kind of truth. It can therefore be seen as the result of a combination of the awareness of biographical tradition and reconstruction and the knowledge that the presentation in another genre requires certain adaptations. This double orientation is also visible in the reactions to Jeffrey's work, as a comment by John Gross shows, in which he states that Jeffrey's "portrait of Rochester [...] closely resembles the original in some respects and falls short in others" (Gross. 1994, 1553). Against the expectations that could be raised by his play *Making History* (cf. pp. 74-5), Brian Friel argues for a similar understanding of the role of history in drama. Taking into account the reconstructionist tradition, which the use of biographical material brings with it, he declares in the programme to *Making History* that he "tried to be objective and faithful" to the historical record. At the same time, however he acknowledges the fictional elements of drama, saying that he followed this methodology "after my artistic fashion," and he resolved any conflicts "between historical 'fact' and the imperative of fiction" in the favour of narrative.[4] For him, these changes are also imposed by the necessities of a different form in contrast to Hampton's search for ways to tell another truth.

Nick Dear also clearly asserts his freedom to use the historical evidence freely. In a programme note he declares that *The Art of Success* is "set in the past but not a history play", as it contains invented elements as well as the condensation of "some ten years of English history into the events of a single night" (Dear. 1986). Rearranging elements of the past, he can thus achieve a double effect: on the one hand the changes allow him to establish parallels between life today and events of the past, on the other hand, the use of past lives in order to illustrate the discussion of contemporary issues shows that he attributes greater authority to them than to fictional characters that are not historically recorded. As a result, the tension between the different traditions of referentiality becomes visible in his work. Another combination of the appreciation of biographical material and the rejection of the idea that it has to be faithfully reconstructed is expressed by Timberlake Wertenbaker. For her, the time of history as "the agreed narrative of certain countries" is irreversibly past and should be substituted by a "dialogue with history" (Wertenbaker. 2002, 22). This means that playwrights can merely "capture and phrase questions" about the past (DiGaetani. 1991, 268), whereas the answers cannot be given by them. Concentrating on the process of enquiry rather than the establishment of a particular version, her position avoids the concept of correspondence between a representation and the past. At the same time, it does not abandon the idea of a different kind of reference entirely and places the search for it at the heart of historical drama. Her idea is also reflected in *After Darwin*, in which

---

[4] The quotations from the original programme are cited in Murray. 1991, 62.

a director and actors prepare a biographical play within the play and discuss the process in parallel with their own lives.[5]

Tom Stoppard's statements about history match the impression given in his plays that he is not overly concerned with historical accuracy. Their style, in Benedict Nightingale's words "an amusement-arcade style" (Nightingale. 1993, 1048) emphasises their theatricality at the cost of the extra-theatrical, apparently neutral and authenticating style of historical writing copied in many history plays, and in interviews he expresses severe reservations about biography. Reportedly he "offered little help and refused to read the typescript" for Ira Bruce Nadel's biography of him, declaring that "biographers see the past through the wrong end of the telescope" (Moss. 2002). Such behaviour suggests that Mrs. Swan, one of the characters in *Indian Ink*, acts as a spokesperson for the author when she declares that "biography is the worst possible excuse for getting people wrong" (Stoppard. 1999, 373). This apparent lack of interest in reference, created by the use of biographical material, is countered by Stoppard's meticulous research into historical topics in his writing - for *The Invention of Love* he even relearned Latin (Anon. 2002b, 2). If Stoppard maintains that, even though he feeds the results of his work into his plays, they are still "a lot to do with the fact that *I just don't know*" (Stoppard. 1974. 13), one could interpret his approach as similar to Wertenbaker's idea of a dialogue with history, in as far as that he asks informed questions, but feels unable to provide definite answers. It exemplifies the dual attitude of many playwrights who deny the necessity for, or ability of the theatre to reproduce correct versions of past lives, but who at the same time refer back to empirical research in order to inform their playwriting. A similar contradiction can be found in Terry Johnson's work. The numerous similarities between the characters in his plays and historical figures suggest that he too is likely to have done a lot of research for *Insignificance* and *Hysteria*, a clear contradiction to his claim that the first does not present any impersonations (cf. above, p. 110). The comic effect born out of this contradiction, which is also visible in Stoppard's plays, suggests that their dual attitude is shared by their audiences who appreciate the unexpected questions put to the past with their laughter.

A Remaining Responsibility

Michael Frayn, finally does not only share their attitude that is based on a paradoxical reliance on historical research on the one hand and awareness of the necessary influence and invention of the author on the other, he clearly formulates this position on several occasions. Much of the material accompanying his plays directly or indirectly refers to the fact that he feels bound by reality to a certain extent. His research is extensive enough to make him employ a research

---

[5] This is not necessarily the case for all of her plays that use biographical or historical material, *New Anatomies*, for example, seems to convey a rather traditional concept of life-writing. Nevertheless, as *After Darwin* is the later play, and her speech about dancing with history is also fairly recent, it could be argued that the other plays were written before her thoughts about history developed in the way expressed in her speech.

assistant for *Democracy* (cf. Wolf. 2003), and in the controversy surrounding the first production and American tour of *Copenhagen* he defends himself vigorously against accusations that he presented the character of Heisenberg too favourably by referring to his knowledge about the physicists. When the debate prompts the release of some new private letters by the Bohr family, he evaluates this evidence in the way a historian might do (cf. Frayn. 2002). Additionally he explicitly formulates the close attention to scholarly history that is revealed in the actions described above: at the National Theatre platform he talks about his respect for historical accuracy, which made him write a play with mainly male characters because "it just is the case that there were very few women in German politics at the time. [...] and finally, with much agony of spirit, I decided I had to follow the story" (Wolf. 2003). In another interview he confirms that "it can be interesting to respect reality" (Canton. 2004).

At the same time, however, he insists that his plays have to understood as fiction[6] and declares that he felt inhibited to "write about people who actually existed" (Wolf. 2003), because he knows that "there was no way that I could get that right" (Wu. 2000, 141).

His sense of obligation towards the past and past lives that underlies his extensive research might seem absurd in the context of his awareness that he cannot reproduce the past, but the paradox can be resolved through a "psychological trick that fiction performs on people." He explains that "nearly everyone who knew the Bohrs or Heisenberg says that these are very good portraits of them: they were like this. They often say, 'Even the actors are like Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg.'" In spite of his own conviction that it is "not possible that [he has] caught the actual tone of their voices just from reading letters and studying stuff about them [because] you can't do that!" (Wu. 2000, 124), the knowledge that other people will believe in his portrait gives him an added responsibility. Instead of rejecting the presentation of past lives as they are doomed to end up being fiction, he accepts the responsibility and even sees it as an opportunity "to make explicit the ideas and feelings that never quite get expressed in the confusing onrush of life" (Frayn. 2002, 23). In theatre, playwrights can "add to recorded history by taking some fiction, by trying to recreate by imaginative means what must have gone on inside people's heads" (Canton. 2004), provided that they act responsibly and "make it absolutely clear what [they] are claiming". His theoretical position is backed up by his own practice, in which where he points out the fictional elements in the postscripts to his plays.

Frayn's position thus echoes the situation in *Copenhagen*, where the characters learn that they cannot establish the truth about the past, but that it is nevertheless helpful to negotiate their positions in order to find a version that works for everyone (cf. p. 80). Similarly, his accountability as a playwright offers the audience the chance to evaluate his version and to determine whether they want to read it as mainly factual or fictional. As in theoretical discourses about history and biography, the absolute distinction between the two categories is

---

[6] Cf. his introduction to the play, published in Frayn. 2003 and in an abridged version in the programme, as well as the following comment by Nicholas De Jongh: "Frayn says Democracy is fiction but the events are real and his characters behave as journalists and historians reported they did" (De Jongh. 2003, 1201).

abandoned, while their existence as different reading strategies is acknowledged. Indirectly playwrights such as Tom Stoppard or Terry Johnson further confirm this dual attitude, as their apparent lack of concern about the accurate presentation of past lives often evokes the existence of these very standards as the basis for their explicit denial. This paradox in the attitudes shown by many playwrights therefore supports the choice of functional approach that can take into account their complex and sometimes contradictory notions of life-writing.

Chapter 7: Biographical Material in Individual Productions I: Acting and Design

<u>Introduction</u>

After the concentration on scripts and the work of playwrights, the following two chapters focus on the contributions of other theatre practitioners, analysing performances of biographical plays and discussing the way in which practitioners see their role in the production process. One of the biggest problems related to this undertaking, or indeed any performance analysis, is the limited availability of live performances and even documentation about them. While I have been able to attend several of the performances discussed here, I rely on videos, photos, programme notes or even other secondary literature for information about others. The description of individual productions in Appendix 2 indicates the basis for the observations on each individual production, showing where they are based on a restricted or mediated experience of them. In the following the titles of individual plays are used as references to the productions of them that are listed in the bibliography, only where several productions of the same play are available for analysis is each of them identified specifically.

According to the emphasis on the historical character as a defining element of biographical theatre, the chapter begins with the elements of a performance that are most closely related to the creation of such a character, i.e. primarily the acting, but also the costume design. Although they are created by different practitioners, the physical closeness and the ways in which actors use their costumes suggest that there is not always a clear dividing line between the two in the perception of a character, and they are therefore presented together. The second part of the chapter focuses on the elements that create the surroundings of the (historical) characters, concentrating on the work of scenographers or individual stage, light and sound designers. In contrast to the previous separation between the analysis of the scripts and the presentation of the opinions of practitioners, the smaller number of productions allows the two to be discussed together in this chapter.

Producing the Historical Character

Lending their bodies to the biographee, the actors have a clearly discernible impact on the way in which these are presented, they bear the main responsibility for their three-dimensionality. Their influence is, however, curtailed by the traditional division of roles in the process of creating a production – unless they participate in a shared devising process their contribution is limited through the script provided by the playwright. Collective devising is employed for biographical plays, as for instance in Foursight's *Thatcher the Musical*, and there are many biographical one-man shows where the same performer devises and presents the material, such as *Artaud in Wonderland* by Damian Wright.[1] In comparison to the number of plays where

---

[1] Cf. Hendy. 2000, 1642. Other examples are 78th Str. Theatre Lab's *Chasing the Train* (cf. Patton. 2004) or *I Weep at my Piano*, presented by Told By an Idiot (cf. *Theatre Record.* 19 (1 – 2)). In addition to their popularity at the Edinburgh Festival (cf. Chapter 1), there is a tradition of biographical one – man shows

actors perform a given script, they nevertheless constitute the minority, even more so among the plays discussed in this thesis in which many small shows are not taken into account due to a lack of documentation. As a consequence, the emphasis is laid on the actors' role in a shared working process. Anne Lacey, who played Mary in Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots* clearly formulates the restrictions imposed by the script, declaring that the playwright "had already made a lot of decisions about Mary as she wrote," and that she therefore "also had to play Liz's Mary" (Lacey. 2005). Some of her colleagues confirm these boundaries for their interpretation of the historical figures on which their characters are based. Roger Lloyd Pack and Timothy West both describe the research they undertook for their roles of Kafka and Stalin respectively, yet they both declare that, in the end, "you have to play what is in the script and the character that is in the script" (Lloyd Pack. 2005), even if "historical truth does not match what the playwright is saying about the character" (West. 2005).

The actors' work is thus guided by both the playwrights' and their own understanding of the past lives used in a production. While the playwrights' guidelines are given entirely in a verbal form in the script, they are granted more freedom with regard to the non-verbal expression of the character's personality. This division between their main areas of influence can be linked to the idea of different levels of truth in biography: the selection of the events presented and described in the play, as well as the biographee's speeches are pre-determined by the author. The actor, on the other hand, has the opportunity to show through voice, facial expression, gestures or movement, which stance the historical character takes towards them. In other words, while establishing a reference to events in a past life is mainly the author's responsibility, the actor can influence the presentation of his personality to a higher degree. Unless there is an entire lack of correspondence between the results of an actor's research and the playwright's description of a historical character, it is thus primarily the actor's task to fill the selection of events in a life with his own interpretation of the biographee's personality.

Having established these restrictions concerning the choice of aspects of a past life, it is of interest to examine the actors' role as a (re-)creator of a past life on stage. In spite of the differences between their roles, it is possible to draw parallels between the contributions of actors and authors. The equivalent to folding the past life into a text in empiricist life-writing (cf. p. 22) could be described as transplanting it onto the body of the performer. The unavoidable differences between a verbal narrative and a material reality, which has been established for the writing of the past, is echoed by the inevitable differences between two distinct biological bodies. Actors do not just regard the subject from a particular perspective, as authors do as well, every performer also brings his own body's characteristics to the presentation of a historical character. These may make it harder for the actor to hide between an

---

created for educational purposes in the US. Good examples can be found on the web pages of Mary Ann Young, Alice McGill or Marc Spiegel where they present their characters.

apparently "authentic" re-creation of the biographee, as for example cross-dressing or the casting of actors with a different skin colour show (cf. p. 121). It can also be assumed that very famous performers are more likely to be perceived as themselves and not merely as the imitations of figures of the past, because their appearance is better known to the audience, who might also see some aspects as typical of the actor rather than the historical character.[2] In productions where the actor is made to turn into the spitting image of the subject, on the other hand, this resemblance can powerfully evoke the idea that this figure of the past has been "resurrected" on stage.

Even though visual aspects are more important for the performer, language still plays a key role, since his own perspective of the historical figure is in mostly based on historical, often written, documents, which he in turn translates into a physical expression.[3] His contribution, influenced by a particular perspective and language, could thus be seen as another form of authorship of the historical character. Consequently, an analysis of the actors' contributions to biographical theatre can be directed by the same questions as that of the playwrights' work, even if their means of creation differ. The discussion returns to the issue of reference and the way in which self-reflexivity can influence the relationship between the play and the world, as well as questions about the presentation of the biographical subject.

The Actors' Approach to Historical Characters

The relationship between the world outside the theatre and that presented in a play cannot be determined by individual actors, but there is a range of different ways in which they can contribute to the overall impression of a faithful reconstruction or a deliberate departure from historical standards. Like the playwrights, they can choose an apparently neutral style that is "understood as a sign of naturalness and authenticity" (McConachie. 2001, 592) or one that calls attention to themselves. The centrality of this question is confirmed by the status many actors grant to research on the historical figure on which their roles are based. All of the actors who answered my questions confirm that they sought some additional material about the historical figure on whom their character was based in order to inform their own approach to their roles, particularly descriptions of contemporaries who know them (Lloyd Pack. 2005 and Gallagher. 2005). For some of them, this is fuelled by their own interests,[4] others regard it as necessary due to the expectations of the audience: "the better known the character [...] the more

---

[2] In the context of star actors it could also be assumed that their outstanding position in the cast is used mainly in order to present the life of a biographee in the tradition of a tale of a single outstanding individual. While other aspects such as the budget or the actors' availability may have a stronger influence on the casting, and their fame does not necessarily say anything about their ability to integrate into a cast, it can be said that most plays in which famous actors play historical characters, e.g. Anthony Sher in *Stanley*, Paul Scofield in *Man for All Seasons* or Liam Neeson in *The Judas Kiss*, treat their biographes as exceptional figures, whereas no group biography with a well-known performer can be found among the productions discussed here.

[3] Theoretically it would be possible to avoid this linguistic mediation if a performer copied another person immediately, but no example for this has been found.

[4] "I always enjoy playing a 'real' person because the research is always interesting" (Lloyd Pack. 2005).

accurate the impersonation must be" (Gallagher. 2004). Interestingly their opinions also echo the dual attitude of many playwrights, who deny the theatre's obligation to work in the tradition of empiricist history, but nevertheless feel obliged to back up their version with their historical sources (cf. Ch. 6). In addition to his own interest in past lives, Roger Lloyd Pack expresses the need to "do some kind of justice to the person you're playing" (Lloyd Pack. 2005), a concept idea similar to Timothy West's idea of "an extra responsibility" caused by references to "a known 'real' figure" (West. 2005). Their interest is equally countered by the belief that "one should never be too reverent to fact if the drama of the piece suffers" (Gallagher. 2005), an attitude that shows that biographical theatre is, first and foremost, produced in a dramatic tradition that is concerned with storytelling rather than accurate reconstruction. The same seems to be true for their own performance in them: using research to inform it, their main challenge is still to make it "work well dramatically" (Lacey. 2005), an idea that is echoed in Timothy West's warning that it is "easy to take physical and vocal portraiture" - in other words, the creation of correspondence on two levels central to the performance of the actor - "too far [...] it's your own personality that is going to carry you through the evening" (Tim West). The feeling of obligation to refer back to information about a historical figure portrayed in biographical theatre on the one hand, and the need to create an interpretation of a role that works on an artistic level on the other, thus create a field of tension in which individual actors have to situate their own work.

The influence of these tendencies on their performance is not just acknowledged by them, but also characterises the discussion of their performances. The opinions given in reviews are likely to be an important source of feedback for actors which shape their impression of the expectations brought to their performance. Thus they might have an influence on their work on historical characters, one that confirms their dual orientation. Whereas Michael Coveney applauds Judy Davies in the first production of *Insignificance* for "avoid[ing] all the usual pitfalls of impersonation" (Coveney. 1982, 382), another critic complains about the lack of surface resemblance between Franz Kafka and the, for this role "implausibly good looking" Conor Moloney in *Kafka's Dick* at the Derby Playhouse (Anon. 2004b, 23). This suggests that the problem of referentiality seems to be one of the central concerns for practitioners and for those who evaluate their presentation of historical characters.

Voice and Diction

Based on the general recognition of this problem for the work of the actors, the following paragraphs explore how it exerts its influence onto individual aspects of their performance. Here again the effect of the actors' attempts to recreate a figure from the past, or to consciously counter the idea of imitation depend on the previous knowledge and ideas of every individual spectator, but a comparison of an actor's interpretation with other discourses or information

about a historical figure allows informed guesses about its reception and the possible intentions behind it. Key aspects related to the physicality of the actor's performance are voice and diction. In a small number of biographical plays, the authors give specific indications of the way in which they wish an actor to speak, as for example in *Marlene*, where the spelling indicates a German accent: "I am not an Owstwian [...] the gweatest little whorehouse" (Gems. 1996, 16). Yet, most often, the choice of accent, tone and diction is left to the actor and the director. The fact that many plays use characters based on models from a more remote past suggests that these aspects might be more marginal for these plays than they are for productions in which more recent historical figures, whose voices are generally known through recordings, are presented.

Surprisingly, however, more general aspects, such as regional or foreign accents seem to be central to nearly all performances. Timothy West testifies to this when he describes his preparation for the role of Stalin in David Pownall's *Master Class*. In spite of the fact that the plays is written and performed in a language other than that spoken by the historical figures presented in it, he "thought it essential to show the difference between Georgian and Central Russian speech" (West. 2005). His efforts demonstrate the significance of speech as a sign of belonging – or here not belonging – to a particular social group that can provide information about someone's history. His point of view seems to be shared by many, as efforts to imitate the accent of a historical figure can be found in various productions. The entire cast of *Insignificance* at the Lyceum in Sheffield, for example, imitates different American accents, in the case of Einstein with a strong German element in it. *Vincent in Brixton* takes this one step further, casting Jochum ten Haaf, a Dutch actor for the role of the young painter.

A similar preoccupation with accents can be observed in the negative reaction of critics to plays where the reference to the original figure has not been taken into account for the actors' speech. Even for a play such as *Kafka's Dick*, which does not seem to present a faithful reconstruction of a past life, the lack of attention to the characters' accents can contribute to bad reviews: Conor Moloney's Irish accented Kafka at the Derby Playhouse received negatively, as are the Scottish accents used in Peter Hall's production (cf. Anon. 2004b, 23, Brown. 1998, 1573, Macauly. 1998a, 1575).

The importance that is placed by actors and critics on accent is particularly interesting, as none of the examples here are taken from a production that adheres to a great degree to the idea of correspondence. If the use of an appropriate accent by the actors who play historical characters is still regarded as an important issue for them, this can be only explained by a close connection between personality and speech. Even in the context of invented situations there are expectations where historical characters share key characteristics with their counterparts, and their accents can clearly be counted among these key characteristics. Deviations from this general rule are not necessarily understood as clear signs of a rejection of the idea of reconstruction, but may be considered to originate in production mistakes such as bad acting or careless direction.

Tone and diction of the biographical subject are also regarded as essential attributes, but unlike accents, they are only relevant if recordings of the historical character are generally known as they cannot be based on other background information regarding their origin. An example for this is Marilyn Monroe, and few reviews have failed to comment on the way in which the various actresses imitate her voice in different productions of *Insignificance*.[5] On the one hand, this aspect thus confirms that the imitation of speech and voice is mainly independent from the concept of biography and is attempted and expected even where reconstruction is not the declared aim of biographical theatre. Introducing deliberate changes on this level is therefore likely to be understood as a strong statement against a particular referentiality of biographical theatre. On the other hand, the fact that many voices are unknown serves as a reminder that any discussion of the nature of references and the relationship that is established between a play and the world has to take into account the knowledge of those who receive and produce the play.

Physical Appearance and Costume

The same applies to the visual aspects connected to the actors' performances – their physical appearance, gestures, movement and facial expressions can all be chosen to deepen or loosen the connection to historical figures, but their effect depends on the existence of the audience's previous concept of them. For most biographical characters these expectations are created by a few, sometimes iconic, images as most of them acquired their fame before the possibility of omnipresence on television. A small number of adjustments in the make up, costume and hairstyle of actors in such roles can be sufficient in order to evoke the historical model. The actors playing Albert Einstein in various performances of *Insignificance* and in *Albert's Boy*, for example, all sport the same grey, wild hairstyle that is likely to evoke the most famous photos of the scientist in his old age. Similarly, Tom Jude in *Hello Dali* merely has to wear black clothes, comb back his hair, put on the artist's trademark moustache and open his eyes wide throughout his performance in order to recall the best-known images of the painter.

The power of such token details is especially impressive when they help to overcome a clear lack of resemblance between an actor and the historical role he plays. Journalist Christopher James remarks in an article about Phil Davis who plays Berthold Brecht in *Tales from Hollywood* that "on paper it looks like a ghastly mistake by the director John Crowley. Brecht is one of the great theatrical revolutionaries; Davis is a walking mugshot who looks as if his career has depended on pleading guilty to every armed robbery since Dixon of Dock Green" (Christopher. 2001). Yet, a few elements such as a pair of glasses, a cap and a cigar, all known from famous photos of Brecht are sufficient to make him recognisable for the audience. Similarly the memorable haircut and moustache of Hitler, in this case part of every photo of the

---

[5] Cf. "Bellman's voice uncannily echoes the cooing sweetness of Sugar Cane" (Anon. 2004d, 27), "her vowels gurgle like bathwater" (Armory. 1982, 384) and "a breathy, blonde-wigged Sharon Small" (Bassett. 1999, 964).

German dictator have the power to transform Roger Allam into his look-alike in *Albert Speer*, even if he does not seem to bear any natural resemblance to the Nazi leader.

For characters based on historical figures whose fame is partly or even mainly based on their appearance in moving images, the number of sources from which an iconic appearance is abstracted is even greater. Here, the actor, make up and costume designers have to proceed in ways similar to those used in caricatures – they establish the most outstanding features of the model and then emphasise these strongly in the actor's appearance. Unlike caricaturists they focus less on facial features, concentrating more on aspects such as clothes, body shape or hair as these are better visible to a theatre audience. Thus Mary Stockwell's Marilyn in the Sheffield production of *Insignificance* may enter with 50s sunglasses and a headscarf, but shortly afterwards she reveals the famous white pleated dress from *The Seven Year Itch* under which padding helps to recreate the star's curves.

The attempt to create at least a certain degree of resemblance between an actor and the historical model of his role is extended to physically less well-known figures. Here the choice of elements that are adapted is less individualised, often they are restricted to clothes and hairstyles, including beards for male characters. Production photos of *Tales from Hollywood* show similarities on these levels for several of the writers depicted in the play, including the Mann Brothers and Ödön von Horváth. The same is true for the young and the old character of Alfred Edward Housman: even though they do not particularly resemble each other, their hair (and beard for the old AEH) are clearly modelled on photos of the poet. The creation of such similarities shows that physical appearance, just as voice and diction, is inextricably linked to the name of a past figure. Although adherence to documented details at the expense of dramatic effect is often rejected by actors (cf. above), this is one of the few areas where even efforts that will only be recognised by "people who are real experts in their field" are made and where, according to David Westhead, "you make your best attempt at satisfying these critical voices as well" (Westhead. 2005).

A further indication of the importance of physical appearance is the fact that, just as the use of the name, it also seems to be sufficient in order to evoke a particular figure of the past. Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein in *Insignificance*, for example, are likely to be recognised merely from their appearance (cf. Ch. 10) and extreme physical similarity does not go unnoticed. Toby Young writes about *Vincent in Brixton*, wondering if Jochum ten Haaf was cast due to "his uncanny resemblance to the tortured artist. At one point, I began to worry that he might actually cut his ear off!" (Young. 2002, 551). The actors' (and probably directors' and costume designer's) interest in finding out more about "the physical presence" (Lloyd Pack. 2005) of their biographees thus seems to reflect the fact that it is generally regarded as a core characteristic of a person, one that cannot be easily changed and which is enough to identify him – an understanding that is also supported by a range of practices in realms other than life-writing: suspects are sought and identified according to the way they look, for example, and

personal documents often carry a photo to identify the bearer as their rightful owner. In this context, the actors' efforts to imitate at least some aspects of the physical being whose name their character bears (or who is evoked in other ways in scripts such as *Insignificance*) does not necessarily have to be understood as an indication of their adherence to the idea of reconstructionist biography. As one of the essential and almost invariable characteristics of the biographical subject, it might be used to support (or in a few plays substitute) the reference to a historical figure made by the name without necessarily indicating a specific form of life-writing. Rejecting these similarities, on the other hand, is likely to send a strong signal against the idea of reconstructing of a past life[6].

Thatcher – the Musical! by Foursight Theatre combines the use of elements that confirm and those that question the concept of reconstructive biography in a playful way, thus demonstrating the power of token objects. Margaret is played by each of the actresses involved in the production at some point of the performance, and the swift changes between them impose constraints on the means that could help to increase their similarity to the historical Margaret Thatcher. The ensuing differences, however, seem deliberate: no make up is used to hide the facial features or skin colour of any of the actresses, and the different body shapes of the performers are not hidden, but rather emphasised through the use of similar cut-dresses. Their physical aspect can therefore not be interpreted as a faithful recreation of the physicality of the former Prime Minister. The reference to the historical figure is only established with a few token elements, such as wigs and her ever-present handbag. All of them are presented in a highly intra-theatrical way: the wigs are made of different colours, according to her advancing age, but are made of rubber and the first handbag is rolled onto the stage, big enough to contain narrator Margaret in her mini-living room. Through these recurring allusions to Mrs. Thatcher's appearance, the different Maggies are clearly recognisable at every moment of the play, even when several of them interact (cf. p. 81). Yet at the same time, the isolated use of a few token elements in an unusual form underlines the theatricality of the performance and exposes the way in which such an imitation of a few outstanding features of a historical figure can create physical similarity in biographical plays.

Other decisions about the actors' appearance offer more clues about the kind of reference to a past life on which the work of a production team is based. Period dress, for example, can reinforce the impression that a life is reconstructed in detail, whereas modern dress helps to reinforce the idea that the past is seen from a modern perspective and regarded to be relevant for

---

[6] The extent to which the imitation of physical appearance can create the desired illusion of 'seeing' the historical character in the actor, has to be examined further, since the interpretations of the role of the actors' similarities to a historical figure vary widely: while I observed that in *Insignificance* it is possible to recognise the historical characters solely on the basis of their physical aspect, Markus Wessendorf observes that the audience's task to "to blend their images of the respective politicians with the dissimilar bodies and faces on stage" in *Stuff Happens* directs their attention to the theatrical aspects of the play.(Wessendorf. 2006).

today. The difference between the two modes becomes more clearly visible with a growing temporal distance between the two times, which means that a production of a play that is set several centuries ago in modern dress, such as *Queen Christina* (RSC. 1977), will be perceived as far more strange than the use of recent suits for *Democracy* which is set in the 1970s but premiered in 2003. In Pam Gems's play, the anachronism of the costumes contributes to those created by the time structure and thus supports the impression that the story of the Swedish Queen is seen from today's perspective and has something to say about the role of women in modern society.[7] In plays where period costume is used, on the other hand, they can play a significant part in the creation of the impression that the past is resurrected on stage: the sumptuous period clothes in *The Madness of the George III*, for example, are seen to give the NT production the feel of "a costume drama" (Edwardes. 1991, 1484) - a reference to a genre that is usually associated with presenting the past for its own sake.

Alternative Explanations for Deviations from the Historical Model

After establishing referentiality as one of the major concerns of actors who play historical characters and describing the various ways in which they can contribute to this effect, it is important to point out that deviations from general assumptions about a figure of the past do not invariably put the idea of reconstruction into question. As long as they are motivated within the play or by dramatic convention, they can be integrated into such a concept of life-writing. An explanation can, for instance, be provided by placing the historical character in an unusual situation. Focusing on the end of the Earl of Rochester's life, *The Libertine* offers David Westhead the chance to show him "disintegrate[ing] harrowingly before our eyes" (Spencer. 1994, 1553), quite an unexpected sight for an audience who probably expected to see the strong, raucous Restoration rebel.

Alternatively, the audience's experience with drama and its tradition of indirect references to the world (in contrast to the idea of direct correspondence advocated by empiricist history) can lead to a symbolic reading. On the level of the visual impression of the historical character, casting Paul Ewing, a black actor, for the role of Mozart clearly counters the image known from souvenirs, chocolate boxes and other sources. Instead of reading this choice as a deliberate rejection of the idea that a play about a composer called Mozart should reflect other discourses about the historical composer of the same name, however, several reviewers resort to a symbolic reading. For them his visually outstanding position echoes that of a man who arrives as an outsider into the world of Vienna's musical circles (Anon. 2004a). Due to this interpretation, the incongruity with other historical documents is not understood as an indication that the referentiality established by the use of a famous name is not followed up. On the contrary, imbedded in a production that expands on this link, it even has the power to cast a new light on the historical figure.

---

[7] For a longer discussion of *Queen Christina* cf. Canton. 2003, 26-7.

A similar contrast is created in the RSC production of *Queen Christina*. Deliberately countering the image of Christina as "a shining, pale, intellectual beauty" played by Greta Garbo in Rouben Mamoulian's film of the same name, Sheila Allen's queen has short hair, not very feminine facial features and wears men's clothes. Pam Gems's claim that this contrast is intended to demonstrate that "the reality is harsher [and that] the real Christina was a dark, plain woman with a crippled shoulder" (Gems. 1986, 47) shows that she is aware of the contrast to earlier presentations of the Swedish queen. In the context of various other elements that emphasise the importance of perspective in this biographical play (cf. above), however, the difference can be seen to carry revisionist potential providing a new perspective on Kristina, rather than destroying the link to her. This interpretation also shows that in spite of the general tendency of actors to build on the reference introduced by a recognisable historical character, changes to popular concepts of historical figures are not necessarily a sign against a close link between the play and the world if they are sufficiently motivated and do not counter too many of the core elements related to a historical character, such as physical appearance or voice.[8] Alternatively this effect can be achieved by an emphasis on the play's theatricality. In parallel to writing styles that are reminiscent of other literary forms, good examples of this are acting styles that are mainly used in more intra-theatrical forms of theatre, such as music hall or comedy.

Actors and Meta-Biography

The introduction of a meta-level also implies that an understanding of the actors as ideally invisible beings who merely lend themselves to the resurrection of a figure of the past cannot be maintained. While the idea of reconstructionism is rejected, they are made visible as the presenters of stories about past figures. In plays with explicit metabiography, they still fulfil this task in the role of someone else. Where the process of writing an autobiography within the play is shown, the actors take over two different roles, those of the young and the old character. Playing both of them, it becomes apparent that neither is natural, both of them are created as stage personas. In *Travesties*, for example, Anthony Sher's "lightning changes" (De Jongh. 1993, 1051) from old and senile Carr into the young Henry Carr, effected through changes in posture, gestures and facial expressions, highlight the effort and artifice behind an actor's apparent transformation into someone else. In *Albert Speer*, Alex Jennings underlines his double role of the prisoner Albert Speer and the young, hopeful architect in Hitler's team further by spatial means: as the narrating Speer he moves downstage, whereas he usually positions himself further centre- or upstage for the scenes in which he participates on the level of his past. With such emphasis on the differences between their two roles as autobiographical narrators and characters at the time of the events, as old and young historical characters, neither of the two

---

[8] As these are not very well known in the case of Kristina of Sweden, other aspects such as her position and her political decisions can be regarded as the core elements of her life for many people today.

can appear natural – the actor's contribution and his impact on the presentation of a past live automatically become visible.

Though less frequent, a similar situation is created in plays where actors take part in the rehearsal or performance of a biographical play within a play, as in *After Darwin* by Timberlake Wertenbaker. In his review of Lindsey Posner's production, Alastair Macauly outlines how Michael Feast and Jason Watkins foreground the differences between the actor-characters and their parts in the play: "We can tell that his Fitzroy has regular attacks of tragic nobility [...] As the actor Ian he employs a different accent and an anti-tragic manner, but to the same chilly and schematic effect. [...] Jason Watkins is charming and subtle as Darwin, charmless and vulgar as Tom" (Macauly. 1998b, 898). Both, the presentation of acting out a historical character in the play within the play, as well as the opposition between the two roles contribute to the presentation of biographical theatre as a construction created by individuals with an individual perspective. The actor as one of the authors of a historical character, in Freddie Rokem's terms as a hyper historian (cf. Rokem. 2000, 12), becomes visible in his role as mediator, making the historical experience accessible to the audience through his own intervention.

In plays without explicit metabiographical levels, actors have to recur to other means in order to make their impact on the presentation of a past life perceptible. This is mainly achieved by implicit references to their acting which enhance or create implicitly self-reflective elements in a play. One way of doing this is by acknowledging the audience – addressing them, particularly when the lines are also directed at another character, helps to destroy the illusion of a fourth wall behind which the past is replayed independently from the audience. This can often be found in comic scenes, as for example in *Insignificance* (Sheffield Lyceum, 2005), where the actors speak direct amusing lines that stem from their conversation with a fellow character into the direction of the audience. By emphasising their double direction, actors have the opportunity to point to the presence of the audience who is usually given the role of an apparently unnoticed eavesdropper in dramatic dialogue.[9] Comic scenes and roles also offer many occasions for exaggeration that can destroy the illusion of a faithful imitation of the world, as the comic appearances of Johnny Weissmüller and Thomas Mann, as well as the Marx Brothers and Arnold Schönberg in *Tales from Hollywood* show. Although they are based on historically documented encounters, their similarity to comic double acts reduces their credibility (Hampton. 1983, 15-6). Finally the interaction among the cast allows actors to highlight the differences between their characters' perspective, a process that can be observed in the National Theatre production of *Copenhagen*, where Sarah Kestelman's interpretation of Margarethe as a practical, down to earth character provides a strong counterpoint to the scientific, high-minded attitudes of the physicists. Although this emphasis on different positions is not directly

---

[9] Bernd O. States describes this as a change from the predominant representational mode in which the actor gives himself entirely to the creation of a character to the collective mode in which he indirectly acknowledges himself as an individual as well as the presence of the audience (States. 1983, 360).

connected to the issue of life-writing in many plays, its prominence can be seen as a first step towards its recognition in this context.

Their Impact on the Creation of Various Levels of Narration

The actors' involvement in creating a level of metabiography, a process described in the previous paragraphs, is mainly related to the question of referentiality. Nonetheless, their work can also be essential for the creation of a meta-level without any direct contributions from the actors to the questions about the relationship between the play and the world. In *Arcadia* (2004, Birmingham Repertory Theatre), for example, the actors' appearance is essential, first for the identification of two different time levels and later for the process in which they merge. The different plot lines from the early 19th century and the 1990s are presented alternately in the same stage design, separated visually by the presence of two different groups of actors and the fact that one of them is wearing period costume. Towards the end of the play, this separation is overcome, and visual clues are once again vital for the presentation of this process when the modern day characters change into period costume. Although the audience has been given an explanation for this in the preparation of a fancy dress party, the image of the actors all dressed alike counteracts this rational explanation and reinforces the idea of simultaneity, an impression that is also given by the parallelity of their movements in the waltz danced by two couples from the different time levels. In *The Invention of Love* a similar impression of a non-linear time is introduced by AHE Housman's presence on stage when he observes his younger self during his university days. Even though this could still be interpreted as presentation of his memories on stage, the distinction between the time levels is collapsed entirely by the interaction of the actors during a conversation between them.

The importance of the actors for the creation of different levels of time and plot can be further demonstrated with the help of a production where their support is missing. In the production of *Kafka's Dick* at the Derby Playhouse, the invasion of Linda's and Sydney's house by two characters from the past is not marked by any differences between the characters from the past and those living in the present: Kafka and Brod do not wear period clothes or hairstyles, nor do they show more formal behaviour or an old-fashioned style of speech. Although the situation still remains understandable to an audience, the opportunity to add a visual dimension to it has been missed. This demonstrates that the acting and the appearance of the actors may not be the most important elements in the establishing of a meta-level, but their input can enhance this process significantly.

In a similar way, the reference between a historical figure and a historical character is usually supported by textual elements as well.[10] Actors can, however, reinforce the similarities or differences between their characters and the historical figures on which the playwright based

---

[10] In this context it is interesting to see that tendencies of associating characters with historical figures can theoretically be introduced merely by the actor's appearance, as for example in *Richard III* where Ian McKellen's clothes and hairstyle suggest a reference to Hitler.

them through their style of acting and the imitation of well-documented aspects of that figure. With reference to individual productions, it therefore has to be determined if the means of influencing described in the previous chapter are perceived in comparable ways by different spectators. Before the reception of biographical theatre is put at the centre of this discussion, however, the potential influence that other elements within or closely related to the performance can have on the relationship between the play and the life world are presented.

Producing the Surroundings of Historical Characters

Having described in the context of scripts how playwrights can use stage directions in order to suggest a reinforcement or limitation of the biographical reference through aspects of stage, light or sound design, this chapter now concentrates on designs used in productions of biographical plays. Even though it would be interesting to compare the instructions given in individual scripts to the designs created by scenographers, the present chapter concentrates on the way in which the designs are related to the use of biography. Studying the relationship between one or several production designs and the scripts on which they are based in depth would lead to important results concerning the role of the text in biographical performance, but for the present purpose of providing an overview of the way in which various elements of theatre are related to the specific characteristics of life-writing in dramatic form this aspect is discarded. Structuring the discussion of productions according to the relation of individual aspects to the biographical subject or its surroundings, the design of costumes, usually part of the scenographer's work is discussed in the previous chapter. In this section the emphasis is put on the way in which stage, light and sound design create the world that the historical characters inhabit. This combination is particularly useful with regard to the interaction between lighting and stage décor, as both of them together create the visual world in which a past life or the search of one is shown. The inclusion of sound is based on the fact that we do not perceive the world around us as separate auditory and visual spheres, but combine the information from both senses in order to picture our surroundings.[11] In the theatre it therefore contributes to the creation of the world on stage and the imaginary world. This structure further echoes the development towards a greater level of cooperation between directors and "artists who have responsibility for all the visual and aural contributions to the performance" (Baugh. 2005, 84) that has evolved in many theatres over the last century, abandoning the strict differentiation between various areas of theatrical design.

Organised around the specific characteristics of biographical theatre identified at the beginning of the thesis, this section is structured according to the key issues that are discussed with respect to the scripts and the actors in previous chapters. In a first step the way in which visual and auditory aspects influence the situation of referentiality is considered, together with a

---

[11] Charles Spence explains that "we continuously bind together, or integrate, all of these multisensory objects and events of everyday life" (Spence. 2002, 345), and nothing contradicts the idea that theatrical perception functions in the same way.

presentation of different ways in which they can make the link between the play and the world more specific or less prevalent. Thereafter possible connections between the subject of biography and the design are presented, followed by an examination of its role for the creation of a biographical meta-level.

Design and Extra-Theatricality

The relationship between the visual aspects of the stage and the world outside the theatre has been central to the scenographic discourse over the last two centuries and it is important to keep its general development in mind when discussing the specific use of designs in biographical productions. Just as the 19th century gave rise to the idea of objective truth in historiography (cf. p. 22), it also developed a taste for authentic materials on theatre stages. In parallel to the idea of correspondence between the description of the past and the events that took place, theatre designers used new technologies in order to effect the imitation of particular spaces on stage with original artefacts and materials wherever possible. By "putting the 'real thing' on stage", practitioners hoped that they might "somehow shock an audience into a greater understanding of the truth".[12] This idea, like that of reconstruction, is challenged by a range of influential practitioners throughout the 20th century, who suggest a range of different answers to the question of how stages could look if they "should no longer exist in order to imitate or impersonate a pre-existing material reality" (Baugh. 2005, 46). Baugh, who describes this development, nevertheless admits that the idea of representations of reality can "still find [...] a place within the ambitions of some theatre and performance of the twenty-fist century" (Baugh. 2005, 30), and in the context of researching historical material for her designs, Pamela Howard sees the world of the past as a major influence as it "motivates and affects the characters' behaviour" (Howard. 2002, 35). Between the poles of detailed reconstruction of environments found in the real world and the absolute rejection of mimetic designs, various intermediate positions thus co-exist. This two opposing tendencies, associated with extra- and intra-theatricality, can have an impact on the presentation of biographical material. Similar to biographical authors, scenographers can try to hide their influence behind the presentation of an apparently 'natural' setting on stage, or highlight it through elements that are clearly constructed, thus consolidating or countering the reference for the past.

Examining the designs made for biographical plays in terms of extra-or intra-theatrical approaches, it is important to clarify the understanding of this concept in this context. As stated in Ch. 4, a relative concept of extra-theatricality means that the notion of a theatrical re-construction of the material reality of the world is greatly influenced by familiarity with particular theatrical styles and conventions. The great variety of different approaches to scenography over the last decades suggests that many formerly radical styles are no longer

---

[12] Baugh. 2005, 30. The reaction to this desire for authenticity is that "spectators have become accustomed to the idea that the theatrical space reproduces a real space" (Ubersfeld. 1982, 143).

126

perceived as intrinsically dramatic and thus no longer call attention to the dramatic form. The reverence for a detailed imitation of the surface appearances in theatre, prevalent in the 19th century (cf. Baugh. 2005, 37), has given way to the widely held expectation to find token elements of that world represented on stage.[13] The recurrence to technical solutions that allow a higher degree of similarity on stage can still be found, for instance in the first production of *Amadeus*, where "various images were projected [on a backdrop]: theatre boxes, walls of mirrors, and a huge fireplace representing the palace of Schönbrunn" (Gianakaris. 1992, 127). Nonetheless there are other productions where a few token elements have to suffice in order to evoke possible or existing locations, as in the RSC production of Nelson's *The General from America* or individual scenes from *Albert Speer* at the NT. Even if events are clearly presented from Speer's perspective in Edgar's play, the ensuing reservations about their objectivity originate in the use of memories of the character, not in their visual and auditory presentation on stage. Here the huge swastika can convincingly evoke a Nazi party rally, and a big Chanukah menorah, as well as Star of David represent the interior of a synagogue. Using such a broader understanding of extra-theatricality, however, the conceptual affinities between extra-theatrical and apparently neutral designs and reconstructionist biography, as well as intra-theatrical designs and the rejection of empiricist life-writing respectively, can be confirmed and it is of interest to see how productions employ them.

Before discussing more individual examples, one further preliminary point has to be made: whereas the work of the playwright and the actors evolves directly around the historical character, scenographers do not work directly with the element that introduces specific referentiality to the play. As a result, their work is affected by it in a different way: the discussion of scripts and the actors' work in the previous chapters has shown that the correspondence on the level of personality and other core characteristics, such as physical appearance of the biographical subject, are considered to be essential, whereas the exact correspondence of events may be partially sacrificed without negating the idea of representing a past life entirely. In addition to this, in life-writing the focus on the subject is automatically stronger than that on his surroundings. Consequently, the conditions for the scenographers are fundamentally different to those for playwrights and actors: their field is less well known and generally deemed to be of less importance. They therefore deal with general, rather than specific references. In order to evoke the original places where a past life took place, it is simply necessary to create designs that do not contradict the general idea held by most about them – few spectators would be able to identify them unambiguously in any case. Even if they did so, deviations from their previous idea would be deemed to be of less importance than changes related to the biographical character, or in other words: an incorrect presentation of Hitler's new

---

[13] Wolfe defines this as "restricted realism [...], a style which stops short of nature and emphasises only those essential details that are acquired to establish the effect of reality" (Wolfe. 1977, 46).

Chancellery in *Albert Speer*, one of the places that is historically well known, would be easier forgiven than an unexpected sympathy for Jewish culture felt by the same character The scenographer's work is thus influenced more by a tradition of extra-theatrical conventions of verisimilitude than by the historical standard of exact correspondence.

This statement seems to be countered by the indication of extremely specific locations in various scripts, such as "87, Hackford Rd" in *Vincent in Brixton* or Freud's study in London in *Hysteria*. As none of these will be known in great detail to the average audience member, however, it is not necessary for the designer to recreate them exactly, as the impression of extra-theatricality is determined by less stringent criteria such as their general knowledge of studies, psychologists and the period. The fact that Colin Falconer nevertheless "reproduce[d] Freud's study in immaculate detail" (Marmion. 2000, 1395) for a production of Terry Johnson's play at the Minerva Theatre in Chichester testifies to the designer's sense of responsibility introduced by the use of biographical material. For most of the audience, on the other hand, a believable version of a study in the first half of the century including a couch would probably have been sufficient in order to strengthen the link to the world outside and consequently the basis for the comic effect that is achieved once this world is made strange.

The major exception to this rule is given by widely known places, such as the palaces of the English Royal Family in *The Madness of George III* or in *The Libertine*, or the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser's residence in *Amadeus*. In some plays, such places are evoked by the use of single outstanding elements that characterise them, such as the door to Nr. 10 Downing Street in *Thatcher – the Musical!*.. At the same time this specific example shows that such a reference does not have to be created in highly extra-theatrical, formal detail: its recognition is not diminished by the fact that in the final scene the corrugated iron above the door turns into a blinking disco decoration and that the open door reveals a glitter curtain. Although these effects are likely to change the spectators' reading of the play, it does not mean that the reference to the PM's house is no longer recognisable.

In most plays, however, language, rather than token references or complex technical effect, is the preferred means of creating a link to a particular location. Including a specific place name in the characters' speeches, this reference can turn a generally suitable space that is presented in a extra-theatrical manner into the particular one evoked through its name. However, this kind of "spoken scenery" is created by both the scenographer and the playwright, and it is the writer who is responsible for its specificity. For the designer it is sufficient not to contradict this by an improbable visual presentation in order to reinforce the connection to the world of the past. These observations are equally true for the work of light and sound designers, and their contributions can in turn modify the effect of the stage design. All of these contributions are examined in more detail with the help of specific examples in the following paragraphs.

Various Degrees of Imitation

A small number of productions, particularly those with a short dramatic time span for which only one setting is necessary, are presented in detailed naturalistic designs. The original production of *Vincent in Brixton* at the National, for example, was applauded for its naturalistic design and the fact that all the elements in the kitchen are functional, serving the on-stage preparation of a meal. As Georgina Brown notes, "everything [in this design] is for real" (Brown. 2002, 547). The same degree of extra-theatrical conventions is found in the production at the Library Theatre in Manchester, and the reactions collected in the interview study (cf. p. 197) suggest that it had a considerable impact on the spectators' impression of authenticity. This dedication to precise imitation seems to be shared by few other designs, and it could be partly explained by the fact that through the influence of life-writing, few biographical plays are set in a single location. Where scenographers have to take into account regular changes in location, however, their plans are unlikely to include such as wealth of detail as can be found in *Vincent in Brixton*, unless they resort to special effects such as the projections in *Amadeus*. It should not be ignored either that a detailed naturalistic style is rare among contemporary designs in general, and this could help to understand why its use can heighten the impression of authenticity: perceived as an exception, it is seen as a conscious decision based on an extraordinary desire on the part of the production team to re-create the world as it is on stage.

This interpretation could be supported by the reactions to plays where the designs represent places in the world relying to a greater degree on theatrical conventions. Closer to the mainstream of design, they could be expected to draw less attention towards themselves, thus simply supporting the idea of a reconstruction suggested by other elements of the production, rather than heightening it explicitly through their contribution. Nicholas Hytner describes how he and his designer working on *The Madness of George* III had to choose between "either do[ing] everything and make it the biggest pile of scenery ever seen on the London stage or do[ing] nothing – so we did nothing" (Wu. 2000, 101). The set used in the production at the National Theatre thus includes stairs located at the centre of the stage and various pieces of furniture that could be brought on individually for each scene, as the chairs for the members of the royal family, the King's bed and, in particular, the restraining chair. Apart from these functional items, the specification of the location and its atmosphere is left to the text, as well as the costumes and the lush red carpet that covers the stairs. From Hytner's own description of his choice, it can be assumed that it was made in order to strengthen other extra-theatrical elements of the play, rather than producing the impression of naturalism as the main style of production. This support can even be given by designs that include very a few elements which echo specific places in the world.

In *Piaf* at the RSC the fluidity of scenes that take place in different locations leads to the use of only a small number of functional items, such as chairs, tables or a microphone to indicate a location on stage. Re-enforcing the change of place through the use of lighting that directs Piaf

from one place to another, leaving the previously occupied part of the stage in darkness, the idea of reference to places in the world is maintained while at the same time Jane Lapotaire as Piaf can walk from her apartment where she dressed up with Toine (Zoe Wannamaker) to the restaurant in which she sings for Leplée without any interruption of the flow of the play. Although this presentation is not a naturalist imitation of the world, the extra-theatricality on the level of the plot is not countered by the simplified presentation of existing locations on stage.

Countering the Idea of a Reconstruction

In productions of plays in which other elements clearly counter the idea of reconstruction, on the other hand, a moderately extra-theatrical presentation does not have the power to change this impression in the same way as the extreme naturalism of the design for *Vincent in Brixton* does. The stylised representation of a typical interior of an English manor house in both productions of *Arcadia*, for example, is clearly informed by research into this kind of setting found in the life-world, but it does not add to the felt authenticity of the situations and characters shown.

Inseparable from the set in the impression of the audience, lighting can help greatly to heighten the sense of extra-theatricality, particularly for designs that establish only a loose connection to the world. In *Albert Speer* at the National Theatre, the Spandau prison cell in the opening scene is mainly evoked by a small shaft of light that seems to be falling through a semi-open door onto a nearly bare stage. In the RSC production of *The General from America* the imitation of a thunderstorm also helps to evoke natural surroundings and light. In this context, lighting is also closely related to the time structure of a production and in addition to heightening the authenticity of place, it can underline the passing of time according to a natural rhythm. This double function can be observed in the night scenes of Richard Nelson's play, in which the lanterns operate at a very low level and actors bring in candles to symbolise the change of time. *Insignificance* is set during one night, and the approaching morning is marked in the Sheffield production by the imitation of a sunrise seen through the window, thus placing the hotel room in a wider context that echoes the world outside the theatre.

On another level sound also contributes to the establishment of the world on stage, and occasionally it can even influence our perception of the visual elements in it. In *Moscow Gold* at the Barbican, the announcement of flights creates the impression that Boris is sitting on his suitcase in an airport, ready to fly to Italy. In *Albert Speer*, the sound of air raid sirens helps to create a world around the stage that reminds the audience of the chaos and suffering of war, thus creating a stark contrast to the civilised setting in which the Nazi leaders find themselves in the first scenes of the play. While giving the impression that the world of the play continues off-stage it also has an impact on the perception of the on-stage scenes in comparison to this background.

Furthermore, sound can also bind biographical plays closer to the world of the past by introducing parallel events that are not shown on stage, but help to position the life shown in the context of recognisable historical events. Thus the drums and other sounds of war in *The General from America* reinforce the references to the American Civil War given in the characters' speeches, and in *Democracy* the fall of the Berlin Wall is represented by the sound of hammering. In *Moscow Gold*, the same device is used in order to introduce this political event, but here it is followed by the visual image of actors who, as the citizens of the GDR, enter the stage and proclaim their hopes and expectations. Whether accompanied by stage actions or on their own, the authenticity of recognisable historical events introduced by sound seems to rub off on the situations and characters presented on stage.

Having described how the creation of an extra-theatrical world onstage by the means of design, light and sound can support or even further reinforce the impression of a recreation of the past, it is important to note that not all departures from extra-theatrical conventions in a design have to be understood as indications towards a rejection of the concept of imitation. As with the actors, here again, a symbolic reading that establishes a connection on a less literal level can be chosen. *Democracy*'s "office-cum-café set" (Nightingale. 2003, 19), for example, allows the parallel presentation of the offices of the Members of the German Bundestag and Willy Brandt and the café in which Günther Guillaume and his contact in the Federal Republic of Germany meet. The parallel presentation of events does not necessarily contradict the audience's experience of the world, even if their closeness would have to be regarded as a conventional concession to the limited space on stage. Alternatively, it could however be regarded as a symbol of the co-existence of the two German states in close proximity and constant mutual observation. Such a reading signifies a departure from the idea of correspondence between the events of the past lives and those shown on stage, but instead of being seen as a rejection of the idea of reconstruction, it could merely be added as an additional layer of meaning.

A similar interpretation can be given to light and sound effects. At the Sheffield Lyceum, a thunder-like sound, followed by strobe light interrupts the characters' interaction, but whereas the Professor reacts to it, the Actress continues reading her script, unmoved and apparently ignorant of any unusual event going on around her. Her lack of reaction suggests that the explosion takes place in the Professor's mind, and that the stage action represents his fear of the possible consequences of his research rather than events that actually take place on the level of the plot. A similar explosion is added to the predominantly extra-theatrical presentation of a meeting between old Einstein and his younger friend Peter Bucky in *Albert's Boy* at the Finborough, accompanied by a detailed description of the effects of a nuclear blast. Again, it seems to take place in Albert's mind as no other element in the play suggests that it should be read as a rejection of the reference to an apparently real situation. The decision whether a symbolic reading that does not diminish the close reference to a past life in a play is chosen, or

whether elements have the power to interrupt such a relation depends to a great degree on the dramatic context: the higher the degree of extra-theatricality of other elements of the production are, the more likely it is that interruptions of the dramatic illusion are compensated by symbolic readings.

Nonetheless, stage, light and sound design can also contradict the impression of a reconstruction and emphasise the differences between the past and its presentation. In *The Art of Success*, for example, the use of modern and functional furniture in a simple plain white square emphasises the fact that the story of the Earl of Rochester and his friends is told from a modern perspective. In other plays, the theatricality of the design, rather than its temporal inappropriateness, counters the impression of imitation of reality. Occasionally this takes the form of typical Brechtian elements, such as the use of titles for each scene, or of a banner with a short text on Horváth's life at the beginning of *Tales from Hollywood*. In other plays, the distancing effect is reached by other means, for example through unusual combinations of elements known from the world outside the play. Thus neither the statue of Lenin, nor the table where the meetings of the Politburo in *Moscow Gold* take place are unusual in themselves, but by positioning the collossial statue[14] within the meeting room, the apparently neutral imitation can no longer be maintained. Even if this combination can be explained by a symbolic reading of Lenin as the giant in whose shadow the politicians meet, it does not merely offer an additional layer, as the unusual nature of the combination points to the fact that this environment is created on purpose – the scenographer's influence is revealed. Similarly, the toy train in Carr's living room in *Travesties* at the RSC may be connected to Lenin's flight from Switzerland, but at the same time it contributes further to the sense of a deliberately created world that plays with elements from the past.

Another possibility of making the stage design seem strange is found in this production is the modification of well-known objects. Although the gigantic library shelves and the crooked, hospital-white fire place in *Travesties* are still recognisable as such, their stylisation, size and colours make it hard to see them as copies of existing elements. The use of colour in order to produce a distancing effect is intensified in *Kafka's Dick* at the Derby Playhouse: the living room and kitchen included in the stage design could be seen as imitations if it was not for their vivid colours that give them an unreal feel. This does not mean that such a pink kitchen could not exist outside this design, just as there might be gigantic library shelves or a bright white, lopsided fire place, but their existence is unlikely enough to suggest that the design is strongly intra-theatrical in the sense of producing a world of its own instead of imitating an existing one. The contrast between the two modes is particularly visible in *Hysteria* (Minerva. 2000), where the faithful imitation of Freud's study (cf. above) turns into "a nightmarish realisation of

---

[14] It seems fair to assume gigantic proportions, as even the height of the stage at the Barbican shows merely the feet and legs of a statue.

Freud's subconscious" (Cavendish. 2000, 1395) in the style of Salvador Dalí's paintings, and the design turns into a surreal world where telephones can turn into lobsters in front of the eyes of the audience.

A similar effect of making the world on stage seem strange can be reached with sound effects or through the combination of images and sound, as in *The Invention of Love*: during a croquet game, the sound of the hammers hitting the wooden balls can be heard, but there is no ball on stage. Separating the cause from the effect, this shows how the similarities between the world on stage and that outside the theatre are artificially created. Where music is not produced by one of the on or off-stage characters, it also has, at least in theory, the power to disrupt the illusion of extra-theatricality. Instead of being regarded as a departure from this notion, however, unmotivated music seems to have been integrated into the list of accepted theatrical conventions that no longer have a distancing effect. This assumption is backed by its use in many biographical plays that do not include any or few elements that can interrupt the impression of a theatrical reconstruction of a life: in *The General from America*, the military music played by on- or off-stage characters is presented alongside music that is played during scene changes or in the background of scenes creating a particular atmosphere. It is used in a similar way in *The Madness of George III*, where the bursts of Händel additionally establish a temporal connection to the monarch's life. Outside these conventions, however, the use of music can underline the theatricality of biographical productions. Actors' songs that are not motivated on the level of the plot, for example, can establish a close relationship to genres such as music-hall which are less readily associated with naturalist traditions (cf. Javed. 1990, 333). As a result, elements such as the choir of the rent boys who present their statements in Oscar Wilde's trial in the form of song, contribute to the anti-reconstructionist stance established by other elements of *Saint Oscar*.

The previous examples of the creation of a world that is markedly different from the one in which the production team and the audience live show how the strong reliance of the play on the world that is suggested by the use of historical characters can be countered. A similar effect can also be achieved by creating a neutral space instead of one in which elements of the world are made strange. *Copenhagen*, for example, is produced in the round at the National Theatre, where a curved wall with a door constitutes the only fixed element in the design, to which two chairs are added. For a production by SUTCO, the stage is entirely bare and in both of them lighting is the main element to transform the stage and to determine the productions' pace by creating different atmospheres.[15] In Sheffield it is additionally used to explain the physicists' theories. In their neutrality, the spaces do not support the idea of a reconstruction, nor do they

---

[15] Cf. a review in the Irish edition of the *Sunday Times*: "Virtually devoid of props, the stage is transformed by John Comiskey's lighting, which sometimes creates the airy atmosphere of a city in springtime, at others the stifling claustrophobia of an interrogation chamber, as Heisenberg sits to defend his transgressions" (Anon. 2002a, 29).

explicitly present the events as fictional. At the same time they offer an extremely flexible environment in which the shifts from the characters' post mortem discussions to their memories and back can be seamlessly carried out, and as such they are appropriate for the self-reflexive presentation of the process of writing life stories.

In spite of the affinity between extra-theatrical design and reconstructive biography, it is important to remember that in this context too, their frequent co-existence can be explained with their common objectives (cf. p. 51), not because any particular style of design necessarily guarantees a higher degree of authenticity. Just as the authors of prose biography can hide their influence behind an apparently neutral style, scenographers can conceal their own impact and the artifices that are necessary in order to recreate a seemingly faithful imitation of the world on stage. At the same time, unusual combinations confirm the independence of the style of design from the nature of the reference to other, historical discourses. *Vincent in Brixton*, for example, presents the invented account of the painter's youth in an extremely naturalist copy of a Victorian kitchen, while *Moscow Gold*, described as an attempt of "translating current history directly to the stage" (Coveney. 1990), is presented in a very theatrical, Meyerholdian environment. On the other hand, the chosen design can have an impact on the perception of the situation of reference given in an individual production. Concerned with the surroundings rather than the historical characters themselves, it influences the degree of felt authenticity in ways similar to those found in the actors' work, albeit to a lesser extent.

Design and the Biographical Subject

The discussion of referentiality with respect to the design in biographical theatre cannot be entirely detached from questions about the biographical subject as it is the main reason for a different relationship between a play and the world. The connection between theatrical design and the historical character has therefore been mentioned indirectly in the first part of this section, where the biographee's times and specific surroundings have been identified as a major influence on the designer's work. In the following further links are examined. These do not necessarily substitute the latter, but add another layer of meaning to the design, an "additional semantisation of space" in Schaff's words (Schaff. 1992, 105).

Although the criteria concerning the merits that are necessary in order to deserve a biography are under discussion (cf. Ch. 2), many scenographers use the subject's outstanding achievements as a source of inspiration for their creations. Such a connection seems to suggest itself particularly for biographees whose work is related to visual or auditory art and the biggest group among them are painters. A popular way of acknowledging their work is to integrate copies of their paintings into the design, as for example in *Self Portrait*, where pictures by Gwen John are hung from the ceiling or *The Art of Success*, where a virtually bare stage in the round is encircled by a border of pictures and engravings by Hogarth. Similarly Stanley

Spencer's paintings are placed on the wall behind and those beside the stage for *Stanley*, and for *Tyger*, some of Blake's engravings are projected onto the back wall.

Other scenographers copy the style or individual elements from painters' work in order to create an additional reference to them in their designs. Thus "Tim Hatley's evocative Victorian kitchen set [National Theatre. 2002] is peppered with objects familiar from Van Gogh's paintings" (Johns. 2002, 1051), such as the shoes on the table at the end of the play or the chair in a corner. These allusions are intensified by the lighting design, whose warm tones help to recreate the atmosphere and colours of many of Van Gogh's interiors or still lives. Though suggested by the playwright in his script of *Hysteria*, the metamorphosis of the set into "a lurid landscape straight out of one of Dalí's paintings" (Smith. 1995, 1634) still offers the scenographer ample opportunity to fill the indications given by Johnson[16] with his own version of elements from the surrealist's paintings. The most inventive use of an artist's work in a biographical drama is suggested by the author of *An Audience Called Edouard*. David Pownall's stage directions at the beginning of the play do not refer by name to Manet's painting *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, even though they describe it in great detail. It is the scenographer's task, however, to convert this linguistic reference into a visual parallel, and it is surprising to see that the design for the first production includes "real trees and real water", thus evoking the original location used by Manet as a model more than his finished painting (Chambers. 1978).

Similarly to the inclusion of paintings, Albert Speer's work as an architect is integrated into the production of Edgar's play of the same name. The most obvious connection is the huge model of his plans for Germania, which is presented to Hitler and other Nazi officials and dominates the stage during various scenes. In addition to this, the use of huge swastika flags for the scene set at a party rally echoes the ostentatious Nazi aesthetics developed by Speer for these occasions. For sound designers, plays that use material from the lives of composers, singers or musicians offer the opportunity to add extra connections to the subjects' achievements, but in many cases, such as *Marlene* or *Piaf*, the playwrights include a selection of the songs in the script, leaving little room for invention to the sound designer.

Design and Metabiography:

Following the discussion of the relation between theatrical design and the biographical subject, as well as the situation of reference created by it, the last part of this section discusses an aspect of biographical theatre which has only recently acquired importance: self-reflexivity and the use of meta-levels. Explicit meta-biography is only relevant for the design only if it is not contained entirely in the characters' speeches. Where other levels of time or narration are acted out on stage, however, the scenographer can have an impact on their presentation. If the locations for two levels of narration are the same, as in *After Darwin*, the set must be suitable for both of

---

[16] Johnson. 1993, 83 -88: "the door has become rubber-like" (83), "the phone [...] turns into a lobster", "the clock melts" (84)

them, which means in this particular case that it must be sufficiently evocative of Fitzroy's ship to preserve the effect of surprise when the audience realises that they are actually watching a rehearsal for a play about the two scientists. After this discovery, however, it is important that it can convey the idea of a rehearsal room as well in order to break up the theatrical illusion of the beginning and present the play within the play as an unfinished product. Joanna Parker solves this problem by using what Benedict Nightingale describes as a "vaguely nautical set", a solution that seems to have served both levels of narration well, while adding a further reference to Fitzroy's life (cf. above). In plays where two levels are separate, as for instance in *Snow Palace*, *Self-Portrait* or *Variations of a Theme by Clara Schumann*, the scenographer has to incorporate two different areas into an apparently organic whole of the stage design. As there are no documents about the designs for these plays, however, the way in which individual designers react to this challenge cannot be discussed here. An interesting solution can be found in *Brontë*, where both the lives of the sisters as well as those of their fictional characters are acted out by the same actors in the same space. Transplanting the existence of their protagonists onto their bodies and into their space thus underlines the biographical reading of their fiction given in the play. In *H.I.D.* finally, the same space is presented on various levels of narration with the help of screens on which it appears again in slightly modified form.

Although the time structure of memory plays suggests that the narrator-protagonists are found in different places from the young protagonists, it is interesting to note that neither playwrights nor scenographers are committed to present two distinct spaces. In plays such as *Albert Speer* or *Travesties* the actors tend to move further downstage when taking over the role of the narrator, thus visually indicating the change from one time level to another as well as the greater temporal and narrative closeness between the narrators and the audience. This spatial divide is, nevertheless, introduced by their movements and changes in the lighting that closes in around them, not by any aspect of the stage design. Meetings between different time levels, on the other hand, are often supported by it. In *The Invention of Love*, the characters of Housman's youth and his older self and Charon are not only on stage together, they also interact in the same design, sharing elements such as the river, a bench on its banks or the boat. The design thus helps to create a dramatic world that is not ordered by the passing of time, but by Housman's memory where the past and the present co-exist, just as they do on stage, at the same time.

In *Arcadia* the merging of two initially separated time levels is also supported by the design. It is facilitated through Stoppard's choice of a location that is likely to have survived a period of a hundred years without being subject to major changes, but Stephen Brimson Lewis's design for the Bristol Old Vic / Birmingham Rep co-production further supports this process. Each group of characters spreads a few properties onto the relatively neutral interior of a manor house, such as the tortoise that serves as the letter weight, the stand for Noakes's drawings of the garden or books and a computer used for research respectively. Whereas these are taken off-stage by the characters at the beginning of the play, they are left on stage and mixed with those from the

other group towards the end when the two time levels merge. In parallel, the blackouts that mark the changes between the time levels at the beginning become less frequent until both of them interact without any separation introduced by lighting.

The role of design with regard to meta-levels can thus be compared to the one it plays in the context of referentiality and the biographical subject: it is not essential in order to establish any of them, but can contribute significantly to the overall impression of the play. Where efforts are made to express the meta-structure on a visual or perhaps even auditory level, it can heighten the impression of the play as an organic whole. However, compared to the script and acting, theatre design works in a different way in this context. Whereas the question of self-reflexivity is closely related to that of referentiality in the first field, the scenographer's contribution to the creation of a meta-level mainly helps to clarify or visualise the plot structure of a play. Even if it would be theoretically possible to create self-reflexive designs that call into question the idea of a high degree of extra-theatricality,[17] departures from the apparently neutral reconstruction of the world are achieved with other methods. As a consequence, the scenographer's work supports meta-biography in a way that is relatively unrelated to the issue of reference.

Another interesting difference to the contributions discussed previously is the commonness of intra-theatrical elements in theatre design, such as the references to the protagonists' work, which do not limit the sense of authenticity but help to bind the play closer to the historical figure presented in it. Whereas other areas of biographical theatre are influenced to a greater degree by the association of extra-theatricality with the idea of reconstruction and authenticity, there seems to be more room for scenographers to establish connections on levels other than a straightforward correspondence of events, situations and surroundings. To a certain extent this phenomenon can be compared to the conflict between the idea of a truth of events and a truth of personality, which is also caused by the tradition of different kinds of references to the world that are made in drama (in contrast to the exclusive idea of correspondence in empiricist history). Therefore, the greater flexibility concerning the relationship to the world on the level of design can be explained by the relatively high importance of conventions in this field, which indicate a close relation to dramatic traditions. Moreover, the fact that scenographers are (with the exceptions of costume design, which is discussed in the context of acting) not directly concerned with the presentation of historical characters might allow them greater freedom, as they are not directly responsible for the element that establishes a different relation to the world. Besides these major differences, however, theatre design in biographical theatre shares many of the concerns discussed in the context of the elements that shape the presentation of the historical character. Indirectly it also has the power to reinforce or challenge the link to the world that is created through a biographical reference.

---

[17] Such designs can reveal the "physical reality of the resources of the stage house, the lighting equipment, flying winches and associated machinery" (Baugh. 2005, 47).

Chapter 8: Biographical Material in Individual Productions II: A Wider Context

Having discussed individual elements of productions of biographical plays, the following chapter continues the analysis of performances by focusing on the interplay of its different components. It introduces accompanying discourses that are not strictly part of the performance, but influence its effect due to their proximity, and discusses the role of the director as the person who is responsible for the overall impression of the production.

Contextual Discourses

In the introduction to this thesis the interdependence of biographical theatre and a variety of other discourses, such as theories of biography and history, dramatic traditions and discourses about the individual subject(s) of biography, has been described. Whereas general discourses about the writing of the past have been examined in previous chapters, those about individual lives have not been taken into account. Although considering them is primarily the task of a discussion of individual plays, as this would be beyond the bounds of possibility for such a general introduction to the topic, this section continues the analysis of individual productions with observations on the role of programmes as one particular kind of contextual discourse that is related closely to the individual biographee. Notwithstanding the fact that they are not strictly speaking elements of a performance, their status as accompanying material to productions means that -when read- they are very likely to have an impact on the audience's perception of the production.[1] Unfortunately there is very little material about the roles programmes play in contemporary theatre practice, but Dan Rebellato's concept of a "sphere of theatrical activity that circulates around the performance and in which the performance itself circulates" that is created by "reviews, posters, programmes, publishing, discussion, criticism" indicates the importance of these elements for performances (Rebellato. 1999, 115). It can be assumed that, read before the performance, programmes will shape the expectations of an audience, while afterwards they may lead to adaptations in the spectators' individual understanding of the production.

As a result, questions about the way in which references to the subject of biography in the programme can have an influence on the reception of the play become relevant. At the same time, it can give some information about the attitude towards biography among the production team or indeed the marketing team. Mostly they cannot be attributed to a particular member of these two, but it can reflect the overall concept to a certain extent, as it seems fair to assume that the programmes would not contain elements that are felt to be counter-productive to the performance.

---

[1] Here again the availability of material imposes certain restrictions on the discussion, as the number of programmes found in archives is limited, particularly for productions by smaller companies. For the same reason marketing material has not been considered here, even though possible references to past lives in it might be of similar importance as those made in programmes.

Following the key questions developed at the beginning of this thesis and employed in previous chapters on the production of biographical theatre, this section returns to the issues of referentiality. Aspects related to the nature of the biographical subject in the programmes themselves are subordinated to this aspect; as a complementary discourse the kind of biographee presented there is not of interest in itself, but simply in comparison to that in the play. Where such discrepancies between the two can be found, however, they may have an effect on the perception of the relationship between the play and the world, as they point to the multitude of possible treatments of the same life. Similarly, information in the programme about the approach to the past life taken is only considered with regard to its potential to add a meta-biographical edge to the performance. The potential impact of the programme on the relationship established between the world and biographical plays depends to a great degree on the way in which reference is presented in the performances themselves. Rather than focussing on this interplay with the example of a small number of productions that are analysed in detail, however, this chapter presents a general overview of the various kinds of contributions made in programmes and their potential effect. As such it helps to create a basis for the analysis of individual productions.

The Importance of Biographical Material in Programmes

A small number of programmes do not contain any reference to historical models for characters, yet the majority do take up this aspect in some form or another. In this context it is interesting to note, that among the programmes examined here, no correlation between the number of references in the programme and any particular use of biography in the play could be found. In some instances programmes for plays that present lives in very different ways, such as *Arcadia* and *The Madness of George III*, contain similar elements, in this case articles about the biographical subject themselves and contextual information. At the same time, productions that are comparatively similar, for example *Insignificance* and *Vincent in Brixton* which present historical characters in hypothetical situations are accompanied by programmes that hardly refer to the famous models for the characters (Lyceum. 2005) or contain a whole range of articles about the artist respectively.

Notwithstanding this variation, in most programmes the references to the biographical background of some of the characters achieve a similar effect, i.e. they strengthen the link to the past or to back up the perspective taken on it in the production. Sometimes this is done with the help of contextual information. Although *Moscow Gold*, for example, concentrates strongly on the process of change in the USSR and particularly on Gorbachev's role in it, its programme provides wide ranging background information about the political situation on all of the countries of the Eastern Bloc. Similarly the programme for *Amadeus* presents a page of quotations that are all broadly related to Joseph II and his cultural policy. While such

background information may be designed to enable the audience to see the scenes presented in a historical context, it can also serve to authenticate the events shown on stage, particularly when the spectators can relate better to the contextual information. Although few people will be familiar with Van Gogh's youth, details, such as the text about London in his times, present an anchor of familiarity that is more likely to be regarded as true. In combination with material that backs up Nicholas Wright's version of events, however, it is only a small step to transfer this evaluation of the contextual material to the play as well.

Texts with Historical Information

In most programmes, the information presented is related more directly to the life of the subject, often with the same effect of backing up the version of a life shown. This is often done with anonymous texts, whose promise of authenticity lies in their textual format and tradition rather than in the authority of the author. One such example is the form of a timeline in which key dates of the biographee's life and important historical events are listed. For *The General from America*, for example, a chronological list of "Benedict Arnold and the American War of Independence" is included, and in the programme for *Amadeus* major events in the lives of Mozart and Salieri are presented alongside important dates of Emperor Joseph's reign and the deaths of fellow composers. Because of its restriction on dates and the description of events in the form of notes, timelines can give the impression of showing nothing but simple and bare facts in their purest form, and where the events presented on stage correspond to those given in the timeline, their credibility can be heightened.

A similar effect is achieved by biographical notes, a format that is even more popular for theatre programmes than timelines. Similar to short articles in an encyclopaedia, the idea of factuality attached to the form can also be transferred to the presentation of lives in biographical theatre. Being restricted to a relatively small amount of information, these short texts can only confirm a fraction of the actions and characteristics of the protagonist and their authenticating effect might therefore be limited, particularly for famous historical protagonists where many spectators may already be familiar with the basic outlines of their lives. As a result, biographical notes are more popular for plays with a cast that includes a large number and partly little known historical characters. In the programme for *Albert Speer*, for example, notes on Speer are presented alongside those about his friend Rudolf Wolters, the prison priest Georges Casalis and Speer's secretary Annemarie Kempf, as well as his fellow inmates and other leading Nazi officials. In the programme for *Futurists* all the artists presented in the play are introduced together with their literary work. For these plays, biographical notes can confirm that the reference to the world is not just established through the use of one but several historical characters, and that all of them are based closely on the information available about the historical figures they represent. As a result they do not only extend the reference to other aspects of the play, they also create a general air of authenticity which can indirectly increase the credibility of previously

unknown aspects of the biographee as well. This is comparable to the effect of contextual material or the use of extra-theatrical designs, which can also heighten the impression that other elements of the performance are equally credible and it suggests that references to the world are often assumed to be relatively uniform within a play.

Another group of texts obtain the power to suggest authenticity through the authority of their authors. One such group are contemporaries of the biographee, who experienced them first hand and often through close contact. A very good example is given in the passages from *Memories of Lenin* by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, that are quoted in the programme for *Travesties*. In them she confirms some of her husband's adventurous plans to escape from Switzerland to Russia, thus backing some of the most incredible elements of a play. In a play in which biographical and fictional material are freely combined, these texts can serve to fuel a sense of, often delightful, confusion about the relationship between the play and the world.

Similar endorsement from contemporaries is given to Frayn's presentation of Willy Brandt in *Democracy*, but instead of relying on one person who is very familiar with the biographee, the programme presents a kaleidoscope of different opinions about Brandt and Guillaume by journalists, fellow politicians, the Head of the Eastern German intelligence service and the two men themselves. In addition to generating credibility, the presentation of such a variety of voices can reinforce the importance of perspective and the multiplicity of positions in the play.

Biographers or other kinds of experts are alternative guarantors of authority, who acquire their status through study and detailed second-hand knowledge rather than direct contact. Furthermore the tradition of factuality associated with academic biography can help to heighten the sense of authenticity of a play if its events and presentation of the biographee's personality is backed by passages taken from scholarly life-accounts. Examples of the use of such excerpts in programmes are numerous: in the programme for *Travesties* Ronald W Clark's and Louis Fischer's biographies of Lenin are cited, as well as Frank Budgens's book on Joyce and *Ulysses* and even Brenda Maddox biography of Joyce's wife Nora is quoted twice; similar borrowings can be found in the programmes for *The Invention of Love* and *Columbus*.

The effect is taken to the extreme for *Albert Speer* – although the script for the play is written by David Edgar, Gitta Sereny's biography of the Nazi official is credited as the basis for the playwright's work on the title page of the script and the programme. The link is intensified in the programme through an interview with Sereny, conducted by David Edgar (Edgar. 2002), in which her role as a researcher and biographer is discussed. In this discussion she defends her work with Speer, insisting that her research was conducted according to scientific standards of objectivity. Instead of pointing out the author's influence, her interview thus helps to give the impression that she, as a scholar, can guarantee a higher degree of authenticity.[2]

---

[2] In the context of the controversy surrounding the play and the accusations that the play was too sympathetic towards Speer, it has to be noted that the credibility of the information given might be the

Including the Work of the Biographical Subject

In some programmes, experts in the field of achievement of the subjects take over a similar role – the authors of two articles about Stanley Spencer's art in the programme of *Stanley*, for example, are described as "Curator of the Modern Collections at the Tate" and "Art Critic for *The Times* and author of, most recently, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-garde Art and the Great War*," positions that give them authority to evaluate the presentation of his work in Gems's play. In the programme for *Kafka's Dick* at the Derby Playhouse, however, the primary function of a text entitled "Kafka's Weakest Link" seems to lie in its capacity to provide some basic information about the writer's work that helps to understand the jokes in the play.

A similar mixture of educational and verifying effect can be created with the inclusion of excerpts from the biographee's own work. In many programmes the subjects' poems (*The Invention of Love*, Tzara's poems in *Travesties*), pictures (*Stanley*, both productions of *Vincent in Brixton*), or letters (*Tales from Hollywood*, *Vincent in Brixton* at the NT) are included. Partly these can be used to confirm the version of their lives presented on stage, partly they can satisfy a possible new interest in the biographee's work on the part of the spectators. The same is true of photos or pictures of the biographical subject themselves. For visually relatively unknown historical figures they can cater to the audience's curiosity about their physical appearance, while at the same time they provide a model to which the actors in the historical roles can be compared. It is, for example, rather improbable that the majority of spectators would have physically recognised the writers in *Tales from Hollywood*, the German politicians in *Democracy*, or A.E. Housman in *The Invention of Love*. Alternatively, photos can offer a new perspective on familiar figures. Thus the presentation of Van Gogh as a young man whose genius has yet to be discovered in *Vincent in Brixton* is supported by a photo of the young painter in the programme. Whereas Jochum ten Haaf might bear little resemblance to the middle-aged man of the famous self-portraits from the late 1880s, the comparison between him and the photo of young Van Gogh reveals striking similarities that can have the power to heighten the sense of authenticity of the presentation on stage.

Supporting Meta-Biography in Programmes

In comparison to the number of visual and textual elements of programmes that have the potential to tighten the link between the play and the world, it is surprising how rarely the programmes help to underline the fictional qualities of the play or support non-reconstructive concepts of biography. Theoretically, any of the contributions to the programme that is described above can undermine the apparent biographical reference if it presents a picture of the historical character that does not resemble the one given in the play in any way. In practice, however, no example of strong discrepancy can be found. Pictures from the rehearsal process, a

---

most important justification for producing a play about such a difficult figure. Playing with elements from the past, as it is done in other plays, is likely to be seen as entirely appropriate. Such ethical limits to the ways in which we deal with the past are discussed further in Chapter 11.

popular element in programmes that can be found in those for *Stanley*, *The Art of Success*, *The Madness of George III*, and *Vincent in Brixton* at the NT among others, emphasise the theatrical nature of the productions and can therefore add to its degree of intra-theatricality. Where the reference is undermined to a great extent, however, this is mostly done with comments on biography in the programmes that can be read as meta-comments on the biographical plays themselves.

In *Arcadia*, the reflection about biography in the play is enhanced further by a meta-biographical text in the programme (NT production), which describes the gaps in Byron's life and various attempts by academics to fill them. Even more popular is the form of an author's comment.[3] Some playwrights, as for instance Pam Gems (Gems. 1996), reflect in these texts on their motivation for writing a play about a specific historical figure, a mildly self-reflexive form unless the motivations clearly expose the writer's perspective. Nick Dear connects the two topics, explaining in a short note in the programme of *The Art of Success* how his fascination with William Hogarth is based on the fact that he sees him as someone whose life showed first signs of modernity (Dear. 1986). For the spectators who read the programme, the effect of the neutral, timeless design and hints at modern technology such as Polaroid cameras in the production[4] is thus reinforced by the explicit formulation of the modern perspective from which the author approaches this life.

In Michael Frayn's notes in the programmes for *Democracy* and *Copenhagen*, the issue of referentiality and the author's inevitable positioning are addressed directly. For both of the plays he gives some insight into his research and explains which elements of the play are based on it and which ones are the fruit of his own imagination (Frayn. 2000 and 2003). Demonstrating his awareness of the influence he exerts as a biographer on his material, he continues the examination of the role of perspective begun in the plays. As these examples show, references to the process of biography are mainly found in programmes for plays where they are already established in the productions themselves. Where they add a new meta-biographical dimension to a play, on the other hand, they are rarely sufficiently powerful to raise doubts about the possibility of reconstructing a life, as Gem's note in the programme for *Stanley* proves. For productions such as *Travesties*, which play with the expectations concerning their referentiality, on the other hand, the programmes can reinforce the doubts about biography's relationship to the past. Although many of the programmes thus seem to reinforce the concept of biography suggested by the production, it is theoretically possible for them to counter the effect of the play. This is done for example in *The Invention of Love*: whereas the play examines the

---

[3] Playwrights and directors alone are granted the privilege to comment on their work in the programme, actors' or scenographers' comments on the other hand can hardly be found. This imbalance echoes the fact that explicit meta-biography concentrates nearly exclusively on the role of writers ignoring other members of the production team (cf. Ch. 4).

[4] Anon. 1986: "As the play closes, the artist glimpses the future of Polaroid cameras in a torrid nightmare."

possibility of telling the story of a life, the programme contains texts that confirm the reference to the poet A.E. Housman taken from discourses that purport to give information about him.

The programme's potential to influence the perception of a biographical play, strengthening or weakening its biographical link to the world as shown in the previous discussion, also depends on a range of additional factors. Practical issues, such as the amount of attention paid to the programme or the moment when it is read – before or after a performance-, and the elements of the performance are as important as the nature of the articles and images in the programme. The previous discussion can therefore only offer an introduction to the role of programmes, a more detailed description of the way in which individual ones shape the reception of particular productions can only be made if all of these factors are taken into account and their interaction is explored. As in the previous chapter on aspects of the production that are related to the presentation of the biographical subject or his surroundings, the present discussion hopes to offer a basis for such future analyses of individual biographical plays. In place of a conclusion that sums up the potential ways in which the referentiality of biographical plays can be influenced by these elements of the performance and the programme, the following paragraphs therefore, outline some typical ways in which these individual elements can complement each other. Bringing them together, it leads away from the attention to details towards a more holistic view of biographical performances.

The Interdependence of Individual Elements and the Role of the Director

The isolated discussion of individual elements of a performance, as presented above, allows greater insight into the role that they play in the context of the complete production, but the overall effect is created by their interdependence. The complexity of the theatrical event makes an exhausting description of an entire performance and the way in which its different constituting elements interact a challenging undertaking. As a result, the following paragraphs offer merely a short introduction to typical patterns of biographical elements. Furthermore, it considers the work of directors, who, in most companies, take decisions and ultimate responsibility for a production and its use of biographical material. Often the most powerful member of a production team, their work has nevertheless, not been taken into account in the previous sections. This can be partly explained by the nature of their role: their rise in Western theatre, "a sign of an increasing emphasis on visuality" (Cody, and Schneider. 2002, 5), has not only made them into one of the most important figures in the process of making theatre, but also one whose task often seems elusive. In Maria Delgado's and Paul Heritage's words: "the theatre director is both the most visible and invisible of artists" (Delgado and Heritage. 1996, 1). They can make their mark on almost every aspect of a performance, but it is hard if not impossible to guess from individual performances in how far exactly they were influenced by the director.

Directors' accounts of their work confirm the variety of approaches to this task: they differ significantly with regard to their relationship with other members of the production team, the

role they attribute to the script,[5] and practical aspects of creating a production.[6] Some take an active interest in all or specific aspects of the production and give their collaborators very detailed instructions, others leave them greater freedom and see their role mainly in determining and communicating their understanding of the play to others, but avoid concrete suggestions as to how this understanding might be translated into a design, lighting design, soundtrack etc. Some directors see themselves as servants to a script, working closely with the text and scanning it carefully for implied stage directions, while others see it as a basis on which they will loosely base their work but towards which they do not feel a particularly strong obligation. In some cases a team of playwright and director have worked together for a long time, as, for instance, Michael Blakemore and Michael Frayn, in other cases this relationship has to be negotiated anew. Directors may also have different styles with regard practical decisions about the preparation of a production, including the working methods used in performance, the integration of other practitioners into this process and the communication with a marketing department. Yet in spite of all the possible differences, only some of which I have mentioned here, the common feature of the roles directors can adopt is their responsibility for the overall concept of the production that can accommodate all the individual contributions of the members of the production team into an organic whole.

An exhaustive description of directing practices is difficult to obtain, due to "the scarcity of material on directors and directing practices in Britain", which can be partly explained by the "absence here of both oral and written traditions in the articulations of process" (Giannachi and Luckhurst. 1999, xv). It is further complicated by the limited number of publications dedicated to this field (cf. above), the lack of documentation of the rehearsal process in many archives and the fact that only extremely famous directors give interviews in the national press. Despite these limitations it is, however, possible to outline how some directors approach their task of coordinating the contributions by different practitioners with regard to biographical references and, following from that, for determining the relationship between the production and our everyday world.

While written biographies can be seen as one person's distillation of different views on a historical character, the collaborative nature of theatre introduces a second layer of negotiation between various perspectives. In the previous chapters it has been shown that most practitioners search for material about a biographee and, similarly to biographers, they distil these into their own opinion about this figure, which then serves as a basis for their work on the production.

---

[5] Among the plays discussed here devising processes are of comparatively little importance as most plays are based on scripts produced by playwrights. Some playwrights, however, direct their own scripts, e.g. John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy or Anna Furse and Foursight Theatre's *Thatcher – the Musical!* was devised collectively by Naomi Cooke (cf. below), Deb Barnard (both credited as directors) and the cast.

[6] For the extraordinary variety of different approaches to directing, cf. for example Delgado and Heritage. 1996; Giannachi and Luckhurst. 1999; Cook. 1974, or Cole and Krich Chinoy. 1973[2]. An interesting evaluation of the importance of the role of the director in the context of biographical theatre is given in Barnett's proposal for a post-dramatic staging of *Copenhagen* (cf. Barnett. 2005).

Through their contributions, their different understandings thus shape of a performance, and, depending on their perspective, this can lead to very heterogeneous results. In extreme cases there may be opposing ideas about the biographee, but in most cases this will be expressed in different emphases in line with different tasks in the production process and personal situations. A sound designer might, for example, see Edith Piaf's life mainly in light of her role as one of the most important singers of the twentieth century, whereas an actress with an interest in feminism might want to concentrate on her relationship with men. The same variety can exist with regard to their concepts of life-writing, the nature of the references made to the past and their role in the play. Attempts at a faithful reconstruction could be found alongside a presentation clearly given from a practitioner's perspective or a playful insertion of allusions.

Although the variety of contributions adds to the richness of biographical (and other) theatre, directors have to assure that they are integrated into an overall impression of the historical character and its relationship to a figure of the past. Even if the goal is not always that of creating a coherent identity (cf. p. 39), inconsistencies have to be related to an overall concept of this particular figure, or human beings in general, as contradictory entities. Directors thus repeat the process of integrating a range of historical sources into their own vision of a historical figure, this time based not on historical documents but on the contributions of the practitioners involved in the production. In the same way, they have to decide on the degree of extra- or intra-theatricality of the production, including the use of metabiographical elements. Some of the concerns of and decisions taken by directors in this process are presented and analysed in the following paragraphs.

Despite the wider range of their responsibility, the task of directors in text-based theatre is comparable to that of actors and scenographers with regard to the limitations imposed by the script. Although often described as the authors of a production (find quotation for that), they can, in David Jones's words, "respond" to the work of the actor and the script; they do not have to start the creative process relying entirely on their own initiative in the way that playwrights are faced with an empty page (Nelson and Jones. 1995, 76). In the context of biographical theatre this means that, if directors base their work on a given script and do not add or eliminate material from it, the decisions about which aspects of a life are shown remains with the playwright. Although these directors make the final decisions about the presentation of the historical character and can add visual material or sounds, they "work with the author's dialogue" and see their own contribution in "try[ing] to make it richer with what [they] have absorbed" in their own background reading (Suzman. 2005). Their main responsibility is thus the creation of the three-dimensional, visual and audible world of a production, and comments by directors or dramaturgs show that their decisions are influenced both by the choices made for the script and their own knowledge of the historical character. Thus Carrie Ryan, dramaturg for the Wilma production of *The Invention of Love* in Philadelphia, and the Blanca Zizka, director

146

of the same production, explain that the play's "decidedly non-linear" (Ryan. 2001) format of a dream determined their wish to "tap into the intense emotional world" of the character (Melada. 2000). Nicholas Hytner's direction of *The Madness of George III* reflects his knowledge of the King's musical preferences as he comments on his decision to "send the audience into the bar at the end of Act One with a blast of Handel" (Wu. 2000, 104).

For devised productions, such as *Thatcher – the Musical!* the directors, where members of a production team take on this task, also ultimately decide on the choice and arrangement of material that is created in the rehearsal process. Here, they also initiate the process rather than reacting to a given script, in the case of this particular example through commissioning a list of roughly defined songs before the rehearsal process began. At the same time, the development of characters and situations through improvisation games gives the perspectives of the actors involved a greater weight. As a consequence the directors have to integrate a greater number of perspectives which have more equal weight; none of them is as dominating as that of a playwright. However, since the majority of the plays discussed in this thesis is based on scripts, this section focuses on their role in text-based theatre.

Rather than merely limiting the directors' work, scripts can be seen as a point of orientation that can be used in various ways; their indications towards their relationship to the past could be countered, as well as complemented or even expanded.

The student production of *Letters Home* at Sheffield University, directed by a colleague and me is a good example of direction that follows the indications given in the script and aims at intensifying the desired effect in the production. In the published edition, Rose Leiman Goldemberg states that *"Letters Home* is based on Sylvia's Plath's *Letters Home*. Selected and edited by Aurelia Schober Plath" (Goldemberg. 1983, 30), thus emphasising its closeness to authentic material. She further emphasises this in her after word to the play, stating that "the play should only use the words of the book, for the two women themselves, living out their story, were more convincing than any fiction a playwright could devise (Goldemberg. 1983, 73). Our work as directors was guided by the idea to extend this impression of authenticity to the non-textual elements of the production. The regular changes of location and the parallel events described in the letters prove to be obstacles to a very detailed, almost naturalist style, which is further complicated by the given financial and technical limits of a student production. Instead we chose a more moderately extra-theatrical style that would not call attention to the play's status of theatre through its reliance on a widely accepted standard of conventions of acting and scenography.

Its most important component is the use of Stanislavskian acting techniques in order to develop the psychological realism of the characters – in addition to working with the idea of the magic 'if' with the two actresses in rehearsal, we choreographed their movement as an expression of their internal relationship. Their distance on stage is thus governed by their internal closeness; their first interaction takes place during a speech in which both of them describe their love of

literature and learning. Similarly, their first physical embrace is interrupted by their disagreement over the role of relationships and marriage in their lives (Goldemberg. 1983, 37). These translations of psychological development made visible through movement is accompanied by other theatrical conventions of movement; Sylvia's journey from America to Europe, for instance, is indicated by a short period off-stage and her return from another entrance with a suitcase in her hand (Goldemberg. 1983, 55). The lighting echoes this approach, as it combines the recreation of the warm and un-intrusive tones of the artificial lighting in their private rooms with changes that indicate Sylvia's increasingly depressed mental state.

The use of written material that was never meant to be spoken and the epic use of Aurelia as a narrator in the script seem to counter a directorial approach that emphasises the authenticity of the situations and material shown. Nevertheless, the popularity of narrator figures in theatre produced in the second half of the twentieth century in comparison to 19th century Realist theatre, for example, has reduced its potential to interrupt the creation of theatrical illusion, and as directors we aimed at stressing the inner dramatic motivation for these two aspects in order to diminish their distancing effect. Therefore we emphasised Sylvia's original authorship over the format of a memory play: while Aurelia opens the play with a short introductory speech from a lectern positioned close to the audience (Goldemberg. 1983, 31) the lights slowly reveal Sylvia, lying on the other side of the stage and writing letters. The relationship between the two levels of narration is thus seen less as one of dependency than one of temporal difference, reminiscent of a filmic flashback. In addition it is likely that the audience's competence of understanding other media will contribute to the acceptance of this device in a theatrical production. The semi-academic nature of Aurelia's foreword to the publication of the letters in the form of a book, indicating a close adherence to Sylvia's own words, is thus intensified by the visual recreation of the process of writing the original letters. Finally, the explicit reference to their format lessens the impact of the use of written language throughout the play as its inner dramatic motivation precedes its first occurrence.

Similar concerns guided the decisions taken with regard to scenographic aspects. The separation of the actresses, each of whom remains on one side of the stage for most of the play, does not correspond to the conventions of an imagined fourth wall. The individual spaces are, however, made to look as natural as possible with the help of individual pieces of furniture and props (such as an old-fashioned telephone and suitcase). As such the two different locations can be considered as a visualisation of the spatial arrangement implied in the exchange of letters, and the occasional encounters between the two actresses as a symbolic presentation of the way in which communication over a distance is made possible through their correspondence. Rather than interrupting theatrical illusion, it could be argued that they add a symbolic meaning to the actions, which in themselves are still clearly recognisable as possible human encounters. The claim of authenticity and reconstructive life-writing introduced by the use of verbatim quotation could thus balance these concessions to epic structures given by the letters. Our production of

Letters Home could thus be regarded as the attempt to create a play in which the process of writing a life is observed (and emphasised through the visual presentation of the process of writing and reading letters), but in which the responsibility of this presentation is apparently given to the historical figures themselves. Although they are seen writing 'their' own lives and experiences, we intended to create the illusion that this was taking place in a reconstruction of the situations in which they wrote their letters in the past.

In addition to different ways in which our decision to reinforce the authenticating elements of the performance shaped our co-operation with the actresses and scenographers, it also led to the inclusion of various elements in the programme. The Director's Note, written by Sarah Bell, introduces the play's claim to authenticity with the following words: "Rose Leiman Goldemberg chose to use only the words from the book *Letters Home* and she offers no suggestion for scene setting: it is this unique dialogue between mother and daughter that offers shape to the action onstage" (University of Sheffield. 2005). The chronology contained in the programme was included not only with the intention of helping audiences to follow the often sudden changes from one event to another, but also as a further sign of the play's commitment to the concept of historical accuracy (cf. p. 140). Finally, the poster introduces the idea that this is a play 'about' Sylvia Plath in printing that is only marginally smaller than that of the title. Although many of the aspects described above are effectively created by other members of the production team, the continuous concern to expand on the use of original material as an indicator of authenticity in the text shows how directors' decisions can help to build on the concept of biography found in a script.

Contrary to our approach, other directors introduce visual and sound elements that change playwright's declared intentions for the reference established between a playtext and figures of the past. This possibility is described in John Barber's review, where he contrasts Terry Johnson's programme note that "announce[s] that there are no impersonations in his new play" with the approach chosen by the director, who, according to Barber, "has other ideas" since "everything is done to make us believe we are witnessing an encounter of Albert Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, her husband Joe DiMaggio and Senator Joe McCarthy" (Barber. 1982, 383). Although the playwright's comment can be regarded as being tongue-in-cheek (cf. p. 108), the reviewer's focus on visual and audible signs, added to the descriptions in the script through directorial decisions regarding costume, make-up and accents, reveals that he considers them, i.e. the director's work, to be the central indications towards the character's biographical basis. [7]

In other reviews, criticism of directorial decisions is linked to the perceived neglect of establishing a coherent overall concept with regard to the relationship between plays and the life

---

[7] It may be doubted whether this reflects the experience of the audience, since various of the participants in the interview study gave textual information, such as McCarthy's anti-Communist stance as the most important clue. A further argument against Barber's interpretation is the fact that most readers recognise Johnson's references to these American icons without further visual clues. Nevertheless, his comment can be seen as an indication of his appreciation of the director's possibility to add to or even counter the references in the text.

world. Phyllida Lloyd's production of Terry Johnson's *Hysteria* is accused by various critics of containing contradictions that amount to incongruities rather than planned and intentionally heterogeneous signals about the play's referentiality. One reviewer finds fault with Lloyd's failure to follow the script in marking the fact that the audience is "actually watching is his last dream, a fantasy induced by the morphine he has been given for his cancer" (Nightingale. 1993, 968). Concentrating on the use of "realistic lighting by Rick Fisher" (De Jongh. 1995, 1634), Nicholas de Jongh also indirectly criticises Lloyd's work, since her co-ordination of the contributions by other practitioners is incoherent with the dream-like situation that is suggested by textual elements. While this shows that directors are expected to provide an overall vision of a performance, including a coherent integration of biographical material, it has to be pointed out that the use of contradictory indications of a play's reference can be seen in a positive light where they seem to stem from a clear desire to create such effects found in both script and performance.

Following this discussion of the impact of scripts on directors' work in text-based theatre, their influence on the creation of a visible and audible world on stage and their collaboration with other theatre practitioners are explored. Many of the decisions made by actors (cf. Ch. 7) are taken in close collaboration with directors, but their role in this relationship is particularly evident before the actual work with the actors starts, i.e. in the process of casting. In his comment on the extreme similarity between Jochum ten Haaf, the actor who played Vincent van Gogh in the first production of *Vincent in Brixton* at the National Theatre (cf. p. 117), Toby Young clearly attributes this choice to Richard Eyre, suggesting that the director took this casting decision because he "doesn't trust us to use our imagination" (Young. 2002, 551). Max Stafford Clark confirms the importance of this decision for a production. Talking about *Bloody Poetry* he states the following: "I suppose you begin with the casting. Byron and Shelley live in the memory, you have an idea of the personalities of those people" (Wu, Duncan. 2000, 64). Casting actors who resemble widely held ideas about the Romantic poets' physical appearance, Stafford Clark can thus heighten the sense of reconstruction, whereas choosing actors who contradict these ideas could introduce elements of doubt about this presentation of their well-known story. The weight of this decision is even higher for productions that include historical figures whose appearance has become iconic – a director who chooses to present a black, skinny Marilyn Monroe could certainly not ignore the effect of such a decision.

Another interest aspect of the effect of a director's decision about casting can be observed in the New York production (reference) of *Guantanamo*, where Desmond Tutu made a guest appearance as Lord Justice Steyn for two evenings (cf. McKinley. 2004. and Hattenstone. 2004). Here his participation does not seem to be motivated by any considerations related to the question of representation of a particular character, but of ideas – while it is unlikely that he would succeed in creating a believable reconstruction of the famous judge in his appearance or

demeanour, his history and activism contribute credibility to the play's political message. As the star in this performance Tutu does not contribute to its effect through what he does, but by who he is. The impression of authenticity, created through the use of verbatim text and the authority of editors who mainly work in non-fictional formats, is further supported by the director's choice of an actor that contributes his credentials in another fight for justice.

Other aspects of the acting in biographical productions are determined in the shared work by actors and directors. Although my colleague and I were working with student actors on the production of *Letters Home*, our awareness of the importance of accents (cf. Ch. 7) lead to the decision of involving an American friend as a voice coach to ensure that the expectations raised potentially by the portrayal of a famous American poet. In addition to such individual decisions with regard to particular aspects of a performance, such as pronunciation, gestures or physical appearance, directors are also responsible for the way in which rehearsals are conducted. This can also have an influence on the acting: rehearsal methods that emphasise the physio-psychological aspects of the characters, for example, are more likely to support the creation of performance that aims at creating a believable reconstruction of a historical figure than techniques that create distance to the role.

The director's collaboration with the other members of the production team is comparable to his relationship with the actor. Through choosing some of his colleagues he can predetermine some aspects of their work depending on their training or previous experience, and he can continue to shape their contributions through his guidance in the working process. The result of their interaction then determines the way in which reference is established in the complete production, as well as the presentation of the historical character.

Many directors confirm that the use of biographical material introduces some changes to their working processes, due to a feeling of added responsibility, but also of added opportunities. For Janet Suzman, the reference to a historical woman in *Snow Palace* adds an interest inn her as a female role model: in a world where "there are few enough historically interesting women that we hear of", she finds it helpful to hear of women like the poet Stanislawa Przybyszewski, who "was certainly one" (Suzman. 2005; her emphasis). The knowledge that a character has historical precedents thus adds to their weight as role models or inspiration. Even more pronounced is the feeling of responsibility towards the historical figures portrayed and to the events that occurred in their lives. Asked for the reason behind the repeated evocation of the drowning of Niels Bohr's son in *Copenhagen*, Michael Blakemore states that "first of all it's true" (Wu. 2000, 247), before explaining the function of this event with regard to character development and dramatic action within the play. In place of such an abstract sense of historical truth, Janet Suzman explains her wish to represent Stanislawa in the *Snow Palace* appropriately with attitude with a sense of respect for the experience of the historical figure: "You owe it to a

historical figure to study their lives and their natures with care. After all, they cannot speak for themselves so you have to represent them with respect" (Suzman. 2005).[8]

While this concern may also apply to other practitioners involved in a biographical production, particularly the actors, the directors' position assigns them an overall responsibility for the representation of historical figure. In addition to the ethical concerns raised by Suzman in this context, this may also have legal implications, especially in the case of people who are either still alive or whose close family still is. Richard Eyre describes his mediating participation as the artistic director of the National Theatre in a meeting between the playwright, director and designer of *Stanley* with Stanley Spencer's daughters (Eyre. 2003, 312). Due to their position as the legal owners of the right to his work, the two ladies' approval of the production was sought in order to gain the opportunity of including some of his work in the design. When no agreement could be reached, the presentation of the play consequently had to be altered. Naomi Cooke of Foursight Theatre gives the problem of possible legal action against a theatrical representation that is deemed to be unsuitable even more prominence. Highly conscious of the risks involved in representing someone who is still alive in *Thatcher – the Musical!*, she describes their fears of being "sued left, right and centre" (Canton. 2006a). Although they were less worried about the reaction of Mrs. Thatcher herself, since the Prime Minister had shown great tolerance towards satire made at her expense in television series such as *Spitting Image*, the feared that "because now that she is in a frail state in body and mind, that some of her aids might try to scupper it before it got going" (Canton. 2006a). The precaution of asking for legal advice did not prove to be necessary, but her preoccupation testifies to the possible legal responsibilities that are brought about by the use of biographical material for everybody, but whose weight is carried mostly by directors as those ultimately responsible for the production process.

Comparable to other practitioners, the directors' sense of responsibility towards a historical figure is reflected in their preparation. The amount of 'homework' for a director, as Sam West puts it, depends partly on the degree of fame – in preparing for *Insignificance*, he felt that there was an almost "endless amount" of it related to Marilyn Monroe and to Albert Einstein (West, S. 2005). In addition to the extensive research for his own information, which included a visit to "the New York public library photo library" from where he "brought back about a hundred photocopies of everything from Einstein as a baby to the interiors of 1950's hotel rooms" (West, S. 2005), he also organised information sessions for the other people involved in the production and passed on interesting pieces of information to them.[9] His approach thus not only reflects his need of finding further information, but also his role as co-ordinator and initiator of the

---

[8] The moral implications of representing human experiences, particularly painful ones, is discussed further in chapter 11.

[9] "We also watched documentaries about McCarthy, Di Maggio and several about Monroe" and "there was a lot about Einstein on the radio, which I recorded and passed on to Nick" (West, S. 2005).

rehearsal process. Janet Suzman's description of her research shows that the process of "form[ing] a picture of the character" and developing a "feeling for the character's motivations" through reading about them actually precedes her work on the author's dialogue, as she feels that it can enrich her work on the script later on (Suzman. 2005). While there is not sufficient material to determine whether close work on scripts often follows research into the historical characters included in it, the time restraints on the rehearsal process and directors' descriptions of their work suggest, that they generally read most information before starting the rehearsals.[10] This means that their plans for the rehearsals are already influenced by their perspective on a historical figure, a situation that underlines the privilege of their opinion in comparison to that of other practitioners.

For many directors, their engagement with historical figures in the context of a production does not only have consequences on their working processes but also changes their opinion about them. For Sam West, "working on a play set in a private space" meant that neither he nor the actors had to "see these people as they would be in public" (West, S. 2005), a situation that leads to new insight into their private, and in case of Marylin Monroe, more vulnerable side. Janet Suzman confirms this idea: asked whether she though that by "doing the play [she had] a better understanding of the historical figure," she answers to the positive, stating that she found new sides to a figure who is "not an easy person to like" (Suzman. 2005). On a less personal level, Naomi Cooke concedes that, despite the fact that Margaret Thatcher was "real figure of hate" for her over many years, "reading chunks and chunks of her ideology and why she went about certain things you start to question your own thinking and you start to even wonder whether some of the things she did were right [...] The research really challenges your own memory, and your own feelings, and intellectual, internal argument" (Canton. 2006a). Though still not exactly an ardent admirer of the former Prime Minister, her statement reveals how her work on the historical character influences her perception of the historical figure.

The previous paragraph shows that there is a high degree of consciousness among directors with respect to their discoveries of new sides of a historical figure, or the questioning of previously unquestioned opinions on them. It is possible to relate this to their feeling of responsibility towards their biographees: identifying the possibility of changing their own opinion, it could assumed that they equally see it as a potential in the reactions of their audiences. Consequently, they feel that they owe a certain respect to the historical figures portrayed, since they become spokespersons that determine the way in which the historical characters on stage are perceived and which conclusions an audience is likely to draw about the figures of the past as a result. In addition to their responsibility towards the biographees, the same recognition can lead to the desire to inform their audiences correctly. In Naomi Cooke's words, Foursight's decision to "be

---

[10] Cf. also Eyre. 2003, 403: "I'm doing preparation for *The Invention*, reading Housman's poetry and prose."

as accurate as possible in terms of retelling the story" of Mrs. Thatcher was also based on idea that "there was an educational value to the piece" (Canton. 2006).

Similarly to the attitude of playwrights, however, most directors' sense of responsibility is two-fold, involving not only the historical figures that are represented but also the integrity of the performance as a piece of theatre. While recognising the need to "embody the characters convincingly enough to put the audience at their ease", Sam West clearly outlines the limits of this obligation: it should not be done "so slavishly that it becomes an evening of impersonation. We must be inspired by biography, not limited by it" (West, S. 2005). Suzman echoes this attitude, stating that despite the similarities to a historical person, "the figure becomes fictional" (Suzman. 2005), and Naomi Cooke explains the way in which the historical material is appropriated by theatre through physicalisation: "although an immense amount of research was done as a starting point" the material is then appropriated through games that provide the stimulus to translate this written material back into a three-dimensional, theatrical action (Canton. 2006a). Cal McCrystal, director of *Kafka's Dick* at the Derby Playhouse, even focuses exclusively on the comic aspects of Alan Bennett's play. Describing his "aim with any play [as] get[ing] the audience into a roll of laughter that grows to the end of the play", he felt free to cut all the "intellectual smuggery" related to the character called Franz Kafka (McCrystal. 200?). His point of view is, however, little representative in his one-sided concentration on theatrical aspects and rejection of any additional concerns that are introduced by the use of biographical material.

In addition, it is atypical in its negative view of the use of life-writing; instead of seeing it as unnecessary intellectual ballast, most directors evaluate the use of biographical material as positive. In addition to her answers to my questions, Janet Suzman added a little note on the margins, describing the positive reactions *Snow Palace* received in Poland, where she observed the attraction of a well-known historical figure: "We took the play to Poland. They enjoyed it there as Stanislawa is well-known there" (Suzman. 2005). Sam West specifies this further: in *Insignificance* it is not just the recognition of a popular figure that causes delight, but "seeing someone you thought you knew go beyond your expectation" (West, S. 2005). Their comments show that directors are aware of the different impact theatrical representations may have on their audiences' perception of a historical figure: while they might enjoy discovering new aspects and changing their perspective, they could also reject this possibility: Accepting that the political message of *Thatcher – the Musical!* might not be appreciated by everybody and that "the Tories [might] go away thinking 'wasn't she fabulous'", Naomi Cooke maintains that "we knew that it was likely we would attract both the left and the right wing to it and that we needed to provide a good entertaining evening for everybody" (Canton. 2006a).

Patterns of Biographical Material

The possibility of different interpretations also has to be taken into account in a discussion of typical patterns of biographical material in contemporary theatre. Although directors influence their interaction, their overall effect nevertheless depends on the way in which individual spectators interpret them. An exhaustive discussion of the interdependence of individual biographical elements can thus only be based on the observations by specific spectators. Although it is hoped that the previous discussions of elements and the role they play in establishing life-writing in performances are relatively representative as they deal with these elements in the context of various well-established discourses about historical figure, they are nevertheless based on the educated guesses of a single spectator, i.e. the author of this thesis. In addition, the sheer number of different signs in a performance makes a complete description nearly impossible, even with regard to single spectators. On such a basis the identification of individual patterns cannot be understood as a first attempt at a typology of biographical plays - such an undertaking would be doomed to failure due to the complications outlined above. It is indeed doubtful whether the rigidity of such a system does not even entirely contradict the complexity and flexibility of a function and communication-oriented approach. For these reasons, the attempt to suggest certain combinatory patterns is not designed to provide the basis for a typology, but it can outline the prospects for some of the possible results of future interpretations of specific biographical performances.

Notwithstanding the preliminary character of the following remarks, however, a comparison of a number of biographical performances reveals some surprisingly clear patterns concerning the use of biographical material. One of them is given by the clear dominance of elements that support a close link between the world and the play in many productions. In plays such as *The Madness of George III*, *Piaf*, *The General from America*, *Total Eclipse*, *Columbus and the Discovery of Japan*, *The Winter Wife* or *A Rock in the Water* the narrow mimetic reference introduced through the biographical material is confirmed by the overwhelming majority of the elements of performance. This is not to say that these plays and productions do not contain any elements that might have the potential to draw the audience's attention to the differences between them and the material world which it purports to imitate, but it is unlikely that these have much impact on the reception of the play due to the prevalence of other aspects that support the idea of reconstructive biography: their characters are psychologically motivated imitations of figures of the past, their time structure is progressive and linear, albeit with some interruptions, they rely on the sequence of cause and effect and are set in places that clearly imitate, often with conventional means, places that exist in the world, and they do not contain any images or information that are likely to contradict general knowledge and thus the audience's expectations. In addition, the programmes of these plays, where available, support the impression that they reflect the past faithfully by using texts that can suggest authenticity.

Another play that is presented in a similarly authentic way, *Vincent in Brixton*, shows, however, that the form of presentation chosen is not automatically related to a reconstructive approach. Based entirely on the playwright's suggestions for possible events in the artist's life, Wright's play is nevertheless seen to be "so richly compelling that one completely accepts Wright's imaginative view of the events as the greater truth" (Thaxter. 2002: 551). The popularity of formal extra-theatricality for biographical plays and its effect on spectators thus suggest that it can be regarded as the standard neutral style, equivalent to a prose style in academic life-writing in which the author is apparently absent. It is mainly used in contexts where the material presented is confirmed by other discourses about the historical figure as well. This suggests that the concept of reconstruction, heavily attacked in theoretical discussions about historiography, is nevertheless still alive and kicking on stage. Consequently, one of the central questions for work on the reception of biographical theatre is directed at the way in which audiences evaluate credibility created in this way. The interviews about *Letters Home*, a play based entirely on the correspondence between Sylvia Plath and her mother, examines the material's potential to give credibility. The way in which the same impression can be created with the help of formal aspects is taken up in the discussion of *Vincent in Brixton* in chapter 10.

The combination of partly invented material and the use of a style that is often associated with extra-theatricality in *Vincent in Brixton* means that the play can also be seen as typical of another pattern of referentiality, i.e. the juxtaposition of formal elements that evoke the notion of reconstructive biography and an improbable story about a life that can counter this impression. As Wright's play only reveals its hypothetical elements in the programme, the effect of confusion created by it is likely to be less pronounced than it is for other plays where elements of both kinds are found in the production itself. This is the case for *Insignificance* by Terry Johnson: the use of characters that resemble four American icons is supported in most productions by a high degree of formal extra-theatricality: the hotel room imitates a possible space in the world, the linear flow of time is only interrupted between the two scenes, the characters are mainly psychologically credible, and although unusual, their interaction does not present many elements that are entirely impossible according to the rules that govern the world outside theatre.

In spite of this, the expectations related to such biographical references are countered by other aspects of the production: the encounter of four figures from different realms of life is little probable in itself, but the fact that they coincide to meet in the same hotel room in the middle of the night, as well as their ignorance of any rules of social interaction that would guarantee the occupier of this room some privacy from people unknown to him make the scene seem improbable. Furthermore many of their actions can not be easily reconciled with the general perception of the historical figures given in other discourses about them. Thus Marilyn Monroe's knowledge of theoretical physics is as surprising as Einstein's seductive appeal for

her. As a result of such a combination of contradictory signals concerning the referentiality of the play, it has the potential to cause confusion, as it does not allow the audience to refer to a predetermined way of dealing with the past. Being the most outstanding examples among various plays, such as *Hysteria, Tales from Hollywood*, and to a certain extent *Vincent in Brixton* in which doubts about the situation of reference is created without metabiographical elements, *Insignificance* and its production at the Sheffield Lyceum are also discussed in the context of reception in the next part of the thesis.

Interestingly, most productions in which meta-biographical levels are established share the use of conflicting signals regarding their referentiality described in the previous section. The mere use of a famous name is sufficient in order to evoke expectations of trans-world identity between a historical figure of this name and the character who also bears it, at least before this is countered.[11] For that reason, it seems impossible to conceive of a biographical play in which the idea of imitation of the world does not play any part, not even in order to be rejected in the course of the play. It could be argued that theatre in general is subject to a similar inevitable influence of the concept of mimesis. As Christopher points out in his work on cinema, anti-realism in the performing arts (in the sense of negating an imitative relationship between the world and a performance) cannot exist without the idea that in some sense or another, works of art can imitate a reality (cf. Williams. 1980, 4).

For biographical theatre, however, imitation goes further than that: here the use of clearly identified, specific figures that exist in the world leads to a more concrete evocation of a mimetic principle. Even in plays where the departure from that rule is particularly poignant such as *Early Morning*, the concept of imitation is still evoked through the name and basic similarities between the historical figures and the characters – in Bond's play Victoria is still Queen of England, is married to a husband called Albert and has contemporaries called Disraeli or Florence Nightingale. Seen as a particular feature of biographical, and to a lesser extent, historical plays in general, the necessity of rejecting this link reflects the situation in the theoretical treatment of life-writing: reconstructionism is often challenged but the idea of imitating the past is never entirely abandoned.

In contrast to plays such as *Insignificance*, the juxtaposition of biographical elements that confirm the idea of imitation and those that contradict it is directly related to life-writing in meta-biographical plays. Thus *Travesties* links the presentation of unexpected and in some cases improbable actions and characteristics of its historical characters, such as Joyce's limericks or young Carr's similarities to Algernon, to biography by emphasising its closeness to other

---

[11] Such a minimum expectation concerning the similarities between the life world and the world of the play can thus be seen as an essential element, without which a play could not be regarded as biographical, as it would not contain a "recognisable" historical character. Schaff confirms this, stating that "for the classification of a play as historical-biographical drama about artists, a certain degree of factuality [or here the belief in it] is essential" (Schaff. 1992, 59).

literary forms. Rather than just showing the gap between apparently authentic and invented elements, Stoppard's play asks whether anything such as authenticity that goes beyond linguistic and textual conventions can exist. As a result it can be expected that the combination of these elements does not just provoke confusion or comic effects, but also reflection about biography and the premises on which it is based. Similar structures are found, amongst others, in *Tyger* or *Tales from Hollywood*. Unfortunately, none of these plays in which contradicting signals concerning their referentiality are implicitly related to the idea of biography could be included in the interview study.

Plays with explicitly metabiographical elements often place the process of writing a life at their centre – rather than contrasting elements which are related to the world in different ways, the search for the relationship between the world and the play is essential. In *Arcadia*, the relationship between the two time levels is taken up as a topic and the insights regarding the two time levels can be transferred onto the link between the play itself and the world. In *Copenhagen*, on the other hand, their relation to each other is also explicitly addressed in the characters' speeches about their attempts to re-create an episode in their lives. The third recurring pattern in biographical theatre, which can also be found in *Variation on a Theme by Clara Schumann, Marriage in Disguise* or *After Darwin*, is therefore the explicit search for its referentiality. Empirical reactions to these elements are examined in the interviews about *Kafka's Dick* at the Derby Playhouse.

The ways in which biographical plays deal with the issue of referentiality established here do not form an exhaustive list, and even among the plays cited as examples, there is a great variety of ways in which these patterns are created. Nonetheless, they provide some orientation in the diversity of biographical forms of theatre found after 1968. As such they also serve as a basis for the selection of plays whose reception is analysed in the following section. Before using them in this way, however, a further clarification with regard to incongruent signals concerning the referentiality of plays has to be made: it is only established on the basis of the elements in the performance text. It does not refer to possible incongruities between the script and its presentation on stage. These can contribute to the reactions of specialist spectators such as critics who are familiar with the playscript. Some reviewers thus find fault with Phyllida Lloyd's direction of the Royal Court production of *Insignificance*, as they feel that it does not, as the script does, make clear that the audience is "actually watching [Freud's] last dream, a fantasy induced by the morphine he has been given for his cancer" (Nightingale. 1993, 968). For them, the confusion is created by inadequate direction that does not explain the dream-like nature of the events on stage.

For most members of the audience, however, the relationship between script and performance is entirely irrelevant to their perception of a production. As the majority it is their opinion that should be taken into account for a functionalist analysis of the plays, and consequently the

temporary separation of script and performance used in this section in order to allow a gradual analysis of the biographical material in the plays is overcome in the second part of this thesis. An examination of the relationship between script and performance in biographical theatre, however, is left to further work about individual scripts and different productions based on them, or for an investigation into the work of directors, where the focus could be on their personal interpretation of the script.

The previous chapters have thus gradually established the basis for the second part of the thesis. Presenting theoretical approaches to life-writing and pursuing some of the key questions established in them in the context of biographical theatre scripts and performances, they provide a detailed description of various forms of current biographical theatre. The presentation of practitioners' points of view adds an understanding of the way in which these forms of theatrical life-writing are created and used. Progressing from this analysis of the individual aspects of theatrical productions and their creation, including the script, acting and scenography, this chapter concludes this section with its consideration of the performance as a whole. At the same time, its description of the most prominent patterns in biographical theatre provides a basis for the next section, in which its reception is explored.

Chapter 9: A Theoretical Model for the Reception of Biographical Theatre

Literature about the Theatrical Reception

The exploration of the reception of biographical theatre starts with the development of a theoretical framework in which it can be conducted. Contrary to the field of literature where a growing interest in the reader has led to an abundance of publications, including many suggestions for reader-response theories,[1] theatre audiences have often been neglected in academic writing. Partly this lack of interest can be explained with the complexities of theatrical reception, which are the topic of several publications in their own right. Una Chaudhuri (Chaudhuri. 1984), for example, compares the possible recipients for drama to those of other kinds of literature. In contrast to the two possible addressees of a book, namely a contemporary reader and a later reader, theatre can have three different recipients on each time level, as scripts can be read, both by a normal reader and by a potential performer, whose reading is oriented towards the creation of an aesthetic experience rather than constituting one itself. In addition it can be experienced in its performance form by spectators (cf. Chaudhuri. 1984, 283). The concept of the recipient is therefore significantly more complicated for theatre, as it can include both individuals and groups, who approach the (performance) text from different perspectives.

Krauss (for the following cf. Krauss. 1993) takes into account this complexity and the practical problems it causes, and consequently tries to establish groups of audiences that can be studied without major empirical efforts. Though intended to provide a solution to the problems of audience research, his suggestions inadvertently demonstrate the inadequacy of approaches that try to reduce the complexity of the recipients for theatre. The "rhetorical audience" he establishes is designed as a theatrical equivalent to an implicit recipient in novels (introduced by Iser. 1972), but he does not differentiate between a rhetorical audiences for the play script and varying productions of this script in performance. The other three groups, however, clearly refer to spectators rather than readers, i.e. the historical spectators for whose experience some evidence may be found, and two hypothetical audiences, one based on the scholar's knowledge about the theatre at the time of performance and another comprised of people who never saw the performance, but who are sufficiently known to the scholar to allow him a guess about what they might have thought. Krauss's approach thus illustrates the two major problems related to audience research: the insufficient definition of the object of research and the high degree of conjectures due to a lack of detailed information about the people who come to see plays and their reactions to them. Even if the approaches proposed by Krauss can therefore not be adopted directly for audience research, they still offer a valuable contribution that can point out some of the inherent difficulties of the subject.

---

[1] Important ones are, for example, Tompkins, Jane P. 1980, Iser. 1989, Iser. 1972 or Holland. 1989.

On the basis of this awareness, the next sections review existing literature on audiences in the search for an appropriate theoretical background and methodology for a study of the reception of biographical theatre. Seen in light of their applicability to the discussion of the effect of life-writing on the reception of plays, various previous publications are presented. The majority of them deal with audiences, not with readers, and most of these texts belong to two different groups, one of them concerned with the reconstruction of historical audiences, the other with the reception of contemporary theatre. Taking into account the fact that the plays discussed in this thesis were published and performed after 1968, the latter is undoubtedly of greater importance. A good, and short, introduction to the different areas of audience studies of contemporary plays can be found in an article by Willmar Sauter (Sauter. 2002), in which he identifies two traditions: audience research, which is concerned with sociological aspects of theatre and its reception, and which is "mainly interested in describing the features of existing or potential theatre audiences" (Sauter. 2002, 117), and reception research, which focuses on the experience of real spectators and the "way in which spectators perceive performances" (Sauter. 2002, 116).[2] Sauter's distinction provides helpful orientation in the field of audience research, as most approaches can be clearly assigned to one category or the other. He also shows that the field of audience studies has been more popular than that of reception studies.

A staple feature of the first is the creation of audience surveys, which are often commissioned by individual theatres for marketing purposes, and are seldom made public. One of the few, and early, examples is P.H. Mann's comparison of the audiences who attend a performance for young people at Sheffield Playhouses to those who come to see a production of *Uncle Vanya* (Mann. 1966). Although he includes some of the results of the study, his description of the approach taken is much more prominent in his article, which seems to aim mainly at establishing a methodology for audience surveys. Similarly, Caroline Gardner's description of a long term study of West End audiences (Gardner. 1994) includes a number of suggestions for ways in which her methodology can further our understanding of historical audiences, but not the results of this particular study. These examples show that audience surveys are mainly carried out by market research groups, while the composition of contemporary audiences is often ignored by academic research. Even though it may not be of interest in itself, however, this lack of attention also means that it is impossible to conduct research with smaller groups that are representative of the average audience at a particular theatre or in a specific region for the purpose of reception research. A renewed interest in empirical reception research might therefore need the support of quantitative audience surveys.

---

[2] He also includes a very useful list of questions that have to be considered when designing empirical research with audiences.

Audience research that approaches the topic as "a cultural phenomenon" (Bennett. 1997, 1), such as Susan Bennett's monograph *Theatre Audiences*, has been more popular. Providing a good introduction to existing research in the field, Bennett draws on this and on approaches developed in literature in order to examine the impact that audiences have on decisions concerning the choice of plays and venues, as well as the importance of the physical arrangements in theatre and of outer frames, such as interpretative communities, for the reception of plays. Combining theories and actual observations, her investigation of the importance of the audience for theatre in general and within particular cultural constellations thus provides a good model for research into audiences and their reactions. Other articles about the audience as a cultural phenomenon use similar approaches, albeit limited to a smaller range of performances, i.e. a fringe festival or a single production of *Look Back on Anger* (cf. Paterson. 1991, Sinfield. 1993). Concentrating merely on spectators, the object of study is clearly defined in these publications, and they allow insights into the interaction of the production and the reception of theatre, building a basis for a different kind of theatre history that regards it as a communicative phenomenon, rather than a single-directional presentation.[3] As they concentrate on audiences as collectives, however, they cannot give a detailed insight into the process of reception, and even though biographical theatre is regarded as a cultural phenomenon in this thesis, only the similarities between the reactions of individuals to the presentation of biographical material on stage can give an insight into the way in which its reception sets it apart from other plays.

Reception research, i.e. studies concerned with the process of theatrical perception, is therefore more likely to provide a model for the analysis of biographical theatre. Empirical approaches in this field provide information that can avoid the great amount of guessing on which many descriptions of audience reactions are based, but they are also particularly affected by the heterogeneous and collective nature of theatrical reception: the complexity of reception processes means that a thorough analysis has to concentrate on qualitative rather than quantitative research, limiting it to a smaller and thus inevitably less representative group of spectators. Few scholars have taken up the challenge of designing an appropriate methodology, but Olsen's theoretical suggestion to integrate semiotic aspects into questionnaires in order to analyse audience reactions on the same basis as the performances (Olsen. 2000) and Sauter's Theatre Talks (cf. Sauter. 2000) offer alternative models for the questions used in such a new approach. Whereas Olsen advocates a directed approach, in which the impressions of the audience are indirectly compared to the way in which scholars see plays, Sauter's actual empirical study is based on the premise that our existing knowledge about the way in which spectators see plays is not sufficient to suggest which questions are of importance. He therefore

---

[3] Another article in which this change of parameters is discussed is Baz Kershaw's article on applause as the only audible way in which audiences can express their participation in this event (Kershaw. 1996).

records discussions among small groups of audience members in which they set the agenda themselves. The data thus allows quantitative as well as qualitative conclusions about the issues that concerned a particular number of spectators, as well as insights into the way in which they processed their perception of the performance individually. Providing alternative models, both of them can be of relevance for the design of a study of the reception of biographical theatre. Likewise Jacqueline Martin's combination of a guided questionnaire, in which she tests her own perception against that of her students, and an essay-style question that allows her participants to develop their own reading of a performance can offer inspiration (Martin and Sauter. 1995, 135 - 9).

Theoretical Models of Theatrical Reception

The theoretical models of theatrical reception are another important source of inspiration for research into theatrical reception. They are less numerous than the approaches to the production and performance of theatre, reflecting the comparatively small interest in the audience. Patrice Pavis (Pavis. 1985) has formulated a very comprehensive approach, in which he establishes the idea of a performance as an autonomous sign, constituted both by its production and its reception. Although he clearly focuses on the side of reception, he does not isolate it from questions that concern the production of theatre. Similarly Willmar Sauter's model[4] presents a new model of theatre as an event that comprises its production and reception. Rejecting Pavis' semiotic approach in favour of his model that is influenced by the hermeneutic tradition, his framework is also based on the experience gained from empirical audience research, whereas Pavis's work can be seen as one of the first steps away from the strong emphasis on the production in semiotics. In spite of these differences, however, the two models are used as the basis for the analysis of the reception of biographical theatre in this thesis. They are therefore presented in more detail in the following section. Daphna Ben Chaim's work is also helpful in this context, as she examines various concepts of distance in the theatre. Describing a minimum distance as a "psychological phenomenon basic to art" (Ben Chaim. 1984, 70), she sees in it the foundation for the idea of fictionality. As such, the perception of distance on the part of the audience is a central question for biographical theatre, and Ben Chaim's work can help to explore this aspect.

Similar to some other approaches presented in the previous paragraphs, Ben Chaim's model is not explicitly defined as reception research, but the lack of attention towards the role of the audience in theatre means that even an implicit acknowledgement of their importance is noteworthy. In addition, most of the work described above fits into the categories of theoretical and empirical audience and reception research respectively. This neat division with relatively few occurrences of cross-fertilisation and the scarcity of material suggest that new combinations

---

[4] This model is included in his 1995 joint publication with Jacqueline Martin and taken up again in his collection of essays published in 2002. The references here are based on the text from 2002.

163

of various approaches are necessary in order to explore the reception and the recipients of theatre more thoroughly. Richard Fotheringham's observations about performances presented in cultures other than their source culture show how the individual theories do not live up to the task of describing these encounters (Fotheringham. 1984). An adequate analysis could only be conducted on the basis of a combination of them: a model of reception could show how previous cultural experiences of the performers and spectators shape their performance and perception respectively. At the same time they could still be treated as sociological groups, whose composition is further explored by audience surveys and whose reactions can therefore be described in more general terms.

Biographical theatre also needs a more holistic approach. Practical restrictions related to the time and resources available for this PhD project impose some limits to the combination of various methods. Nevertheless, an empirical study of the ways in which a small group of spectators perceive life-writing on stage, based on a theoretical model, could provide a first insight into this particular phenomenon. In future projects this could then serve as a basis for reception research on a grander scale, in which greater groups of audiences are asked if they share reactions that are typical for this small group of spectators. Additionally, their reactions could be related to audience research, as this might reveal patterns that prevail in particular groups of spectators. The first step in this direction is, however, the formulation of a model of theatrical reception that can be applied to biographical theatre.

The Models Suggested by Pavis and Sauter

For a description of the specific characteristics of the reception of biographical plays, a general model of theatrical reception is needed in which the differences introduced by life-writing can be located. As indicated above, the most complete models are provided by Pavis and Sauter, and in spite of their differences, Sauter's description of the simultaneous activity of performers and spectators, which constitutes the theatrical event, and some elements from Pavis's semiotic model can be used for a combined theory of theatrical communication. In a second step, the potential influence of biographical material on the reception of plays can be integrated into this framework. Sauter himself addresses the differences between the two theoretical frames, accusing semiotics of a "one-sided concentration on the production itself" (Sauter. 2000, 24), but the fact that it is Pavis's declared attention to address this neglect with his extension of semiotic research to the role of the spectator indicates that the differences can be overcome. Further common ground is provided by the shared assertion that elements of a performance can be read, in the sense that spectators can attribute meaning to them.[5] Concentrating on these links rather than their differences, it is therefore possible to combine elements from both of them, even if they are not obvious allies.

---

[5] For semiotics cf. for example, Aston / Savona. 1991, 99 who state that everything in a performance has "an artificial or pre-determined meaning" and can be read as a sign. Sauter seems to agree with the idea that "meaning can be attributed to the artistic actions" (Sauter. 2000, 7).

Patrice Pavis's model[6] uses the Saussurian definition of a sign, in which a sound pattern, i.e. the signifiant, and the concept associated with it, the signifié, make up the linguistic sign (Saussure. 1979, 99). He assigns the role of the signifiant (SA) to the material reality of the performance on stage, or elements thereof, and describes the activity of the spectator as the search for a matching signifié (SÉ). The two elements together then constitute the autonomous sign, or, in his words, the concretisation of the performance or part of it.[7] The third element in this process of assigning the signifiant to the signifié is the social context (SC), which helps the spectator to match the signifié with an appropriate signifiant. Perceiving the signifiant, the spectator refers back to the social context, which Pavis defines as "the total context of social phenomena",[8] in order to connect his previous knowledge to the new reality of the performance and match this reality with a tentative reading. This circle, leading to a possible match, is then accompanied by another one in which, starting with the social context, the signifié is compared to the signifiant to see whether this tentative choice of a signifié can be accommodated with this signifiant and thus to confirm the first tentative match. Both of these processes can be repeated until a satisfactory concretisation has been reached.
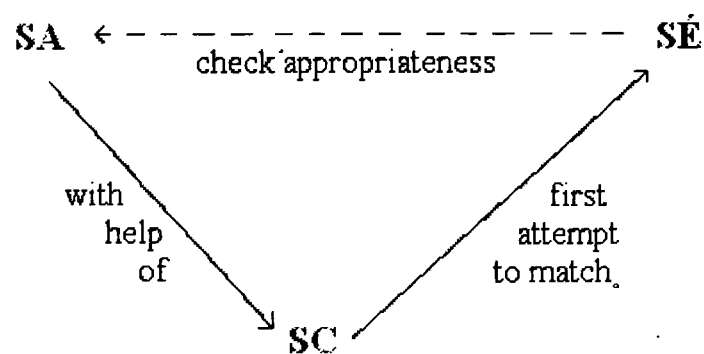
The result of these circuits depends on the nature of the individual elements that contribute to it, and therefore varies with differences in the signifiant and variations of the social context, both in time and for every individual member of the audience, which means that "there are innumerable concretisations of one and the same text, but that they are nevertheless explicable due to the variations of the SA and the SC" (Pavis. 1985, 247).

Willmar Sauter argues in favour of an understanding of theatre as an event, "which includes both the presentation of the performer's action and the reactions of the spectators who are

---

[6] The following section summarises some of the main points from his publication *Voix et image de la scène*. 1985, but due to restrictions of space and the fact that not all of his theory is used in the model presented here, some of the aspects are necessarily presented in a slightly shortened and therefore simplified way.

[7] "The *material reality* connects itself to an aesthetic object (a signified) thus becoming an autonomous sign, which is the concretisation of the material reality of the performance" (Pavis. 1985, 146).
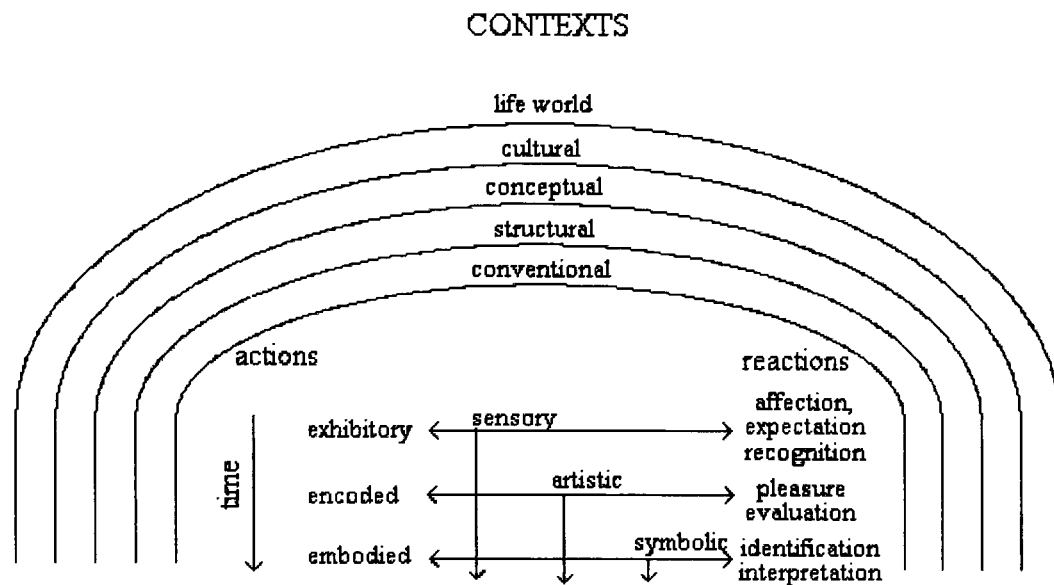
[8] Pavis, 1985, 246. He also describes the processes that play a role in this activity, but they are neglected here as they are not strictly necessary for the way in which Pavis's model is used in this context.

present at the very moment of the creation".[9] According to him, theatre is also defined as the co-existence of productive and receptive processes, in other words, a process that is incomplete without the audience. As Pavis, Sauter situates theatrical events in a bigger context, which he divides into various levels. The contextual circle closest to the performance is the conventional context, which contains "attitudes towards genre, the tradition of performance in a specific country at a given period, the artistic encoding of a performance, and the spectator's competence in understanding these codes" (Sauter. 2000, 34). It is followed by the structural context in which information about the organisation of theatre in a society are found, answering questions regarding, e.g. the role of theatre, the places where it is made and received, or whether it receives subsidies. Further to the border, he establishes an ideological and a cultural context, which inform audiences about ideologies related to theatre and the interdependence of theatre and other art forms respectively (Sauter. 2000, 9 – 10). Surrounding all of them, he also establishes a more general social context, here called the life world, "a word describing a vast range of things that we might consider important for the theatrical event" (Sauter. 2000, 10). Although Sauter does not explicitly state this in his book, I would argue that, as in Pavis's concept these contexts have to be understood as individual ones that differ from one member of the audience to another.

At the centre of the contextual circles, Sauter's model of communication consists of actions and reactions on three levels: the sensory level, where a mutual recognition of the performer and spectator is established, the artistic level, on which theatre is established as a form of artistic expression that is different from every day life, and finally the symbolic level. For all of these, the interaction between the performers and the audience is described in more detail. On the sensory level the exhibitory actions of the performers trigger sensory reactions in the audience, i.e. the audience react to the performer who exposes his body to their view. As on all of these levels this can trigger both intuitive and cognitive reactions, such as admiration or comparison, a distinction which according to Sauter can only be made theoretically but which in practice "continuously interact in the spectator's mind" (Sauter. 2000, 58 -9). The actions on the artistic levels are called encoded actions and they refer to the performer's skill. As a consequence these actions are "to a high degree determined not only by individual and cultural conditions, but also by the aesthetic norms of the particular performance" (Sauter. 2000, 54), aesthetic norms that are defined for example by the genre, and the spectators are required to possess a certain competence in order to appreciate the performance on an artistic level. The symbolic level is the most interesting one for the purpose of this thesis. Existing as a "consequence of the artistic otherness of the event" (Sauter. 2000. 7), this level allows the presentation of actions that are intended and regarded to "signify something beyond the directly perceivable appearance of the actions" (Sauter. 2000, 55 – 6). On this level, spectators are thus called to transform the directly

[9] Sauter. 2000, 11. It would be interesting to include further members of the production team into Sauter's model, as he concentrates exclusively on the performers, but for the present purpose further complications are avoided.
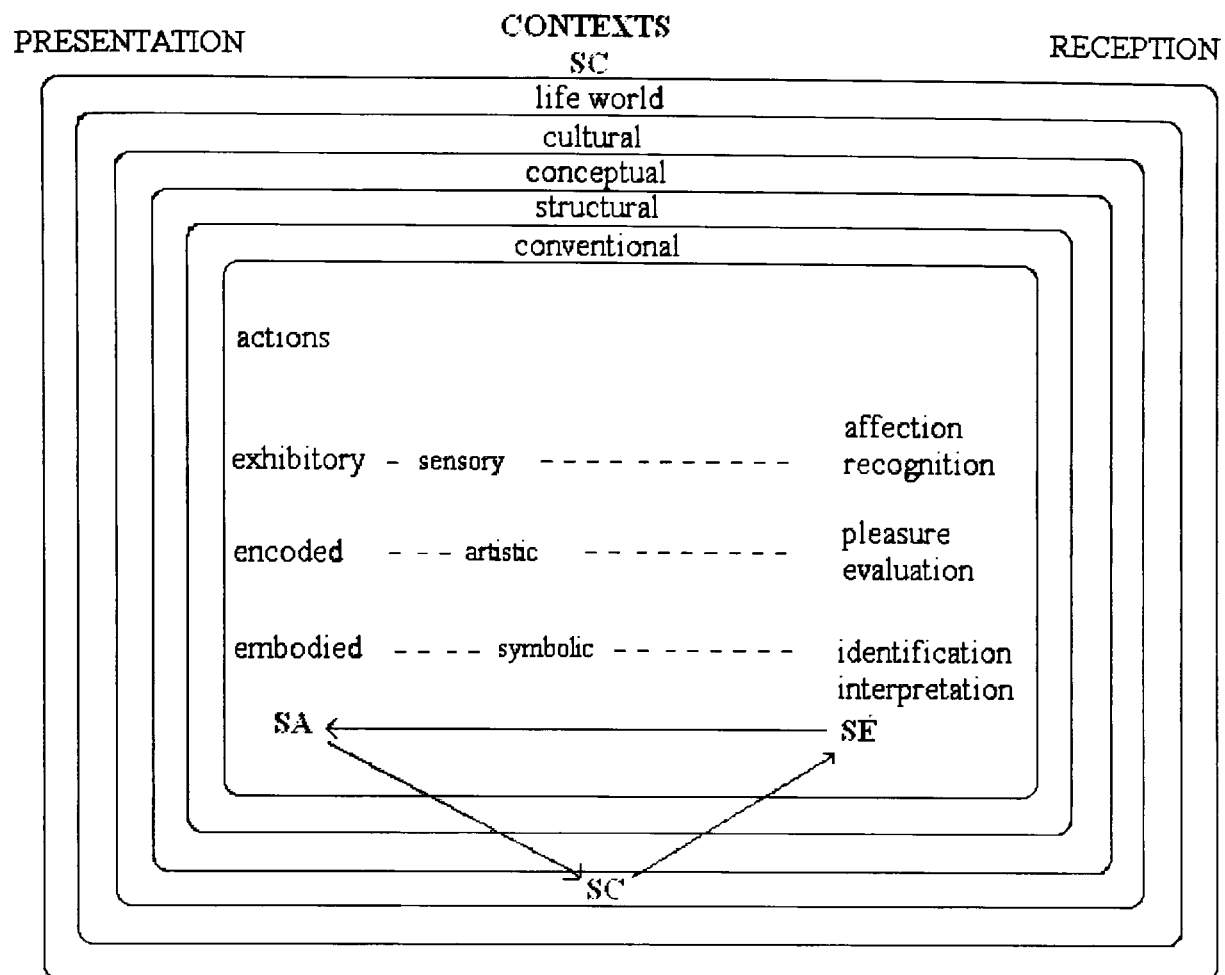
visible actions into symbolic or fictive ones, or, to use the example presented by Sauter – to complete the transition of the actor on stage into Hamlet. The creation of fictionality is thus explained by a mutual agreement between performer and the audience.

CONTEXTS

life world
cultural
conceptual
structural
conventional

actions   reactions

                                                 affection,
exhibitory ←——sensory——————→ expectation
                                                 recognition
                          artistic
encoded ←——————————————→ pleasure
                                                 evaluation
                                  symbolic identification
embodied ←——————————————→ interpretation

time

A Combined Model

On the basis of this short description of the two models, it is now possible to combine them. The most immediate point of comparison is the context in which both authors place the theatrical communication. Although less structured and divided into individual sections, Pavis's idea of a social context is compatible with the different levels of context established by Sauter. In addition, the search for a suitable signifié that complements the signifiant, producing an autonomous sign, can be related to the concept of action and experience presented by Sauter. The production of the signifiant can be attributed to a performer and the idea of creation, whereas the search for a signifié can relate to the experiencing activity of a spectator. It is therefore possible to suggest that the triangle of communication suggested by Pavis takes place on each of the individual levels of communication established by Sauter, and that the spectator's reactions are therefore mediated by the contexts of the theatrical performance. Pavis's model of communication is best described on the symbolic level, as the transformation of a concrete action on the stage into an imagined one seems to be the closest equivalent to Pavis' description of understanding the play. Sauter's other levels of interaction are not taken into account in his model. In the terms of Pavis, the transformation of a stage action into a symbolic one can be described as the attempt to match the material reality of the signifié with a signifiant that translates this direct action into one that is meaningful on the level of the story. The concretisation described by Pavis is thus one in which actions are not understood as those executed by an actor in order to please his audience, even if this could also be seen as a meaningful signifié, but as one in which actions are already understood on a fictional level. Graphically this could be presented as follows:

PRESENTATION CONTEXTS RECEPTION
SC

life world
cultural
conceptual
structural
conventional

actions

affection
exhibitory – sensory – – – – – – – – – – recognition

pleasure
encoded – – – artistic – – – – – – – – evaluation

embodied – – – – symbolic – – – – – – – identification
interpretation

SA ← ———————————————— SE

SC

A similar circle of communication could also be established on the other levels, for example on the artistic one: a spectator's reaction to the display of artistic skills will also to a great degree vary in accordance with his conscious or unconscious attitudes towards theatre skills which are influenced by his previous experience with the arts; i.e. by his knowledge of the conventional context. Similarly, the audience's experiences in the life world will shape their reaction on the sensory level. Pavis's model may be particularly suitable for the symbolic level, where the search for a signifié leads to the establishment of a fictional action, but the referral to the social contexts can be observed on all of Sauter's levels of interaction.

Having stressed the similarities between the two theories, it has to be pointed out that this combination of elements taken from both approaches does not level out the differences between them. Situating Pavis's concretisation alongside Sauter's interaction between performers and spectators should not suggest that they merely use different words to describe the same phenomenon. Instead their different terminology reveals that they focus on different levels of theatrical communication. Whereas Sauter stresses the role of those involved in the process, describing their activities, Pavis concentrates on the result of their interaction, i.e. elements of a theatrical sign without referring to their origin. They could thus be seen as representing different perspectives on the same process: those who communicate and the sign produced by them. Combining the two approaches in one model therefore allows a fuller understanding of theatrical reception.

One of the most important aspects of these models of communication for the present purpose is the question of fictionalisation. Both authors refer to it and establish it as a basic characteristic of theatrical communication, seeing the fictional world created by plays and the world in which they are created not as separate entities, but interacting ones. In Pavis's own words: "the textual and dramatic theory of fiction insists on the inter-relatedness of these worlds and their complementarity. In fiction we recognise "'morceaux collés' or 'objets trouvés' of our own reality. The identification of a character or a situation can only take place on the basis of our previous experiences" (Pavis. 1985, 272). Pavis' theory is more complex in its distinction between a textual and a scenic fiction and its search for places in the performance text where these two interact (cf. Pavis. 1985, 280), but for the purposes of this thesis, Sauter's approach seems more helpful. Even though he himself does not regard his approach to fictionality as complete without any need for further research (cf. Sauter. 2000, 48), it does provides a valuable tool for the discussion of biographical material in plays as it identifies the elements that are involved in the process of creating a level of embodied actions. Pointing out the aspects that contribute to the phenomenon, it suggests which element of individual discussions would have to be taken into account in order to identify how biographical elements change this process in the reception of plays. According to him, "the fictional character is created by the performer and the spectator together. There is no Hamlet on stage: he is only in the mind of the spectator, aided through the images presented by the performer" (Sauter. 2000, 9). This shared creation takes place in the frame given by the concept of 'theatre', where different rules apply,[10] and whose relation to the world is suggested by the audience's knowledge of the conventional context.

The fictional tradition of theatre can thus prompt audiences to read the images presented by the performer in a different way, or, to use Sauter's image, to see the performer in a costume as Hamlet, whereas its inevitable dependence to the world, described both by Pavis and Sauter[11] can lessen the distance between the symbolic actions and those that have taken place in the world. The process of fictionalisation can thus be described as an interplay between these opposing forces: the expectation, caused by the framing of an event as theatrical, that a play has to be read as fiction, and the possibility to pick up other elements of the play that counter this impression as they put emphasis on the similarities between the two worlds. It is therefore influenced by the signals given by the performer and the audience's contextual knowledge, which includes the tacit understanding that events on stage do not really take place in the same way they do outside the theatre (cf. Ben Chaim, 74).

---

[10] Sauter. 2000, 48. Cf. also Ubersfeld. 1982, 235 who describes the "fundamental assumption" that being in the theatre means that "the discourse is only valid within a pre-determined space [...] and time."

[11] Cf. Martin and Sauter. 1995, 84: "Engaging in a theatrical event always means to confront the spectator's own personal world with a suggested imaginary world" and Pavis. 1985, 246 who sees the social context as produced "by the play through its references to a possible world."

In order to explain why a play is perceived as fictional to a high or low degree then, the similarity of the performers' actions to the world, and the audience's previous experiences with fictional modes have to be examined. Sauter's scale of intra- and extra- theatricality is a useful tool to analyse the first, as it helps to establish the closeness or distance between the two worlds. The idea underlying this scale can also be found in many other writings on theatre, for example in Keir Elam's affirmation that, due to the incompleteness of dramatic worlds, they always depend on the world in which we live and "have to be 'supplemented' by the spectator on the basis of his [contextual knowledge] before they are fully constituted" (Elam. 1980, 92). Sauter expresses the degree to which they rely on this information about the life world by steps on his scale of theatricality (cf. Sauter. 2000, 62 and Ch. 4). The extreme ends of the scale are included as its logical boundaries, but in practice an entirely intra- theatrical world is not possible, due to the presence of live actors on stage and the difficulties of "imagin[ing] an abstract performer, in the sense in which a painting can be figurative" (Sauter. 2000, 61).[12] At the other end of the scale, experiments with an entirely extra-theatrical theatre have been more numerous. Discussing Grotowski and others, Daphna Ben Chaim, however, claims that it is also merely a theoretical possibility, and that a certain aesthetic distance is an intrinsic characteristic of art (Ben Chaim. 1984, 70-1).

The contextual parameters that determine the degree of intra-textuality attributed to a particular performance, including general theatrical conventions, the performative genre, codes of everyday behaviour and the broader social context (Sauter. 2000, 63-3) firmly connect his concept of fictionalisation to the spectators' input again, as the contextual contribution is specific to each of them. The positioning of a play on the scale of extra- or intra-textuality thus depends both on the elements of the performance and on the context brought by the spectators. As Ben Chaim points out, the audience's knowledge about the concept of fictionality in art leads to their complicity in treating new theatrical experience as fiction,[13] or, using Sauter's terminology, their willingness to translate the actions into embodied actions.

With regard to the analysis of biographical theatre, this model of fictionalisation therefore identifies attitudes towards and knowledge about theatre in general, as well as more specific contextual information about the biographee as areas that are of importance for its reception. In the following, the combined model of theatrical reception is examined in more detail in order to describe more specifically at which points the use of biographical material is likely to change this process.

---

[12] Sauter's argument might hold for traditional forms of spoken drama which rely on the presence of an actor, but it could be argued that a wider definition of theatre including puppet theatre might make this possible. As this discussion of biographical plays only deals with plays that include performers, this argument is, however, not of direct relevance.

[13] Cf. Ben Chaim. 1984, 74 and ibid, 75 – 81 for the concept of manipulating distance.

The Application of this Model on Biographical Theatre

Before applying the theory outlined in the previous paragraphs to biographical theatre, it is important to clarify its potential use: no single theory can be taken for a full and exhaustive explanation of a phenomenon as complex as human perception. In addition to that, long and extensive empirical studies would be necessary in order to determine if a particular theory does or does not describe theatrical reception accurately and can thus shed some light on its complexity. While it is important to keep these limitations in mind, however, they do not necessarily imply that the use of theory cannot be successful in illuminating the phenomenon in question further and in leading to a more detailed description of it.

As Willmar Sauter and Jacqueline Martin point out, it is important to take into account that the theatre scholar is always a spectator, who "cannot pretend to be an objective observer, since s/he has already been involved in the theatrical event" (Martin and Sauter. 1995, 16). The description and analysis of scripts and productions in the first section of this thesis is therefore based on their perception by a single spectator. The conclusions drawn from it with regard to the presentation of past lives are enriched by other writing about history, biography and theatre, but a model of theatrical reception could help to map out the individual steps that lead to these impressions and to describe them in more detail. Using the model of theatrical communication as a background, it becomes possible to segment the reception of biographical plays into smaller units and to assign these individual steps to the different levels and stages of the reception process. Implicit assumptions thus become visible, and can be compared and verified through empirical research that evaluates if the reception by other spectators is based on the same assumptions and therefore confirms the hypothesis formulated here. The following paragraphs then describe the influence of biographical material on various steps in the reception process.

Recourse to Contextual Knowledge

In the terms of the combined model of theatrical reception, the influence of biographical material can be generally seen as an increased reliance on information from the social context. A smaller amount of information given inside the text remains understandable as it can be complemented by the context - the play can be described as more extra- than intra-theatrical. In an apparent paradox, the dependence on more contextual material also leads to the use of a narrower social context: if the spectators' attempts to match an element of the material reality of the performance with a possible signifié are based on very little information from the play, this information has to be more precise. In the present process, precision means that it has to point clearly to a narrow range of contexts which can then complement the signifiant and lead to a signifié.[14] *Insignificance* helps to explain how this process can be triggered by biographical information without the use of names. Here the Ballplayer is introduced as the husband of

---

[14] Barbara Schaff observes the same phenomenon with regard to artist figures in plays: "In plays about artists, the thematic contexts are more narrowly defined due to the concentration on a single person or a small group of people, their work and possible environments" (Schaff. 1992, 19).

another character, who bears an uncanny resemblance (both physically and in her activities) to the actress Marilyn Monroe. The information given about this character, i.e. that he is the husband of the Marilyn Monroe-like actress and that he is a world famous baseball player leads to a context that might be defined as one of "sportspeople who at the same time were married to famous actors". It is specific enough to allow the spectators to match the character with the "concept" of the historical figure of Joe DiMaggio, a combination that subsequently can give them a wealth of contextual information about the historical baseball star. With the help of this context, the limited information provided by the play can then be extended to a fuller picture of the character. A characterisation that does not allow the connection between the world of the characters with a specific and narrow context of the life world, on the other hand, means that the play itself would have to provide more information about the character in order to develop it to the same degree.

This reliance takes place, and also has its strongest effect, on the level of the embodied actions. Here the comparison of the stage actions to the social context leads to the construction of an additional level on which they can be understood as something else, the level of the fiction. A higher dependence on the social context in this translation of stage actions into embodied fictional actions has the consequence that, due to the quantitative relation of information taken from the play and from the context, the resulting fiction will bear a closer resemblance to the social context that is evoked. This can be demonstrated with an example: if an actor on stage shows signs of distress and talks to another character, who identifies himself as a priest, about forgiveness and possible repentance for his sins, these stage actions suggest to the audience a character whose story is one of misdeeds in the past and a resulting bad conscience. Such a story might bear resemblance to various experiences that individual members of the audience might have with similar situations, but it is only loosely connected to their social context. If the same actions on stage take place in a play called *Albert Speer*, the audience can, with the help of a narrower context, arrive at a more concrete interpretation of the actions presented on stage in which additional contextual information is integrated: here they will imagine seeing a character who, as a minister in a world-famous dictatorship, has to live with the guilt of having backed the genocide of millions of people. By integrating more information from the social context into their reading of the embodied actions, this reading of the actions on stage becomes more similar to an individual story in their knowledge about the life world.

In this context it has to be pointed out that the similarity between the fiction that is built together by the producers and the recipients of biographical theatre and the life world does not mean that the audience perceives the stage actions as real and valid outside the theatre. The active contribution of the audience to build a fiction, or in Ben Chaim's words, their "willingness to 'see as'" (Ben Chaim. 1984, 73) something else, is, here as in non-biographical plays, based on their knowledge that the events that happen in the theatre are not real, the necessary minimal

distance which Ben Chaim explores in her work (cf. above) is maintained. In other words one might say that no member of the audience is likely to believe that the man on stage feeling regret is indeed the historical figure Albert Speer.[15] Even if the audience does not perceive the stage actions as real, the great similarity between the fiction they create on the basis of the performance and their knowledge about the past is likely to influence their evaluation of the story told in the performance. Although not real in its material reality, the immaterial character created in the world of the fiction can be seen as an imitation of a figure of the past. While audiences continue to see Alex Jennings on stage, they also see Albert Speer in the fiction, and consequently will except that the fictional Albert Speer shares characteristics with the historical one. Recognising aspects of the figure of the past in the presentation of the performer, they might also expect that elements that were formerly unknown to them apply to both the fictional creation and the physically existing figure of the past.

This new status of the fictional creation based on biographical elements in plays makes it possible for the transfer of information from the social context into the world of the play to be potentially converted into a two-way exchange. New elements of the fiction can be considered to be valid in the world outside the play as well, due to the close relationship between the fiction and the life world.[16] In this case, the social context is not only used to build the fiction from embodied actions, individual embodied actions may also be transferred to a person's contextual knowledge as well. The reception of biographical theatre can therefore be seen to result not only in a different status with regard to the fiction that is created, but also in a different way of dealing with a performance, as it can have a more direct and specific impact on the spectator's life world.

Other Levels of Reception and Context

Before examining the elements that can trigger such a mode of perception, however, this process is described in a larger context, taking into account possible side-effects on the other levels of performer – audience communication and relating it to specific contextual levels. There the changes observed in the perception of embodied actions on the symbolic level are complemented by minor differences. On the artistic level, an additional criterion of judgement for the skills of the artists is introduced, due to the expectations that highly extra-theatrical plays are generally consistent in their close imitation of the life world. This means that once the references to historical figures are established, the performer's artistic skills can be judged

---

[15] In the case of autobiographical plays, in which performers present their own life, this distance is abandoned and the relationship between the fiction created and the world would have to be described in different ways. Rosenthal confirms the audience's power to distinguish between their life world and others such as television or the theatre, stating that "they are aware that what they see is only a producer's vague approximation of what actually happened" (Rosenthal 1999, 10).

[16] Peacock describes this phenomenon when he points to the influence of Shakespeare's histories on our understanding of the War of Roses (cf. Peacock. 1991, 13).

according to the degree to which they achieve an imitation of the historical figure. [17] On the sensory level, a difference in the audience's perception is likely to occur in plays with historical characters whose outward appearance is well known to the audience. Although the transfer of the identity of a historical person onto a theatrical character is a process that belongs to the level of embodied actions, the mere presence of an actor who bears a striking similarity to the original, as for example David Calder as Gorbachev in the RSC production of *Moscow Gold*, could lead to an immediate effect of recognition as soon as the spectator becomes aware of the actor's presence. Such an immediate and little reflected recognition could be seen as a primarily sensory reaction (Martin and Sauter. 1995, 89), rather than a process of fictionalisation, and it could help to trigger a particular mode of fictionalisation in biographical theatre. It is thus possible to locate a difference in the way the social context is referred to on all three levels of the theatrical communication model, although this might not apply to all plays. The process of establishing a link to a narrower, but also more informative context has thus proved one of the central characteristics of the reception of biodrama. Furthermore, its reliance on different levels of context can be differentiated further.

Whereas in Pavis's model, the particular reference to the social context in the reception of biographical plays would be sufficiently explained, the existence of a life world as well as the cultural and various theatrical contexts in Sauter's model demands a stronger differentiation. The process described above refers mainly to the relationship between the performance text and the life world, as it is less oriented towards the audience's experience with theatre and culture than to their knowledge about the past and past lives. One could argue that historical discourses in the life world play a particular part in this process of recognition, but it is also important to keep in mind that "recognition does not occur because all recipients are familiar with the essential historiographic publications, but because they have notions of the past that are nourished by many, mainly non-academic sources" (Breuer. 2004, 53).

In addition, the effect of the double time structure of biography has to be established for the reception of life-writing in the theatre as well. Witnessing a performance in the here and now, spectators also relate this present experience to events in the past, which they see reflected in the fiction they create on the basis of the symbolic actions of the performers. Just like the producers of biography the audience cannot avoid seeing the past through the lens of their own modern perspective (cf. Ch. 2). Influenced further by the mediation of the material through the performers, who are their contemporaries, their impression of the past can thus be considered to be subject to a twofold impact of present-day mental frames. Those brought to the production by the individual spectators can be located mainly in the context of their life world, underlining once again its extreme importance for the reception of biographical theatre.

---

[17] This imitation does not necessarily have to be understood in a strictly naturalistic sense, as the discussion of the role of extra-theatricality in biographical theatre shows.

Despite this dominance, other contextual levels are also significant, particularly the conventional context: containing the audience's knowledge about genres, styles, the length of typical performances and similar aspects, it gives spectators the opportunity to compare an individual performance to others they have witnessed. Where they find similarities to other performances they have seen, they might therefore see the stage actions primarily as elements of a theatrical tradition, and less as a way of presenting the past. On the other hand, it could be assumed that the audience's familiarity with theatrical conventions provides regular theatre goers with a larger number of models for the translation of stage actions into embodied actions. With these at their disposal, this group might be able to accept greater distances between the stage actions and those known to them from their lives; their evaluation of the intra- or extra-theatricality of elements could thus also be shaped by their previous theatre experience.

On the level of the cultural context, finally, the effect of clashing genre conventions (cf. Ch. 3) that influence biographical theatre can be located. The degree of their impact depends on the spectators' familiarity with these cultural concepts, and it remains to be seen if avid theatre goers, for example, are more inclined to acknowledge the fictional tradition of the genre and therefore describe the relationship between plays and the past as less important than those who are not as familiar with this tradition.

Elements that Can Trigger Biographical Reception

Having outlined the possible effect of biographical material on several levels of the reception process and with regard to various contextual areas, the specific mode of fictionalisation can be described in more detail, and one of the central questions concerns the way in which this mode of reading is activated. Assuming that similarities between the life world and the actions performed on stage lead to a different way of seeing a play, it has to be determined in which specific sections of the life world these elements can be located. Moreover, other possible sources of information about the play, such as the marketing material, programmes, or reviews have to be examined, as they provide contextual knowledge that can nevertheless be seen as specifically relevant for a production. Ideally, empirical research thus has to conduct an enquiry that provides an insight into the totality of the knowledge a spectator has before preparing to see the performance, as well as the impact of contextual material. Due to pragmatic limitations, the study presented in the following chapter is restricted to questions about their general attitude to biography, specific information about the biographees and the programme, which are discussed here. In addition, the title is given particular attention due to its prominent position.

Within the performance text, three different kinds of signs, which have the potential to establish references to the social context, can be identified: language, visual aspects or non-linguistic auditory elements. Language can be regarded as the most central one among these, as it can be found in most plays, as well as in the other forms of material, i.e. the programme, the title and

other accompanying texts.[18] It is also highly versatile in the way it creates references, for example through the use of proper nouns. Proper nouns, i.e. mostly people's names but also those of buildings, institutions etc. are interesting from a linguistic point of view. Leaving aside many discussions about their status, which deal with questions such as the one of whether they have a meaning and so forth, most linguists, however, agree on their function: they establish a direct reference. In order to do this, they "replace deictic, or pointing gestures such that direct reference to that object or state of affairs is made" (Bussmann. 1996, 387). Another important aspect is their capacity to single out objects: "A name is a word or a phrase that identifies a **specific** person, place or thing. We see the entity as an individual, and not as a member of a class" (Crystal. 1997, 112; bold UC).

The reference to an individual object might be complicated if various entities bear the same name, but in the case most biographees, this is clearly not the case. In some plays, names might not be given entirely from the beginning, such as for example *Vincent in Brixton*, or *Stanley* where the Christian names of the title are completed with surnames in the plays. Although not always part of the title, proper nouns are, however, used in most biographical plays, particularly the names of the subjects of biography. The only exception among the plays discussed in this thesis is *Insignificance*, where none of the characters is ever given any name. Despite the lack of names, they are still clearly recognisable – proof for the fact that proper nouns are a very convenient way of indicating a close reliance on the life world, but that they are not indispensable. They are more economical than descriptions and less prone to equivocations, as here one or two words are enough to give a clear and direct reference to an entity that exists under the same name in the life world of the audience. Identifying this entity can lead to a wealth of contextual information connected to the name, but it also acts as a strong indicator that the world of the fiction in the play and the life world are alike because they contain the same entities and proper nouns for them.

These disadvantages of descriptions, i.e. the lack of economy and their comparatively weak link to the life world, explain why few plays rely solely them and on non-linguistic elements in order to create a connection to specific historical figures. Notwithstanding that, *Insignificance* shows that this is possible (cf. above). In combination with proper names, descriptions are, nonetheless, one of the most important elements that can confirm or counteract the identification of references to entities from the life world. Even in the generally unlikely circumstances of *Kafka's Dick*, for example, where a man named Kafka returns from the dead, further description of the character as a writer who died young, wanted his close friend to burn his work, and had a problematic relationship with his father can be read as a confirmation of the link between this

---

[18] This does not mean that mimed biographical references, made explicit by visual similarities to a historical figure are impossible, but such plays clearly are exceptions. A possible example is *Comedia Tempio* by Josef Nadj, presented at the London Mime Festival 2002, which is described by a critic from El Cultural as "inspired by the life and work of Josef Brenner [...] who called himself Géza Csath" (Kumin. 2004).

character and a famous Czech writer by the audience. A description of a character called "Kafka" as one who does not share any characteristics with the historical figure of the same name, on the other hand, could destroy the link between the name and the entity and establish a greater degree of intra-theatricality. In the same way another common combination, proper nouns and visual elements, can complement or contradict each other.

Visual images also rely on similarities between the images shown on stage and those known to the audience from their life world. Just like descriptions, it is generally harder to establish them as unequivocal references to a single entity. The physical appearance of biographical characters seems to be an exception here, as people are used to perceive other human beings as individuals.[19] In the case of a stunning similarity, as for example that of David Calder as Gorbachev, the visual image alone will make it possible to evoke an individual historical figure. In many other cases of a lesser degree of similarity, a proper name or a description can make the visual reference unequivocal. For elements other than the actor's appearance, visual impressions function like descriptions: images that are similar to those that form part of the audience's knowledge of the life world will create a less specific link to it than proper names do, and in combination with other references they can reinforce or counter the connection suggested by them.

The last possible elements are non-linguistic sounds. In this area it is hard to imagine how sounds alone could establish an unequivocal reference, again possibly with the exception of human voices. The acts of some comedians who imitate voices are based on the comic effect achieved by the contrast of hearing a familiar voice saying things that the person to whom it originally belongs is unlikely to say. In a similar way, a very gifted actor might be capable of evoking a famous person just through his voice. Few actors are, however, able to effect this kind of imitation, and the audience will be familiar only with those historical figures who lived in the age of radio and television recordings and whose voices are exceptionally widely known such as that of Marilyn Monroe. This means that spectators are only rarely able to establish a clear connection between a stage action and a historical figure purely on the basis of the actor's voice. Other non-linguistic auditory elements, such as the style of singing in plays like *Marlene* or *Piaf* can also serve to reinforce the creation of a fiction that is similar to the stories of these singers if their personal style is imitated. If the songs are presented in an entirely different way, on the other hand, it can destroy this mode of interpretation.

These three kinds of signs can be found for every individual element of the play, for example with reference to the actor. On the level of visual signs, the audience's reactions to his

---

[19] This is confirmed by psychological research, cf. for example Bruce and Young. 1998, 97: "Voice, body shape, gait or even clothing may all establish identity in circumstances where facial detail may not be available. Nevertheless, a face is the most distinctive and widely used key to a person's identity."

appearance, movements and gestures could be analysed, while his voice and other sounds he emits are examples of non-linguistic auditory elements that are connected to this element of the performance. With regard to language, the possible area of analysis is even bigger, comprising all the information given in the actors' own speeches and in those given by other characters that are related to him. Connecting the signs to the spectators' knowledge about them, it can be shown whether they can help to maintain the biographical link or if they counter it. In addition the possible influence of other contexts, such as the audience's experience with different styles of acting, has to be taken into account. The description of elements that strengthen or counter the illusion of a biographical reconstruction in the first section of the thesis is based on the comparison of generally held ideas of particular historical figures with my own perception of the signs of a range of performances, but only empirical research can show if these different contexts equally influence the perception of other spectators.

The Effect of Title and Programme

In addition to the description of the effect of signs that are related to biographical material within the production, some contextual material has to be taken into account, particularly the title and the programme (cf. Ch. 8). The title is, strictly speaking, not part of the performance text either as it is not used on stage, yet few people would perceive it as something separate from it. It is often the first point of contact with the play, and its shortness means that elements that can trigger references to a specific but informative area in their social context stand out even more than they would in the performance text. A title such as *Piaf* can, due to the use of a proper noun, trigger a wealth of background information and the expectation that the play refers to the same entity in the play as it would outside it. Thus a single word can indicate a mode of reception and provide background information which can only gradually be confirmed or countered by the performance or other additional material. Similarly the marketing material can create very concrete expectations as to the reading of the play, and here as well it remains to see if the fact that this information is given with anticipation means that it has a stronger and more lasting impact on the mode of reception.

The hypotheses about the effect of different signs of the performance text and in additional material thus leads to a number of key questions that have to be addressed in empirical research: do spectators refer back to their knowledge about the life world in a different way than they would when seeing a play without biographical material? Which signals are necessary to start this mode of reception, how is it maintained and what happens if contradictory indications are given? How big can the distance between the actions on stage and similar ones in the life world be without provoking a different way of reading? Which role do conventions of different genres and their previous experience with these conventions play? What is the importance of contextual material and how can it support or counter the mode of reception chosen by

individual spectators for a production? Do audiences expect a uniform degree of extra- or intra-theatricality within a production?

With regard to the increasing importance of metabiographical elements in biographical theatre, the audience's level of awareness of the process of fictionalisation can also be seen as a key question. While the assumption that an increasing distance between the actions on stage and the life world is likely to cause such awareness has to be confirmed, empirical research can also show whether the meta-biographical elements described in the first section of the thesis can draw attention to the process of life-writing. Moreover, the conscious thinking about biography, triggered by metabiographical elements, can be compared to the analysis of concepts that are concealed behind the evaluation of other biographical plays and similarities and differences can be formulated. Among these attitudes, their expectations about the openness with which a production team acknowledges the reliance on contextual information is of particular interest in order to reveal whether audiences share the dual attitude of freedom vs. responsibility expressed by some authors like Michael Frayn (cf. Ch. 6).

Further Concerns

Answering all of these questions individually is the first step towards a thorough investigation of the reception process of biographical theatre. Nevertheless, an exhaustive analysis would include work on the way in which they are interrelated, showing how some elements are foreground whereas others stay in the background, and how they interact with each other. It would rely on a description of all the elements of a performance and the contextual material, as well as on the entire contextual information brought to it by the spectators, including their previous theatre experience, their experience with life stories, their knowledge about the historical figure on whom the biographical character is based and their familiarity with this period of history in general. The vast amount of information, as well as the complexity of their interaction involved in such a process means that it is nearly impossible to conduct an empirical study that can satisfy all of these ideal conditions, even for a single performance and a single spectator. Further restrictions are imposed by the exclusive focus on the communication that takes place between the production team, particularly the actors, and the audience. Other directions of communication, such as reactions of the production team to their audience, either in the form of assumptions about their contextual knowledge[20], or in the form of reactions to the feedback theatre makers receive from them, are not taken into account.

In spite of the inevitable incompleteness, however, an empirical study that approaches the key questions that are identified on the basis of a theoretical model can lead to valid hypotheses

---

[20] This can be seen, for example, in Michael Frayn's statement that Michael Blakemore convinced him not to use acronyms for political parties in *Democracy* as the majority of a British audience would be likely to feel confused about them (Wolf. 2003).

about the differences in the reception of biographical theatre and their origin. It can be assumed that it will concretise how far the number and the nature of the elements on stage that are recognisably similar to those from a spectator's life world are responsible for the degree to which the created fiction is seen (or not seen) as an imitation of the life world. At the same time it can confirm whether the description of the differences in the reception of biographical theatre, made with the help of the combined model of reception, is supported by the reactions of actual spectators, and whether the assumptions made about the effect of biographical elements are adequate. Even without absolutely representative results, an empirical study can therefore shed new light on a phenomenon, which to date has been virtually unexplored, and provide new insights which can be pursued and generalised in future research.

Chapter 10: A Study of the Reception of Four Biographical Plays: Methodology and Analysis

Considering the fact that the model created in the previous chapter is based mainly on the experience of my own reactions to biographical theatre, as well as observations of spontaneous comments made by fellow spectators and hints found in the reviews of plays, it seems necessary to see whether the hypotheses made are also consistent with a broader range of reactions from actual audiences. The following chapter thus presents the outline and the results of an empirical reception study conducted in order to test whether the theoretical model presented in the previous chapters is an appropriate tool to describe the reception of biographical plays. After a short description and explanation of the methodology chosen for it, the reactions of the participants are compared to the hypotheses established in chapter 9.

Methodology

The combination of theoretical description and an empirical examination of the process described helps to broaden the basis of experiences for the theory, and, at the same time, validates the empirical research which "must encounter theory, but in such a way that the theory is illuminated by the data, and the data take on greater significance through the lens of concepts and theory" (Barker. 2003, 327). Examining the process of reception on the basis of the experience of individual audience members, it uses qualitative research methods, as these allow a more profound insight and a more accurate description of complex processes than numerically based studies. This choice automatically reduces its representativeness, as it restricts the number of questions and participants due to pragmatic reasons, but these concessions seem justified by the complexity of the issues examined. In addition, efforts have been made to guarantee that the results are as representative as possible within the thematic and pragmatic constraints (cf. p. 183).

The decision for oral responses is also based on the complexity of the topic, as conversation offer the opportunity to clarify difficult aspects straightaway. At the same time, it guarantees a higher immediacy as most people feel less obliged to be clever and to produce their thoughts in a well-structured way when speaking, even when it is recorded, than they do in writing. They are therefore more likely to share their spontaneous impressions in interviews.

Important Aspects of the Interview Study

A tested and successful method for this kind of reception research are the Theatre Talks that were developed by Willmar Sauter and his collaborators in Stockholm University (cf. Sauter. 2000, 174 – 6). Nonetheless, they are not used for the present study, as their lack of directed questioning (cf. p. 160) does not combine with the relatively narrow focus on biographical material and the key questions that have to be addressed here. Even though it would be

interesting to find out whether life-writing is considered sufficiently important by many spectators to be discussed, this aspect has been abandoned in favour of those that have been formulated in the previous chapter. Under these premises, the idea of individual interviews is more suitable than the group discussions used in Sauter's Theatre Talks, as they grant the interviewer more opportunity to explore this specific issue with a single participant, reducing the danger that group discussions drift away from the subject.

Due to the format of individual interviews, the number of participants is necessarily very small, thus reducing the representative value of the results. One of the positive consequences of this configuration is, however, the fact that it makes it possible to examine the reactions of the participants to various plays, comparing their way of seeing different forms of biographical theatre. In other words, while the comparability of reactions to the same biographical elements is limited, it allows conclusions about the way in which differences in the material can change the reactions of a few specific spectators. It thus creates a more complete picture of the reception process of a small number of people, which can be compared to a greater number of spectators in later studies. Moreover, such an experimental set-up with a predetermined group of spectators[1] offers the possibility to establish their contextual knowledge in a pre-show interview, in which their reactions to the title and marketing material can also be established. One of the major drawbacks related to this approach is the learning effect on the side of the participants. It can be reduced by withholding the subject of the interview study and by the use of indirect questioning techniques,[2] but it cannot be eliminated completely, and the differences introduced by it have to be taken into account in the analysis of the later interviews. In the same way, it can be assumed that the questions asked in the pre-show interviews can have an impact on the participants' perception of the performances. These drawbacks, however, have to be accepted in order to guarantee a sufficient focus on the topic and to allow the recollection of data about the reactions to different kinds of material.

The Participants

Choosing an experimental configuration in which a small group of participants is interviewed before and after various performances the selection of the participants is of great importance as it can help to make the study as representative as possible within the given limits. Without reliable information about the composition of theatre audiences in a particular region, or for specific theatres, it is impossible to create a group that is representative of an average audience. Instead, a relatively homogenous group for which key parameters, such as age, education and sex can be controlled is used, as this allows some generalisation with regard to the attitudes and reactions within this group which could be used for a comparison with future studies with

---

[1] It is worth mentioning at this point that this also excludes the possibility to ask questions about the reasons why people decide to see biographical plays, but here again, this question is considered to be less important than those identified in the previous chapter and is therefore left for further research.

[2] For various questioning techniques, cf. for example Kvale. 1996. or Rubin. 1995.

changed parameters. This choice is further supported by practical concerns, as the student body of a university offers a pool of suitable, accessible and possibly interested candidates for participation. All the parameters are controlled with the help of a questionnaire,[3] and while participants are picked in roughly equal parts from both genders, from a limited age group (18 to 27 years) and from a similar educational level (all undergraduate students) and background (all of them are educated in Britain to ensure a comparable cultural background), other parameters are designed to introduce variety. With one student from each university faculty, shared specialist knowledge in one subject area is avoided,[4] making sure that their training in particular methodologies does not influence the overall results to a great degree. This leads to a group size of 7, which is situated within the range of 15 +/- 10 participants, which Kvale recommends for qualitative research (Kvale. 1996, 102). Further variety is given by their differing experience with theatre, ranging from active involvement with professional theatre to hardly any experience at all. Familiarity with any of the plays visited in the study, however, is avoided.[5]

These selection procedures lead to the following list of participants:

Participant 1 is a female student of the Faculty of Architecture, 19 years old and has extensive experience of theatre in various forms, both as a spectator and, to a certain extent, of its production both in an educational context, as well as on the Edinburgh Fringe.

Participant 2 is a 23 year-old, male student of Modern Languages at the Faculty of Arts, also with extensive theatre experience on both sides of the curtain. In addition to being an avid theatre goer, he participated in some professional productions in Scarborough.

Participant 3 is male, 20 years old and a student at the Faculty of Engineering. He has not attended the theatre at all within the last year and had little experience with theatre before.

Participant 4 studies at the Faculty of Law. At 27, he has hardly any theatre experience at all.

Participant 5 is a 27 year-old, female student of the Faculty of Medicine with some theatre experience in the past.

Participant 6 also brings some theatre experience. She is 18 years old and studies at the Faculty of Science.

Participant 7 is female student of the Faculty of Social Sciences and has hardly any experience with theatre.

---

[3] The project thus relies on the assumption that the candidates have no reason for lying to the interviewer, although neither their responses to the questionnaire, nor those in the interview can be tested for their truthfulness.

[4] The returned questionnaires show that, as expected, interest is particularly high among students at the Faculty of Arts, but also among medics.

[5] There is one exception to this rule, as one participant had seen *Kafka's Dick* as a child but could not remember anything.

A back-up group that is interviewed about all the performances would have been desirable, but this is practically impossible. Thanks to the dedication of the participants, the series of interviews is still nearly complete with one exception: participant 7 could not attend *Letters Home* due to her exam time table.

Excluding the last production, where one participant attended the matinee on his own, all of the participants are taken to see the same performance together with the interviewer in order to guarantee that their reactions are based on the same material. In order to avoid mutual influence-taking or any changes in their contextual knowledge after the pre-show interview, all of them agree not to discuss the performance with each other, or to consult other people or sources of knowledge with regard to questions that might arise from the productions. Reference to contextual material, such as the programme is neither encouraged, nor discouraged, but their choice is brought up in the interviews.

The Choice of Plays

Having selected a methodology and a group of participants, the choice of plays is the last important aspect of the preparations for the study. Aiming at the greatest variety of ways in which biographical material is used that is possible in a study with only few productions, the decision is based on the description of recurring patterns in the productions of biographical plays (cf. Ch. 8). The continuing importance of the idea of authenticity and historical truth is examined in the reactions to *Letters Home* (a student production at Sheffield University), a play that consists entirely of the dramatisation of letters written by the biographees, Sylvia Plath and her mother, and to *Vincent in Brixton*, which is based on hypothetical events, but presented in an extremely naturalist style. At the same time, the latter can also be compared to *Insignificance*, another play that shows a hypothetical encounter, but which is regarded as less likely to be true, due to the mixture of elements that suggests a high degree of reliance on the world and elements that counter the previous knowledge of the audience. All of these plays can thus provide answers to the questions regarding the use of contextual knowledge and those related to the evaluation of a play's extra-theatricality. In addition to these questions, reactions to metabiography are examined. As the plays discussed in this thesis are not often performed, the restrictions imposed by geographical distances and the time limit of one year, which ensures that all the participants are still available for the study, severely limit the number of plays that can be included. With regard to metabiography and its reception, only *Kafka's Dick* at the Derby Playhouse is available. In contrast to the script, this production does not put much emphasis on the explicitly self-reflexive elements, but it still provides some insight into the participants' thinking about biography and the way in which this can be influenced by metabiographical theatre. A play with implicit metabiographical elements can, unfortunately, not be included.

<u>The Structure of the Interviews</u>

The different areas of interest for each of these productions are also reflected in the issues discussed in the interviews. While a structure is prepared for each of the interviews (Cf. Appendix 3), it mainly serves as an indication of the topics that are brought up in the interviews in no specific order, and it leaves ample room for issues the participants want to discuss. The pre-show interviews tend to be organised more strictly, as the conversation is based on the information that is gradually given to the interviewee, beginning with the name of the author and the title, and continuing with further marketing material. The interviews are also more uniform, as enquiries into certain areas, such as the knowledge about the biographee or the era, form part of all of the pre-show conversations.[6] The post-show interviews often begin with a question about the way in which a production confirmed or countered the participants' expectations, and other areas that are discussed frequently include their impression of the characters, the actors, design-related issues, the information they take from the programmes and indirect questions about the way in which they evaluate the relationship between the play and their life world or the way biography is presented in *Kafka's Dick*. Through them, some of the key questions formulated in the previous chapter are addressed.

Although this approach does not explicitly try to follow Olsen's suggestion to base audience and reception research on semiotic theories, the similarities between the topics that are suggested by the interviewer in the discussions and those that would be brought up in performance analysis cannot be ignored. Some involuntary guidance of the participants' thinking thus seems to be unavoidable if the interviews are aimed at answering specific questions. At the same time, however, it is essential to compensate as much as possible for this necessary scholarly bias. Most importantly this is done through the flexible approach to the interview structures, which allows the interviewees to determine the direction of the conversation at some moments, and to include the issues which they want to discuss. Moreover, literary and dramatic terminology is avoided, and instead the words used by the participants are picked up wherever possible in order to create an atmosphere where they feel that their opinion is valuable, independently from the way in which they express it. Problematic terms, such as 'authenticity', 'truth' or 'reality' are not used before they are introduced to the conversation by the interviewee, as this might prompt them to think in the categories whose importance is analysed in this study. Moments where the analysis of the interview shows that, despite these precautions, the answers are clearly influenced by the way in which the interviewer raises a topic are clearly marked in the analysis of the data.

The interviews collected with the methodology described above take place over 8 months, usually within a maximum of a week before and after the visits to the theatre. All of them are recorded and their analysis is based on a literal transcription of them. Rather than discussing the

---

[6] Participants were shown flyers for the productions of *Vincent*, *Kafka's Dick* and *Insignificance*, as well as a poster of *Letters Home*; with the exception of *Insignificance*, all of them contained direct references to the subject(s) of biography presented in them, cf. Appendix 4.

interview results individually, the material collected in them is presented in light of the key questions formulated in the previous chapter, comparing the hypotheses made with the reactions that were obtained in order to confirm or challenge them. The context of the quotations is included wherever it seems necessary, but all of the extracts are presented in their original context in Appendix 5. All the candidates have been given transcriptions of the conversations and have given their consent to be quoted.

An Analysis of the Interviews [7]

In a further exploration of the key questions established in the theoretical model, these can be confirmed or challenged on the basis of empirical evidence collected in the interviews. Their analysis therefore follows the structure introduced by the model of reception, but the linearity of such a verbal description is inevitably at odds with the complexity of interconnections between the various elements of a performance and between the spectators' perception of them. As a result cross-references to other statements by the same participants become necessary in some contexts, but they are kept to a minimum to avoid repetition.

The Spectators' Reliance on Contextual Information

The statement that the reference to specific entities in the life world, in this case historical individuals, leads to the use of a narrow, but informative context is central to the model of reception. The participants' reactions do not only confirm this assumption but also show clearly which elements are more likely to establish such a connection.

Due to proper nouns in the title and the marketing material, many interviewees already establish such a link prior to most of the performances. Although the title of *Vincent in Brixton* merely reveals his first name, the flyer provided by the Library Theatre shows an excerpt from *La chambre de Van Gogh à Arles* (1889) as well as his surname. In the promotional material for *Kafka's Dick*, the more specific reference in the play's title is also repeated and extended through the question about 'literary legends' and the poster for *Letters Home* explains that this is "A play about Sylvia Plath" (cf. Appendix 4). The participants' reactions demonstrate that the use of proper nouns in the accompanying material is essential for the expectations they form about the play. This is particularly visible with regard to *Vincent in Brixton*: after hearing the title, most of them used the more specific place name, concluding that "imagin[ing] Brixton to be an area of London that is not so well kept [and that] is often associated with social problems, [...] it will be a story about a young guy" (bV2, 10). Where the name of the historical character

---

[7] In order to quote the interviews, numbers are assigned to the individual paragraphs in the transcripts of the conversations. The interviews themselves are identified as pre-show (b for before) or post-show (a for after) interviews about one of the four plays (V – *Vincent*, K – *Kafka's Dick*, I – *Insignificance* and L – *Letters Home*) and by the number of the participant. bV5, 13, for example, refers to paragraph 13 in the pre-show interview about *Vincent* with participant 5.

is most specific, it is immediately connected to their knowledge of the historical figure,[8] but an even clearer example of the hope to extract specific information from the precise references provided by proper nouns is given by those who are not familiar with Kafka. Ignoring the second word of the title, they concentrate on the first one, which is "obviously not English",[9] but which is seen as the key to guessing the play's content: "Is it a person Kafka?" (bK6, 10). Having recognised a name, all participants use it as a basis for their ideas about the play. In the pre-show interviews for *Vincent*, this can be observed in the changes made in reaction to the recognition of the painter in the title: "The first thing I point out as I look at this flyer is that Vincent is Vincent Van Gogh".[10] Reacting to the full name and the picture on the flyer, their knowledge that the person referred to is "the **artist** Vincent Van Gogh" leads them to the conclusion that this is "more of an arty play" (bV5 8, bold UC). Likewise, participant 4 expected "a picture of a young artist [who] eventually [...] is successful" (bV4, 18), even though the flyer merely announces the "story of the young Van Gogh on the brink of genius" (Flyer for *Vincent*). His expectation is therefore likely to be influenced by his knowledge that the historical figure is famous for his paintings today.

A similar use of contextual information can be observed in the conjectures about *Kafka's Dick* and *Letters Home* by the participants who were familiar with the two historical figures. The first is expected to be an "almost maybe autobiographical thing" (bK1, 14), and one candidate suggests that the use of characters who are brought back from the past "could be very similar to this metamorphosis thing of waking up, as 'Gregor Samsa awoke from easy dreams'" (bK2, 32). As few of the students knew anything about Sylvia Plath beforehand, their guesses are less dependent on her, but most agreed that she would be at the centre of the play. In this context some also acknowledge indirectly the importance of the use of contextual information triggered by a biographical link. Participant 5, for example, says that "because [she] didn't know anything about Sylvia Plath to start with [she] didn't realise that it was going to be about her and the relationship with her mother and the other people in her life" (aL 5, 2), indicating that those who had the chance to draw on their life world knowledge might have been better prepared. The same appreciation of the importance of contextual information in biographical plays is expressed in the differing opinions on the first scene of *Kafka's Dick*, where the character Kafka urges his friend Max to burn his writings. Asked if this scene is necessary, participant 3 confirms that it is "because of people like me who don't know anything about Kafka at all, that's kind of central to the storyline" (aK3, 22), while participant 1 "thought the beginning scene was almost unnecessary" (aI2, 10) as he had already assumed that the character Kafka

---

[8] "Just from the title, what would you imagine? – "I think Kafka was a writer" (bK4, 4). Similar responses were given by candidates 1and 2.
[9] bK3, 12. Cf. also bK5, 4 who sees in it "an element of foreignness to this play."
[10] bV2 12. This reference is also recognised by all the other participants, cf. bV1, 10, bV4, 18; bV6, 10; bV3, 16; bV7, 12 and those cited further on in the text.

might have done this, due to his knowledge about the historical writer of the same name. Their answers thus do not just demonstrate how proper nouns that identify a specific historical figure enable them to add a wealth of specific information to that given by the marketing material, they also illustrate the participants' awareness of this possibility, expressed in their interest in names and their reactions when they cannot make use of them.

In some cases, visual material is also used to establish a reference to the participants' contextual knowledge. Its impact is greatest when it helps to create a link to a specific person known from the life world as well. The participants who comment immediately on the picture on the flyer for *Vincent* did so, because it leads them to assume that "that Vincent is Vincent van Gogh, because you have the Impressionist painting" (bV2, 10), thus using it as a way of identifying a potential historical character. One interviewee also refers to the poster for *Insignificance*. It is not included in the material given to them, in which no reference to the historical characters is made, but she had spotted it by chance in Sheffield. The photos of Einstein and Marilyn on this poster work in the same way as proper names, as they allow her to recognise the historical figure and to feed her knowledge about them into her expectations about the play, predicting that it could be "Possibly quite ironic, maybe quite satirical, because they seem to be fairly significant people with the rather contradictory title" (bI 1,1).

The recourse to contextual information, which is confirmed by the examples described in the previous paragraphs, is on no account a reception strategy reserved for biographical plays, but one that is used for any kind of play. The pre-show interviews for *Insignificance* show, however, that less specific references do not lead the participants to rely on contextual references to the same extent or in the same way. Nothing in the material shown to the participants suggests that the characters are based on historical figures,[11] and as a consequence, most interviewees react to other clues in the text of the flyer, such as the period in which the play is set: "1950s, so, well 50s clothing obviously" (bI3, 24). With respect to the characters, they are more hesitant about their guesses and tend to keep them more general, using expressions indicating uncertainty, for example "what **might** be quite funny is their conversations" or "the Nobel Prize winning scientist **would** be very clever" (bI 6, 24 and bI 2, 19; bold UC) . Some of them rely on the information about their professions and stereotypes about them: "the scientist is going to be really intelligent. The film star – they tend not to be. The baseball player might be all macho, I suppose" (bI6, 24). As these descriptions apply to a whole group of people, rather than an individual, they tend to be more general than those made for the other biographical characters on the basis of a very precise but exhaustive area of contextual information which can then be brought to the play.

---

[11] This is suggested on the posters, which participant 1 saw by chance. Her interview is therefore not taken into account for this paragraph.

The Recognition of Biographical References during the Performance

The interview study thus shows how biographical references can lead to an increased reliance on a narrow area of life world knowledge. This has mainly been illustrated with respect to the participants' conjectures in the pre-show interviews, made on the basis of the references in the marketing material shown to them. The post-show interviews suggest that the encounter of elements in the performance that allow a recourse to previous knowledge leads to a similar reliance on the latter, and these reactions are therefore not presented in detail. In *Insignificance*, on the other hand, the biographical reference has to be established in the performance and without the use of names. As suggested in chapter 9, the physical appearance of the actors proves as powerful as the use of proper nouns, as various participants understood the link to Marilyn Monroe as soon "as she walked in, really, because she's wearing the classic dress that she's always seen in in films and the hair and the make up" (aI3, 12). Other interviewees confirmed directly that their recognition of "Marilyn Monroe was purely visual" (aI2, 14) because the actress matched two of the most striking features of the famous film star, "that dress, because that is all I really know about her, and the blonde hair" (aI7, 26). They thus confirm that the physical appearance of a person can be regarded as equally unique and recognisable as their name. Comments about the Professor and his similarity to Albert Einstein also reveal that the imitation of some of key features, such as "the moustache and the crazy hair" (aI 3, 12; cf. also aI 2, 16) are sufficient to evoke the famous physicist, or in other words to establish a specific reference.

Compared to the powerful effect of the visual elements, the descriptions that help to establish biographical references in the script become secondary in the performances. Nevertheless, most participants state that these help to confirm their impression. Whereas their reactions to the visual aspects are relatively comparable, the participants refer to a wider range of elements in the descriptions of the characters when explaining how they established the similarity to life world figures. Thus some participants picked up references to *"The Seven Year Itch"* (aI6, 26, cf. also aI3, 12), whereas others saw the Actress's marriage to a baseball player (aI5, 26) or the idea that she was "having affairs with people" (aI4, 50) as evidence for her similarity to Marilyn Monroe. In the case of Einstein, there is less variation and most participants declare that references to "his work and his theories" (aI5, 36, cf. also aI 4, 70) or more specifically to "the theory of relativity" (aI2, 16) help to confirm his identity. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily counter the idea that descriptions are less specific than proper nouns and a person's physical appearance, as it could also be explained by the fact that little else is generally known about Einstein.

The reactions to the other two characters who are less famous, at least among young British students, on the other hand seem to confirm that descriptions are less likely to evoke specific references. The impression of the Senator as someone who is "obviously very concerned with

Communism and anti-American things" (aI3, 34), for example, is not seen as a clear sign of a biographical connection by the participant who describes him, and another one states that she "didn't know whether it was supposed to be Joe McCarthy or one of his side kicks" (aI6, 36). The following quotation gives a final example of this lack of specificity and directness:

> The stage that I knew that it was McCarthy was when Einstein handed Marilyn Monroe a programme that was for the *Crucible* and then it all fell into place, because Marilyn Monroe was married to Arthur Miller who wrote *The Crucible* which uses the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts as a allegory for McCarthyism (aI2, 22).

Maintaining or Countering the Biographical Reference

After establishing how the particular connection between a performance and its contexts is created, it has to be examined how it can be maintained or countered. Even though the interviews cannot provide reactions to every single element of the performance, they still illustrate various ways in which a biographical reading mode can be manipulated. The assumption that expectations about the degree of extra-theatricality are influenced by the style of the presentation (cf. Ch. 4) is confirmed. An intra-theatrical way of acting is thus seen as a strong indication against the creation of a world that resembles their life world and therefore as difficult to combine with a biographical reading – a point raised by participant 4 in his complaint that in *Kafka's Dick* the "way the characters were played [was] just completely overdone" (aK4, 26). Interestingly, another interviewee refers to the same production, when she explains that the acting style, which she considered to be close to life, can support a biographical link, or in her words how "the way he portrayed it gave [her] the feeling that he was a real character" (aK5, 26). While the opposing evaluation of the acting style can restrict the conviction of this argument, the relation between stage formal extra-theatricality and felt authenticity clearly exists in their reception of *Vincent in Brixton*. The choice of a naturalistically presented design, based on elements from everyday life[12] and the presentation of everyday acts such as peeling potatoes (cf. aV7, 106) are pointed out, and some participants establish a direct relation between this theatrical style and their impression of the play's credibility: "it was so real, you therefore make assumptions that all the history and all the facts they are telling you were actual facts" (aI1, 19).

In addition to formal extra-theatricality, the existence of a biographical link can be seen as an indication of overall historical credibility. "Recognis[ing] two of them", one of the participants explains after *Insignificance*, makes him start wondering if he "should [...] be able to recognise the others" (aI4, 86), and participant 1 declares that even before the play, she assumed that the other photos on the poster she spotted would also be "very famous people and therefore probably iconic photographs of those people as well" (bI1, 44). All of those who were not familiar with the historical models for the characters in *Insignificance* thus feel that it would be strange to mix the historical characters they recognise with invented ones, and the phenomenon

---

[12] "The fact that it is one set, always in the kitchen, that made it more true, I think" (aI3, 104).

190

can be observed with regard to some of the other productions as well. After *Vincent in Brixton*, participant 5 wondered "how much they found out about Sam and his character [...] and how much the actor has actually put his own, what is the word?" (aV5, 46), indicating that she does not doubt the fact that he, just like the protagonist, is based on a concrete historical model.[13] These reactions thus suggest that such an expectation does not have to be created for each individual character, but that under specific conditions, it can be extended to the whole list of dramatis personae. Its effect is therefore comparable to that of formal extra-theatricality, as both the context in which a character is presented (i.e. in the vicinity of recognisable historical characters) and the style of the presentation can lead to an increased willingness of the audience to see the performances as highly extra-textual and firmly rooted in the life world. The effectiveness of these techniques, however, can depend on other factors, as for example the relation of the historical characters and the invented ones – whereas they are roughly equally prominent in *Insignificance*, Sam is clearly a minor character in *Vincent*, a constellation that can explain why fewer participants extended the biographical link to the other characters in Wright's play.

In comparison to formal intra-theatricality, the violation of natural laws, of rules related to the standards of human interaction or the notion of probability is even more powerful in countering the impression of a high degree of reliance on contextual knowledge. "Bringing back from the dead and kissing tortoises" in *Kafka's Dick*, is considered by participant 4 to be "something quite surreal" (bK4, 16) and therefore incompatible with the idea of a biographical mode of reading. Similarly, participant 1 declares the fact that "half the characters were dead" (aK1, 73) to be one of the reasons for the limited credibility of the play as a source of information about the biographical characters. Likewise, the unsuitable place of encounter (bI7, 22) and the "different social circles and I assume interests" (aI5, 16) of the characters in *Insignificance* are cited as one of the major arguments why none of the participants is convinced that the meeting between the historical figures took place. Other reactions also list the fact that "nobody would say that Marilyn Monroe and Einstein would go together" (aI2, 12) or unlikely breaches of social decorum, including "turning up with a bottle of whiskey and going around drinking it" (aI6, 48) as factors that prevent them from extending the reliance on the life world in the context of the characters to the realm of the events as well. The participants thus seem to base their impression of the degree to which the play and the life world resemble each other more on the question whether the forces that shape their life world, i.e. natural or social rules, are replicated in the fictional world than they do on the degree of formal extra-theatricality in which it is presented. As the different evaluation of the acting in *Kafka's Dick* (cf. above) has shown, both of these categories are relative and may vary between different spectators. In comparison to the

---

[13] Van Gogh's letters, however, do not contain any reference to another lodger, and Sam can therefore be assumed to be an invention of Nicholas Wright rather than a character inspired by a little known historical figure.

next factor, however, it can be assumed that they are shared by a greater percentage of the audience.

Contradictions of or the adherence to information about the life of biographical characters, on the other hand, depend entirely on the audience's familiarity with these historical figures and they are likely to vary greatly. Where spectators have the chance to compare the presentation of a biographical character to their own impression of the historical figures, it nevertheless has a great impact on their reception. If new information is compatible with their previous ideas, the participants seem to be inclined to believe that it is based on the historical life. Participant 3, for example, explains that when Vincent is "sacked from his job and the girl he loves has gone and married another man, that's made me think it's probably true, because it is tragedy I'd associate with him" (aV3, 98), and participant 2 adds that she thought the family row was based in the life world as she had "heard that Van Gogh spent a lot of his life on his own, so I presume there were rifts between him and his family" (aV2, 30). In the same way, participant 2 explains that the references to *Metamorphosis* in *Kafka's Dick* help to maintain the biographical link (aK2, 4), even if the character does not resemble the historical figure he expected.

Contradictions between a historical character and the participants' knowledge about the historical figure become more likely with increased contextual information. They are often used in order to explain why the interviewees regard certain elements as inventions: participant 4, for instance, explains that "even if she was in a hotel room with Einstein, [he believes that Marilyn Monroe] wouldn't make a pass at him. [...] because it doesn't fit in with the image I had of her" (aI 4, 30 and 32). In some cases, even the fact that they have not heard about an event shown in the play is seen as sufficient reason to doubts its authenticity: "I wouldn't imagine he would throw [his papers] out of a window, because that would be like a famous thing, [...] I would have remembered if he had done" (aI3, 81). Their contextual knowledge is thus essential for their impression of the relationship between the world and the play, and elements that counter it can significantly weaken the biographical link considerably.

Finally the interviews after *Letters Home* confirm that the use of first-hand documentation can be seen as the ultimate proof of authenticity. While few of the participants refer to the selecting influence of the playwright, many of them explain that knowing "that it was her writing", they think that it was possible to "actually get a feel for her rather than somebody else's perspective of her letters" (aL5, 44).

Are the Plays Perceived as Fact or Fiction?

The final verdict of the participants regarding the relationship between the play and the social context depends on the way in which all of the effects described above interact in a particular performance. Depending on the number of elements that each participant perceives, as well as on the emphasis they put on each of them, their evaluations of the individual performances differs greatly. Nonetheless, most of their positions can be described as intermediary, neither the

complete acceptance of a play as an entirely truthful imitation of the past, nor a complete rejection of the biographical link once it is established is common. On the contrary, participants often avoid taking a clear position, as for example participant 3 who declares that he "wasn't entirely sure every bit was all true" (aV3, 82). Other interviewees evaluate the play on the basis of specific conditions: "if it was all real, I would have probably liked Vincent more" (aV4, 59). For them, a definite decision about the historical truth value of the play is no prerequisite to their enjoyment of it. Others, in contrast, show confusion and try to seek confirmation of their evaluation: "I wouldn't have associated Van Gogh with comedy [...] I and he was known to be mad, **wasn't he**, so ..." (aV5, 8 and 10, underlined UC). It shows how the co-existence of contradicting indications about the degree of similarity between the life world and the fictional world can also lead to conflicts for some spectators.

The strategies with which the participants try to accommodate the conflicting signals vary. Before seeing the performance, they are likely to expect a low degree of reliance on contextual information in spite of the biographical link established through the use of a name. As participant 4 believes that Kafka's work "didn't contain anything which is that much to do with tortoises and bringing people back from the dead", a reference to the other elements he finds in the marketing material, he expects the performance to be "just a variety of different things which are being held together by some central theme" (bV4, 18 and 20). Similarly participant 2 is inclined to think that *Vincent in Brixton* is a parody, because "he was Dutch, Vincent Van Gogh, you wouldn't expect him to be in London, in Brixton" (bV2, 12). Even though names are a powerful tool to evoke a possible biographical connection before the play, these examples show that they are not necessarily strong enough to preserve the expectation of a highly extra-theatrical play if all the other indications contradict it.

After seeing the performances, in which the historical characters share more characteristics with their models, the reactions differ and the participants show more willingness to integrate the new contradictory information into their idea of the biographee. Although her image of Van Gogh was of someone "older, [who] looked a bit trampy and [...] a bit mad" (aV5, 8), participant 5 accommodates the impression of a "very smart, very intelligent" man into her contextual knowledge. Similarly participant 1 assumes that this is "possibly another side of his character that isn't usually portrayed in a very maximised manner" (aV1, 30). Similarly unequivocal positions are also expressed with regard to *Letters Home*, which most participants regard as very authentic. It also shows, however, that such a felt high degree of extra-theatricality is not necessarily desirable; as one participants formulate it, it might be merely an excuse where "the writer was so uncreative to make that out of something that could have been a lot better" (aV4, 70). While confirming the possibility of using theatre in order to give information that audiences consider to be valid in the world as well, it shows that for some of them, this is not compatible with the idea of theatre as an art form. In other words, a very high degree of extra-theatricality is possible, but not always desirable.

<u>Consequences on Other Levels of Reception</u>

Having described how the interview study confirms the use of contextual material outlined in the theoretical model, and how contextual knowledge influences the creation of a fictional story that relies to a great degree on the life world, it has to be examined if the study can also support the possible changes on the other two levels of reception established by Sauter. Observations concerning the sensory level are scarce, partly because sensory reactions are unlikely to be consciously perceived and therefore to be reported. One instant during both performances of *Insignificance* I witnessed, however, suggests that the recognition of a familiar voice can have an effect: before the Actress enters the stage, she calls for the Professor's attention with a short sound of greeting, and both audiences reacted to the similarity between her voice and that of Marilyn Monroe with laughter. Although this could be read as instant recognition, it does not provide conclusive evidence of this change on the sensory level, as the spectators might have expected her appearance after having seen the posters for the play. The influence of biographical elements on the sensory level of perception therefore remains to be examined further.

The judgement of the performers' skills on the artistic level, on the other hand, is clearly influenced by the use of historical characters. Where the participants are familiar with the historical figures, they generally react positively to a high degree of similarity between their impression of the historical figures and their presentation by an actor. Participant 3 states explicitly that "the way she portrayed herself is pretty much how I remember Marilyn Monroe" (aI3, 54) and participant 1 explains that the positive evaluation of *Insignificance* is based on the fact that all of the actors in the play "seemed to portray quite effectively the characters who they were being" (aI1, 24). Although this praise could be seen as partly directed at the playwrights, who provide the basis for the actors' work, all of the quotations are taken from answers to questions that refer explicitly to the acting of the play. For the participants, this aspect thus seems to be related mainly to the performer.

As suggested in Ch. 7, the accent of the characters is critical with regard to the evaluation of the performance. Perceived as one of the essential characteristics of a historical figure, several participants see in it a reason why a performance is convincing: participant 3 applauds Gus Gallagher's performance, "because he convinced me that he was from Holland, obviously not speaking with an English accent, and [he] played the part quite well" (aV3, 27). This is confirmed by negative reactions. Asked about the acting in *Kafka's Dick*, participant 2 conceded that "we are not after a hundred percent total realism, but [...] the first thing I have to mention is his Irish accent" (aK2, 21). Their comments suggest that once a biographical reference is established, the participants expect it to be continued, at least with regard to key characteristics of the historical figure. Where it is countered without any apparent reason, they see in it an unnecessary interruption to the biographical mode of reception, which is often attributed to bad

acting. It can be assumed that the degree to which their perception on the artistic level is influenced by the actors' capacity of impersonation depends on a range of different factors, including the historical documentation about the historical figure, the spectators' knowledge about it and the context of the play. While this remains to be examined in greater detail, the audience study can provide evidence for the possible impact of biographical material on the artistic level.

Differentiating Between Levels of Context

Following the discussion of possible side effects on other levels of reception, it has to be seen how far the interviews allow conclusions about the different contextual levels to which spectators refer. The idea of genre proves to be central to the participants' conjectures about the plays in the pre-show interviews, particularly where they are not familiar with the biographical subject. When asked to describe what they expect "the play to be like", many of them offer a genre description as an answer: *Kafka's Dick* is categorised as "a comedy" (bK6, 16), or more concretely "quite a silly comedy" (bK3, 20). In some cases, the influence of this conventional knowledge is completed with information about the historical character which can be situated in the context of the life world. Thus participant 2 explains that, "because it's Kafka, [he] should think that it's quite intelligent humour" (bK2, 10). In the post-show discussions, genre conventions still play a part, as the conflicting conventions in the following reaction show: participant 4 states that after reading the marketing material he "still thought that it was going to be more about his work", an idea that is probably based on the central position of achievements in biography. Confronted with a different plot, however, he explains it with another generic convention, namely the fact that "with most plays, films, songs, there's some sort of love interest in it somewhere" (aV4, 45). This shows that both, the information about biography and about theatrical genres in the conventional and in the cultural context, can have an impact on the expectations about and the reception of biographical plays.

Conventional knowledge is also revealed as an important influence on the biographical references. Comic elements can, for example, serve as an indication of a lesser degree of extra-theatricality, as some of the rules that apply in the world are substituted by those provided by the genre. Participant 3 formulates this clearly when he explains that "the fact that it is quite a silly play means that it doesn't have to be entirely accurate to how Kafka was" (aK3, 76). The comic elements whose origin can be seen in the theatrical form chosen for the production therefore do not have to invalidate all of the biographical information given about the writer. For the participants, fights over gigantic salt and pepper dispensers that exemplify the size of reproductive organs may be explained in their form by the conventions of music hall and pantomime, while still indicating a problematic relationship between the historical Kafka and his father. The same effect can be observed with regard to *Vincent in Brixton*, where participant

2 observes that Vincent's sister, "the most unrealistic, yet deeply comic of the characters in the play" nevertheless "shows the audience [...] the gap that had occurred between Van Gogh and his supportive family" (aV2, 27-8).

The importance of conventional knowledge can also be observed with regard to the use of space. After *Letters Home* participant 3 declares that he "quite liked the fact that the mother was sitting down most of the time and she was on the other side because that gave the impression that she was like in one place and Sylvia was a long way away" (aL3, 36), a comment that shows indirectly how his knowledge about the limited availability of space on stage helps him to translate the distances into relative ones – sitting at opposite ends of the stage, the distance is seen as maximal, not just 5 metres. The recourse to the conventional context thus also makes it possible to establish a symbolic reading which can even heighten the impression of extra-theatricality (cf. p. 148).

Even though the interviews cannot measure the reliance on generic conventions and their influence on a biographical mode of reception, it is noteworthy that the participants whose answers reveal frequent recurrence to generic conventions, and who show greater tolerance to departures from extra-theatrical forms without doubting the biographical link are those with more theatre experience. One of the participants who claims that she hardly ever goes to the theatre, on the other hand, sees the unlikely nature of the meeting between Monroe and Einstein in *Insignificance* as a factor that diminished her enjoyment of the play (cf. below). The interviews thus provide some indication about the way in which the reception of biographical plays can be influenced by previous theatre experience, in other words, by their knowledge on the conventional level. As with other areas of the conventional context, however, this aspect has to be examined further for more conclusive results, for example in an interview series in which previous theatre experience is given more prominence, and which also includes plays produced in a more intra-theatrical style than those included in this study.

The effect of generic conventions on theatrical reception described above is also relevant with regard to those acquired by the participants during the interview study. With the exception of participant 5, all of them recognised one similarity shared by all the plays: "Each one of them involved real people [...] so each one was a stage portrayal of somebody that has existed" (aL2, 62, cf. also aL4, 80; aL6, 58; aL1, 47). Finding a common denominator among them, it is likely that the participants will view biographical plays as a particular kind of drama, thus storing some of their observations as rules for plays with similar references to the world. As a consequence, their perception of the later plays may be partly influenced by the earlier ones, as they are likely to turn these experiences into emerging generic conventions for biographical theatre. This may be heightened by the questions asked, as they are highly influenced by my own perception of these plays as characterised by a shared key feature which I try to describe in more detail. Even if the participants are not establishing generic similarities themselves, they are

therefore likely to be indirectly affected by my particular perspective on the productions discussed.

The cultural context as the one where conventions about other genres, including life-writing, are located is also of great interest. In the interviews, it can be seen that these have an impact on the participants' expectations and reception once the plays have been categorised as life stories. Participant 4 seems to rely on them when he describes his expectations about the plot of *Vincent in Brixton* as a story of "young artist, struggling and trying to make an aim for himself" (bVD, 18), an idea that is not conveyed in the information on the flyer, but seems to be based in typical structures of artists' lives. Similarly, their experience with biography can influence their expectations concerning the aspects of a life presented in the plays. While participant 7 follows the information on the flyer, expecting *Vincent* to "show more of, not particularly his paintings, more of his life around it and who he meets and friends" (bV7, 28), others are convinced that, in spite of the lack of any mentioning of his work in the description given to them, it will be "about his work and life" (bV1, 20) or "Vincent's work as an artist" (aV4, 2). These comments reveal how their expectations are influenced by a concrete concept of biography, according to which achievements play a central part.

A similar traditional influence can be observed with regard to the period of time shown in the plays. Participant 5, for example, is surprised about *Vincent*, as she "expected [...] more of his life [and because she] didn't expect it to be just like I think it was one year" (aV5, 2). This particular issue also reveals the potential for clashes between expectations based on conventional and cultural knowledge. In contrast to the previous quotation, one of the other participants complains that *Letters Home* "just went from one thing to the other too quickly and it probably would have been more interesting if it had maybe just picked something and looked at it in more detail" (aL4, 14). These opposing opinions can be seen as the result of different contextual influences, of biographical vs. theatrical conventions, and the general attitudes of these two participants support this idea: while participant 4 stresses the entertainment factor of theatre, participant 5 often expresses her views on its educational potential as art that can inform the audience about the world. In addition to proving the influence of the conventional and cultural context, the previous example therefore underlines the complexity of the interactions between the individual elements of the performance and the different levels of contexts used for their interpretation.

<u>The Role of Programmes</u>

As programmes and their influence are considered in the analysis of productions, some remarks should be made about the way in which the participants of the interview study use this particular contextual material. During the visits one programme is generally provided by the interviewer for those who are interested, but several participants chose to buy one themselves. Asked about

their use of programmes in the interviews, many of them explain their interest with their curiosity about the actors and the wish to look for more information about the biographical characters in the plays. In *Insignificance*, it thus serves to provide the names of the characters whom they cannot recognise; as one of them admits, he "wouldn't have been able to put a name on Joe DiMaggio to be honest, [he] wouldn't have been able to put a name on him until afterwards when [he] read the programme" (aI2, 20). For other plays it is seen as a compensation for their lack of previous knowledge about the historical figure, for instance for participant 3 who admits that he "didn't know about [Plath] at all, although she is well known, [so] the introduction helped [him] to understand what is going on in the play".[14] These reactions indicate that programmes are seen as an important tool for biographical theatre, as they can help to determine the degree to which the plays rely on the world. Where they do not fulfil this role and fail to clarify the historical background, this is interpreted negatively. While participant 2 enjoys the "very clever combination of fact and fiction" in *Insignificance* (aI2, 32), he complains that in the programme he would "like to have seen a bit about each of the characters that were clearly represented on stage [...] It may have been good to mention that Marilyn Monroe did or did not have a higher than average IQ" (aI2, 47). The study therefore suggests that programmes are seen to have no artistic value of their own and are therefore reduced to the function of providing reliable contextual information that can compensate for the spectator's own lack of background knowledge.

When in doubt about the relation between the play and the world, participants tend to give higher authority to the programme notes. Challenged about the authenticity of the situation in *Kafka's Dick*, participant 5 does not argue with the fact that she cannot imagine two people coming back from the dead, but becomes confused and refers to the programme in the first instance: "I can't find anything here [points at the programme] about a couple, I mean, plus it's set in the future" (aK5, 91). Although none of the other participants expresses their confidence in the information given by the programme to the same degree, their reactions also suggest that it is seen as a potential source of factual information, and in this regard to be more reliable than the performance. One could explain this through their textual format, as written texts are linked less closely to the idea of fictionality than theatre performances (cf. Ch. 3). In addition, their role as accompanying material suggests that they serve as a meta-comment on the production. This difference between the programme and the productions can also be observed in the fact that most participants differentiate clearly between the information they have taken from the programme and that given in the play, adding the first immediately into their contextual knowledge, while being cautious about the latter. In one instance, a participant gets confused about a detail in Kafka's life, admitting that she "might have read that in the programme, [but is] not sure" about its origin (aK7, 90), but this is an exceptional occurrence.

---

[14] aL3, 46. Cf. also aV5, 56 and 58: "I particularly liked [Van Gogh's] life history right from when he was born until he died. I liked that a lot. [...] Because it filled in a lot of things which I didn't realise".

The Bi-directional Transfer of Information

Whereas information from the programme thus seems to find entry into the participants' contextual knowledge almost automatically, the possibility of details from the performance entering into a spectator's concept of their life world has to be investigated in more detail. The interview study shows that such a transfer takes place and that the connection to the life world therefore leads to a bi-directional flow of information about a specific context. Although the participants express some reservations, they concede that if they find confirmation that *Vincent* "is meticulously researched", the play "will have changed my opinion about how I thought Vincent was" (aV4, 53 and 55). Others echo this impression of a learning effect: participant 3 claims that he "didn't really know about Sylvia Plath beforehand, now [he] obviously do[es]" (aL3, 4), and participant 1 thinks that in the future she "would draw on the experience from [the play] and use that to inform [her] thinking" about Sylvia Plath (aL1, 21). In spite of their general impression of retaining information from the plays, the process is highly dependent on the kind of information with which they are confronted and the way in which it fits into their contextual knowledge.

One of the areas where the participants had great confidence that the information given in the play also applied to the world outside it is the work of the historical figures. Thus participant 1 sees the comments in *Kafka's Dick* about "the volume of text he actually produced as well, and the fact that there has been a lot written about him" (aK1, 18) as a reliable indication that the historical figure must have been famous. Another participant picks up the title of *The Trial* and its plot as "something about a man waking up and finding that he is a cockroach" (aK4, 70) and expresses an interest in reading it. On occasion, their confidence that information about the work of the character is based on that of the historical figure even applies to cases where it is clearly not connected to any shared contextual knowledge: "but I definitely know more than I did before [...] Well, I just know what he wrote, was it *Crime and Punishment*?" (aK3,28).

In addition to their achievements, participants think that some of the plays, for example *Letters Home*, help them to get "a bit of a sense about what [the biographee] was like as a person" (aL5, 12). While some participants merely confirm general changes with regard to their impression of a subject's personality, others provide specific examples when asked, including, for instance, the idea that Van Gogh was "quite set [...]once he decided to do something he'd do it" (aV5, 60) or "his strong faith" (aV1, 22). In the same way, their relationships with other people are often seen as aspects that can be safely integrated into their contextual knowledge, apparently quite independently from their presentation. Thus the comic presentation of Kafka and his father in Bennett's play does not impede the participants from assuming that the historical Kafka Sr. "was not very nice" (aK7, 88) and that the famous writer "had a repressed childhood possibly" (aK1, 17). Likewise they accept the play's presentation of Kafka as someone who was generally

"quite friendless despite the fact that he seemed to have a very close friend in the play" (aK1, 17).

The same willingness to see relationships as credible elements of sometimes incredible plays can be found in the interviews about *Insignificance*, where various participants share the opinion of participant 7, who believed in "the rocky relationship between Marilyn Monroe and her husband because I think they did divorce" (a7, 54). Nonetheless, just like individual actions of the characters, their relationships with other people are not seen as reflections of those the historical figures had if they contravene the spectator's ideas of probability. Thus the possible affair between Marilyn and Einstein is qualified not as believable by most participants.

Sometimes, the differentiation between elements that are transferred to their life world knowledge and elements which the participants believe to be fictional seems slightly intuitive, as participant 1 observes: "it probably sounds a bit contradictory if I can accept the characters for who they are so believably if it didn't happen" (aI1, 49). Yet, the conversations in the interview study reveal some guidelines for these often unconscious decisions. One of them can be found along the lines of a truth of events and a separate truth of personality. Thus participant 7 admits that she does "not know how much of [*Insignificance*] was actual truth, [but that] it was quite interesting to know what the people were actually like" (aI7, 4), suggesting that she locates the elements that belong to the world and the play mainly on the level of personality. The evaluation of Johnson's play by participant 2 echoes this idea even more directly, when he declares that "the strong thing about this play would be that it's the characters that are based on truth and the scenario, the setting and the situation are based on fiction" (aI2, 34).

Another important factor seems to be the possibility to connect new pieces of information to their existing contextual knowledge. This can be observed particularly well in instances where the participants are not able to make an informed decision. As a result, several of them (participants 3,4,6 in particular) announce their intention to refer to additional material about the historical figures of Van Gogh, Franz Kafka and the models for *Insignificance*, whereas most of the other ones considered the programme to be sufficient for this purpose. Participant 1 expresses similar reservations when she declares that "not knowing much about the history, it does seem an odd scenario that such people should meet" (aI 1, 45), thus indicating that she might evaluate the play differently if she could link it to her concept of the life world. This process of incorporating details from works of art into one's knowledge of the life world is not exclusively reserved to biographical theatre, as an unexpected connection to a film demonstrates. Unfamiliar with Kafka the writer, some participants merely remember the imaginary book title of *Kafka's Motorbike* in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. This had apparently also found its way into the life knowledge of participant 1 as an existing publication, leading to the guess that "he's probably been travelling" (bK1, 37). Inadvertently, the interviews thus illustrate

that the bi-directional flow of information is not unknown to other plays, but the higher reliance on contextual knowledge in biographical theatre suggests that it is much more common in the reception of plays based on historical figures.

Even though the factors which influence the selection of information that is passed on to the spectator's contextual knowledge cannot be defined accurately on the basis of these interviews, the differentiation between characters and events and the connection to existing life knowledge illustrate that this process is not to be mistaken for an overall acceptance of biographical plays as "true" versions of past lives. On the whole, the participants still regard it as "just a piece of fiction" (aV6, 68), an attitude that confirms Daphne Ben Chaim's suggestion that a fiction can only be built when the spectators are conscious of its unreality and that a minimum distance is a necessary condition for the reception of any piece of performed art. At the same time, the clear, though still slightly unpredictable discrimination between elements that the participants regard as trustworthy information about their world and those that remain within the world of the play shows that the difference is widely felt to be important. Participant 5 declares that, after watching part of *Kafka's Dick* she "realised that it was real [and] felt really stupid" (aK5, 22), a fear that is shared by participant 3 who decides to consult other writings about Van Gogh in order to avoid being misinformed by the play, or in his words to make sure that he is not "being stupid" (aV3, 92).

Even if the rules cannot be clearly described yet, the participants nevertheless seem to perceive them as essential and basic enough to give them the impression that they are not knowledgeable when they cannot apply them. Their importance for the reactions of real spectators thus shows the differentiation between what they feel to be fiction and what they see as reflections of the real deserves further attention in future research. In addition to showing the necessity for further research, the analysis has also shown that the model presented in the previous chapters can provide a good basis for such a discussion, as it helps to illustrate several of the characteristics that can be found in the reception of biographical theatre by various spectators, including the close link between the creation of a fiction on the symbolic level and various contextual levels, side effects on other levels of reception and the transfer of information from the play into the life world context.

The Perception of these Plays as Biographical

Although the set up of the interview study does not allow final conclusions about the spectators' perception of these plays as biographical, it is of interest to see how much importance the participants grant to the biographical elements in these plays. With the exception of *Insignificance*, where no names are given, the marketing material leads to the perception of the other plays as being "about" someone: "It sounds like a historical story about Vincent Van Gogh in Brixton" (bV1, 22). Where a biographical reference is provided in the information released before the play, the power of proper names means that they provide the main basis for

the audience's expectations. For some plays, this impression continues to dominate the post-show interviews, often in connection with additional information about the aspect of a life that is shown. This combination can be found for *Vincent in Brixton*, which is seen as "a portrayal of the life and times of Vincent van Gogh when he came to London" (aL2, 60), or in *Letters Home*, in the eyes of the participants a play "about the poet Sylvia Plath and how she descends into depression" (aL6, 58). For *Kafka's Dick*, on the other hand, the summaries changed significantly after the performance. One participant describes it as "a crazy comedy with a tortoise running across the stage" (aL1, 51) and other one claims that he does not think his "knowledge about Kafka added anything to the play that we saw on stage" (aK2, 13). Thus where the biographical link is not emphasised by other elements of a play, the elements of life stories can become secondary, leading to a different classification of these plays.

The range of different opinions reflects the variety of different forms of biographical theatre, and illustrates that the participants are conscious of it. Despite recognising the use of biographical material as the common denominator of the performances included in the interview study (cf. aL4, 80; aL6, 58; aL3, 62; aL2, 62; aL1, 47), they recognise the variation of biographical theatre, as well as a range of different reasons for using a historical character. Participant 2, for instance, remarks that using a historical character is "a clever way of writing a variation on a theme and to get people to come and see it" (aV2, 47), others see funny potential in the mixture of characters that are based on historical figures and unlikely situations as in *Insignificance* (cf. aL4, 78) or the chance for writers to present a personal take on a figure of the past.[15] In addition to different degrees of reliance on contextual knowledge and of their impact onto the spectators' life world, the participants also classify biographical theatre consciously as a varied form of theatre. This leads to their evaluation according to a range of different factors: *Letters Home*, for example, is harshly criticised because "it could easily have been performed on the radio or it could have been read in a book" (aL2, 6), in other words, because it was felt to be inadequate on a theatrical level. Another participant arrives at contrary conclusions, declaring that he likes the play because he feels engaged by the biographical events in it and because of the fact that she "had so many interesting things going on in such a short life and such highs and lows. I thought that was good" (aL3, 12). As it can be assumed that the different descriptions and evaluations of the plays, just as their reception, depend on the way in which biographical material is used in them, it would be interesting to relate these results back to the participants' impression of individual elements of a performance. Such an undertaking could also give an insight into the spectators' general opinions about biography on stage and on the page.

---

[15] Cf. aL 2, 60: "it's Bennett's take on the life of Franz Kafka."

Meta-Biography

In the present study, the participants' points of view on this issue are further investigated on the basis of their reactions to metabiographical material in *Kafka's Dick*. As these aspects are rather played down in the production at the Derby Playhouse, the interviews contain only a small number of reactions to them. Therefore other explicit remarks made about the use of biography in theatre and its reception, made in interviews about other plays are added. Due to this lack of emphasis on metabiographical concerns in the production only one participant raises this issue, stating that the play "does pose the question of whether what we know is totally one-sided" (aK2, 15). None of the other participants approaches the topic without specific questioning from the interviewer. In reaction to this, several of them describe Herman K's behaviour as being "more bothered about how he looks" (aK4, 58), but do not relate this to more general issues regarding biography. Instead they see it as "just him [Sydney] and Herman trying to come up with a plan that would make one famous and the other one sound better" (aK6, 35). Despite their apparent lack of interest in the issue, further questions about the trustworthiness of these characters as witnesses to Kafka's life (in which the difference between the historical Kafka and the character is not addressed specifically) reveal that the participants take a clear stance, which can be interpreted in a wider context. Thus participant 7 gives Sydney little authority as a biographer, because "you can't really understand someone from reading their work or reading biographies on them, because obviously different people have different perceptions about people" (aK7, 46). Similarly, the idea that "Max Brod was the guy who ultimately made Kafka, without Max Brod there is no Kafka" (aK2, 24) shows that participant 2 is aware of the important role played by the biographer in the making of a biographical subject. Still, all of these observations are made with reference to the concrete situation in the play, they are not detached from the material presented and applied to biography in general.

Although this seems to suggest that reflection about biographical writing is not of great interest to the participants, their reluctance to generalise can also be explained by a different approach to theatre. In contrast to academics in the humanities, they are less trained – and interested – in observing the underlying systems of belief that govern the concrete actions of people and their reaction to art. Therefore they are less likely to turn their observations about a specific performance into general observations about the state of biography and their understanding of it. From an academic perspective, on the other hand, their statements can be seen as expressions of a general understanding of issues related to life-writing. Returning to the two examples quoted above, this means that participant 7 is conscious of the limitations of biographers who only have access to their subjects through their work and historical documents, while participant 2 appreciates the impact a biographer has on the presentation of his subject. The reactions *Kafka's Dick* do not only reveal that this production is not an ideal object of study then, but also shows that the examination of spectators' reactions to metabiographical elements necessarily differ from the academic description presented in previous chapters.

In order to trace possible changes in the participants' understanding of life-writing indirectly in their remarks about specific examples of biographical performance, their comments on the other plays are included in the analysis. Many of them reveal a diversity of opinions that supports the idea of a situation that is characterised by changing attitudes and epistemological variety that has been established on the basis of theoretical texts (cf. Ch. 2). The question of historical accuracy demonstrates this: some participants see it as a vital criterion, as for example participant 5. Feeling confused by *Insignificance* and its mixture of biographical references and improbable inventions, she declares that it could only make sense to her if "it was something that had happened in history" (aI5, 24). Her opinion is partly shared by participant 1, who declares that if she was told now that *Letters Home* "was fake [she] might be quite disappointed now, because [she] did believe it" (aL1, 21). Though not a general expectation, she thus confirms that the use of Plath's own letters in the play leads to this sense of an obligation to authenticity. Most other participants on the other hand, confirm that even if they were not "sure how much of [*Insignificance*] was actually based on facts or not, [...] it didn't really affect the way [they] perceived or enjoyed things" (aI4, 20). Similar views are expressed about other plays, such as *Vincent*, where participant 3 would "be interested to find out" how much of it is based on historical documents, "but [where] as far as the story goes that wouldn't bother [him] at all" (aV3, 106). Participant 2 even declares that he prefers a theatre production to "go totally off what's written and use their own ideas rather than trying to keep rooted in what has already been done" (aL2, 13). Their opinions thus range from seeing it as "an educational experience" with "enjoyment as well" (aV5, 78) to a theatre experience that can be enjoyed independently from its relation to the world, a diversity that seems not just influenced by the contradicting traditions of biography and theatre, but also by different attitudes towards biography and its purpose.

Their attitudes towards historical accuracy also reveal different degrees of flexibility with which they react to the references to contextual knowledge in the plays. While some participants express pleasure in "learn[ing] things about the[se famous people] that you wouldn't have known otherwise" (aL4, 82), they are easily capable of differentiating between elements they include into their contextual knowledge and those they consider to be invented. Participant 2 even declares that he "liked [*Insignificance* for] the fact that it was a very unbelievable scenario presented as a nice believable story" (aI2, 4), as this uncertainty and unexpectedness of these contrasting elements makes the play exciting. Likewise, participant 3 sees in it "something that's a bit different" which makes the audience "listen more closely" (aI3, 68). Their appreciation of a situation in which they cannot use a simple mode of reading that either takes everything in a play to be based on contextual knowledge or to be entirely independent from it suggests that they are comfortable employing various reception strategies within one play. Seeing *Insignificance* as "a clever combination of fact and fiction" (aI2, 32), these spectators also demonstrate their own capability and willingness to deal with contrasting indications in the

play. Participant 5's confusion about the combination of biographical and invented elements, on the other hand, suggests that she is less flexible in her reactions to these, and that she therefore prefers to approach a play with a single, clear-cut mode of reading, based either on a high degree of similarity between the world and the play or on their complete separation.

Relating their positions back to those found in theoretical texts, participant 5's stance can be compared to a positivist attitude, in which texts are clearly classified. The opinions expressed by participants 2 and 3, on the other hand, echo the less rigid and often playful way found in postmodern approaches. Nonetheless, the latter do not abandon all distinction between elements that exist in both the life world and the theatre and those that are unique to the fiction created in a play. They merely shift the differentiation from the level of the whole play to individual elements in it. The role of the author[16] is also changed and he is praised for his "very clever idea[s]" (aI3, 67) that lead to new combinations, a clear sign that he is no longer expected to be a neutral agent of reconstruction. Despite this new understanding, the participants do not absolve him of all responsibility and state clearly that they do not expect the plays to "have been written with the name of someone that famous and then completely not [to] have any proper link to them" (aK4, 72). Simply ignoring the biographical reference created is seen as "very easy" (aI2, 30). Their task in biographical theatre is thus not seen to be equal to that expected of playwrights who do not use biographical references; if they ignore the link which they create, they are perceived to be inconsistent. In their diversity, the opinions of spectators thus echo those expressed in theoretical writings. At the same time, they introduce new limits for the acceptance of the ideas often associated with post-modernism and various results of this study suggest that these are related to trans-world identity of recognisable historical figures. The participants are not only keen to see playwrights respect the biographical link they create (cf. above), they are also more inclined to regard the information about the characters and their core characteristics as worthy to be included into their contextual knowledge. Moreover, their intentions to verify some of the information given in the play with the help of other documents are mainly directed at the historical lives[17]. When participant 3 states that he "would like to find out" more, he immediately specifies that he would "quite like to see more about Kafka" (aK3, 93), and others specify directly that they are "interested in going and finding out things about **them**" (aL4, 82; bold UC). The idea that historical characters are not expected to share information with recognisable models from the life world and at the same time adopt new characteristics randomly at the will of the author has to be investigated further. Although the hypothesis is supported by many of the reactions collected in this reception study, it has to be

---

[16] Most participants automatically gave responsibility to the establishment of biographical references to the playwrights. In order to avoid further complications and to explore their idea of authorship in life-writing, the collaborative production in theatre is not brought into this discussion. Nevertheless it would be interesting to follow this up in order to find out about their idea of the process of making theatre.

[17] In this context it is interesting to note that the same desire seems to have existed among 18th century audiences. According to Stauffer. 1940, plays about exotic and other monarchs were accompanied by a profitable business with short biographical texts at the time.

tested in the context of plays such as *Early Morning* that challenge this unity to a greater degree. Nevertheless, it provides an interesting interpretation that could lead to more predictable patterns to the varying degrees of reliance on the extra-theatrical life world in the creation and reception of biographical drama.

Instead of concluding with this hypothesis about the basis for the participants' reactions, however, I would like to return to the way in which the study gives support to the explanation of the reception of biographical theatre provided by the combined model presented in chapter 9. At the beginning of this chapter, its appropriateness has been established on the basis of the participants' immediate reactions to the performances, but in conclusion to this analysis, I would like to show how their comments on their own behaviour also confirm it on a meta-level. The reliance on contextual knowledge is clearly formulated and generally evaluated positively, as it offers them an additional link to the play: if "the audience are given something that they already know something about [...] that [...] makes it very attractive to the audience as it means that they can relate to it more" (aI2, 40). The consequences of this reliance on contextual material, which according to them gives "the characters just that extra little bit of substance" (aI6, 83) and makes them "more like people, I suppose, three-dimensional as opposed to just characters on stage" (aI6, 71) are outlined as well. Going one step further than the model where this connection is merely described, the participants also illustrate its effect on an emotional level. Seeing the characters as reflections of real human beings, as "people who existed experiencing something similar", makes them feel, according to participant 1, "a greater empathy with him [Vincent van Gogh]" (aV1, 57). A similar recognition of the subjects' experiences as not merely possible, but actual also underlies the statement by participant 6, who states that "it made [her] feel for them more, especially for Marilyn Monroe", although she does not "know if this about the baby is true, [...] that made [her] feel really sad for her" (aI6, 54). These statements show that the participants are often conscious of the changes to their perception that are introduced with the use of biographical references, but it remains to be seen whether the degree of awareness has an effect on their reception, for example in the form of a greater flexibility with regard to changes in the mode of perception. This and other questions raised in the context of the analysis have to be examined in further research, just as the results of this study with a limited scope have to be confirmed on the basis of a greater amount of data before they can be regarded as representative. Nevertheless, they offer a first understanding of the different effect that is introduced by the use of life-writing in plays. Although this is hard to explain theoretically, unless one ignores postmodern challenges to the understanding of knowledge and the relationship between the world and various discourses about it, the previous chapters clearly show that such a difference is made both by practitioners and the spectators included in this study.

Chapter 11: Other Reactions to Biographical Plays

Further confirmation of the differences between biographical plays and those that do not contain such a close link to the life world can be given by other documented reactions to the use of life-writing in theatre. It is therefore important to include further sources of information about the perception of biography in theatre into this discussion,[1] in order to confirm the appropriateness of the model established in chapter 9 and to refine our understanding of this process. Newspaper reviews and articles are particularly useful in this context, as they constitute one of the best-documented and most accessible resources. In addition to providing a good basis for a comparison between the participants' views and the reactions of critics with regard to some of the key aspects of the model of reception, they offer an opportunity to approach the question of why the effect of biographical plays is different through the exploration of the potential for controversy in some of the plays.

Nonetheless, some differences between the interviews and the articles and reviews have to be taken into account. The most important distinction is the previous theatre experience and motivation of the respective audience members: professional theatre critics or journalists do not only bring much more theatre knowledge and experience, but also the particular perspective of a value judgement to the plays. As a consequence, they are more likely to have done more research into the biographical characters before writing about a play, and have to adapt their comment to various practical concerns, such as the required number of words.[2] In comparison, the articles can therefore be regarded as less immediate and comprehensive than the recorded conversations with the participants.

The main advantage offered by reviews offer is certainly their high number, together with the variety of performances covered by them. In addition to this, they often contain descriptions, as critics cannot automatically assume that their readers have seen a performance, whereas the participants were conscious that the interviewer had witnessed the same performance as they did. The descriptions that are provided by some reviewers as the context for their evaluation of the performance are not just a good source of information about individual aspects of the production, but some of them also help to reveal what knowledge is brought to it by the critics and how this influences their reactions. In the first part of this chapter, the quotations taken from reviews are limited to a small number of representative examples that illustrate the similarities to the observations made in the analysis of the interviews.

---

[1] Van Niekerk describes such an effort of using "multiple sources to obtain evidence on the same phenomenon" as "triangulation" (Van Niekerk. 2001, 138).
[2] Cf. for example Patrick Marmion's description of the imitation of Freud's study (Marmion. 2000, 1395).

A Comparison of the Reactions of Critics and Students

Similarly to the interviews, many reviews clearly illustrate this recourse to a specific and narrow context of knowledge related to the life world, for example, in Ian John's remark that, "knowing this young man's suicidal fate makes even the most mundane gestures [in *Vincent in Brixton*] carry a tragic air" (Johns. 2002, 1051). As the play's character does not commit suicide, such a feeling of tragedy can only be provoked by the transfer of historical information about the painter Van Gogh onto the character Vincent in Nicholas Wright's play. Although most critics seem to make this connection on the basis of names, some reviews of *Insignificance* show that an accumulation of other similarities can also suffice. Two of the reviewers even provide a concrete list of the elements which they seem to consider necessary for this process of recognition when they recreate the guessing game of the play in their reviews, giving the following hints: the physical appearance and the work of the Actress and the Professor, her voice and her connection to a famous baseball player, and the political agenda of the professor (cf. Mark. 1982, 384 and Cushman. 1982, 381).

Once they have established this connection, the factors that influence it also seem to be similar to those that are outlined in the analysis of the interviews. In the context of *Vincent in Brixton*, various reviewers comment on the fact that, although seemingly "everything's for real" in the production, the play is nevertheless "a matter of speculation, cooked up from reading between the lines of the letters Vincent van Gogh sent to his brother Theo" (Brown. 2002, 547), a comment that shows their feeling that the style of the presentation contradicts the hypothetical nature of the events presented. Unlike the participants, the critics' impression of the degree of formal intra- or extra-theatricality is based on a greater spectrum of observations, which often includes the lighting, an element that is mainly ignored by the interviewees. Thus Nicholas de Jongh sees fault in the 1995 production of *Hysteria*, due to inappropriate "realistic lighting [which] misguidedly conceals the fact that the play [...] consists of Freud's hallucinatory visions" (De Jongh 1995, 1634). Though based on different elements of a production, the effect of the style of presentation on their impression of the relation between the play and the world is nevertheless comparable.

Adherence to their idea of the historical figure is also a key factor, which is revealed in Benedict Nightingale's rhetorical question: "Would you believe James Joyce dancing about spouting saucy rhymes or pulling exotic scarves from a hat?" (Nightingale. 1993b, 1048). The idea that the reception of biographical theatre is characterised by a stronger reliance on a specific area of biographical contextual knowledge, which is influenced by a range of different factors, including the style of presentation and the compatibility of the historical character with their previous idea of the model on which it is based, is thus supported by the reviews as well.

On the artistic level, their appreciation of the actors' skills of imitation is prominent in their choice of words: Kenneth Hurren, for example, likes the acting in *St. Oscar* because "Stephen Rea [...] **captures** all the man's extravagant posturing" (Hurren. 1990, 333; bold UC), and

Alastair Macauly applauds Matthew March for "**catch**[ing] with extraordinary impetus and absorption, the many ambiguous facets of Heisenberg" (Macauly. 1999, 149, bold UC). The emphasis on accent as a key aspect of a biographical performance also echoes the findings in the interview.[3]

A clear difference between the two groups can, however, be found in with regard to their perception of meta-levels. The higher frequency of comments on metabiographical elements in reviews may be explained, at least partly, by the fact that the only play with a self-reflexive component discussed in the interview study does not emphasise this aspect very much, while there are many reviews on clearly metabiographical plays available in newspapers. Alternatively the critics' greater inclination to abstract from individual cases and to produce more general statements about history, biography and their presentation on stage can be explained by their role as experts who are less focussed on their individual theatre experience, and more on theatre as a cultural phenomenon that is influenced by a broader framework. Just like their heightened willingness to apply symbolic readings, this greater tendency towards meta-biographical reflection could be seen to stem from a stronger impact of cultural and conventional contexts on their perception. On the basis of their greater experience with theatre and its convention of levels of truth other than that of correspondence, they appear to consider departures from a high degree of formal extra-theatricality to be less interruptive than the interview participants. A good example of this is the interpretation of a black Mozart as an outsider of society instead of regarding it as an interruption of the biographical mode of reading (cf. p. 121), even if the physical appearance of the actors has been identified as a key aspect of this link.

Attitudes towards Authenticity

Such a prevalence of the conventional and cultural context could also explain why some critics explicitly praise plays for breaking the boundaries of strong formal extra-theatricality. Hugo Williams, for example, claims that "after all the impersonations it is marvellous to see Oscar Wilde come alive in the unlikely person of Stephen Rea" (Williams. 1990, 334), putting more emphasis on his credibility and liveliness as a dramatic character than outward similarities to the famous writer. The same preference is shown with regard to other aspects of a production, for example in the praise for Michael Frayn's scripting in which he "wisely [...] picked one aspect of Brandt's life through which to refract his story" (Anon. 2004e), or in the criticism that Claire Tomalin has failed to adapt her writing to this form of writing.[4]

This interpretation is, however, countered by the equally high number of reviews and other articles in which other critics express their dissatisfaction with productions on the ground of historical inaccuracies. David Grant, for instance, explicitly deplores that "Friel himself only

---

[3] Examples of critics' reactions to the accents of actors can be found on in Chapter 7.
[4] "Tomalin observes with the acute eye of the biographer, but isn't entirely successful in making the leap of imagination necessary to turn this from a literary exercise into a theatrical event" (Gardner. 1991, 279).

lightly laments having taken liberties with the historical 'truth'" in *The Making of History*.[5] This division shows that the group of journalists, just as the group of interviewees, is divided on the question of the relationship between play with biographical references. While most of the similarities between the two groups and even some of the differences, such as the higher degree of reliance on levels of context other than the life world, confirm once more that the proposed model of reception can be considered to be appropriate, the great variety of opinions on historical authenticity among the critics poses a certain problem to the interpretation given in the previous chapter. It has been suggested that the participants' different ability to accept changes in the mode of reading applied to the same performance can be partly explained by their familiarity with theatre (cf. page 196). For critics, who are, in a sense, professional spectators and commentators, this explanation is not very convincing. This does not mean that contextual knowledge related to theatre does not influence the audience's expectations with regard to the relationship between the world and the play, but it suggests that other factors might also make an impact.

Controversial Plays

A possible approach could be based on an interesting division found among the articles and reviews: whereas those for some plays differ significantly with regard to their emphasis on authenticity versus theatricality, those for a few other productions unanimously emphasise the question of historical credibility. In some of them, the praise for "magnetic staging" is even seen as criticism, because, according to the reviewer, only insight into the historical figure could have provided a valid justification for writing a play about a Nazi official.[6] The degree of responsibility imposed by the introduction of a biographical reference, thus also seems to be related to the historical figure evoked in a play and its potential for controversy. This could explain why a play in which Hitler appears on stage and where a Nazi supporter is given a voice is seen as controversial and therefore is subjected to stricter notions of historical credibility. In order to explore these differences further, the following sections present and analyse reactions to three productions that have provoked intense and sometimes even fierce debates about the degree to which they reflect the past and the lives of historical figures. Following a short presentation of the arguments provoked by *Amadeus*, *Albert Speer* and *Copenhagen*, I examine possible conclusions about the reception of biographical plays that may be derived from these controversies.

---

[5] Grant. 1988, 1699. Cf. also Koenig. 1990 who criticises the use of a painting on the curtain on the grounds that Wilde's biographers do not see it as equally central to his life.
[6] Clapp. 2000, 685 about *Albert Speer*.

Amadeus

Chronologically, *Amadeus* is the first of these plays. After its premiere in 1979, James Fenton attacked the play in the *Sunday Times*, claiming that the vile language Shaffer gave to the character of the composer was inappropriate and reflected more on the playwright than on his biographee.[7] The heated discussion that followed these accusations is still evoked in many reviews of more recent productions of the play, for instance by Georgina Brown, who begins her review with a reminder that "twenty years ago audiences were outraged at Peter Shaffer's caricature of Mozart as an obnoxious enfant terrible" (Brown. 1998b, 1387). Moreover, Shaffer's presentation of Mozart and the ensuing debate have moved from the realm of theatrical criticism into the public sphere and influenced the general debate about the Austrian composer: the playwright claims that although "surprisingly there were not all that many biographies, [...] there have been many more since Amadeus appeared" (quoted in Anon. 1998, 47), and the play is often mentioned as a document that argues for an alternative presentation of Mozart. In the announcement of a BBC documentary about the musician, for instance, the hypothesis that he was not the angel-like musical child prodigy as many people imagine is introduced with the following words: "It was a theme that ran through Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, later made into a film starring Tom Hulce as the composer. Although there were many fictional elements in both, Shaffer **accurately caught** Mozart's love of coarse behaviour" (Anon. 2004c, bold UC). When a new translation of Mozart's letters is published, the playwright uses the opportunity to "point[...] out that the language he ascribed to Mozart was accurate" (Anon. 2000c, 5), a statement that is countered by Fenton in the same article. Admitting that the language used in the play might be appropriate, he nevertheless insists that the interpretation of it was not as Shaffer "used the obscene words to define the character of the composer" (Anon. 2000c, 5).

In addition to the controversy about the portrayal of Mozart, the presentation of his rival Salieri has also caused many debates in which the historical and the theatrical are no longer distinguished. One journalist uses an article about a new release of a recording of Salieri's music to point out that the composer's art is often under-estimated and cites *Amadeus* as an example where his achievements are played down on purpose in order to make Mozart shine more. Although he concedes that "it was a work of fiction. The playwright was not on oath when he wrote it. Salieri was dead and could not sue",[8] he clearly uses this piece of "fiction", rather than historical documents as the basis for his vindication of Salieri's music. In both cases, the initial anxiety about the accuracy of the historical characters has turned the play into a piece of nearly historical evidence that is used in debates about the two composers that are not directly

---

[7] The argument is summarised in Anon. 2000c, 5.

[8] Anon. 2003. Although most historical figures cannot sue themselves, *Brecht's Women* shows that legal action is not entirely impossible. Annie Castledine remembers that "the piece was thought to be so provocative by the Brecht estate that it had an injunction slapped upon it and we were forced to play it underground" (Giannachi and Luckhurst. 1999, 9).

related to productions of Shaffer's play or their theatrical treatment. On the contrary, few of the texts which refer to it explicitly mention that they see it as a piece of fiction, such as the author of the last quotation. Through the controversy, *Amadeus* is thus regarded to have achieved a status that differs significantly from that of other plays.

Copenhagen

A similar effect, though on a greater scale, accompanies the success of Frayn's *Copenhagen*. The discussion about Heisenberg's visit to the Bohrs in 1941 is not resolved by the characters in the play, but the presentation of various versions has clearly sparked new interest in the debate. Previously held mainly among historians, the interest is extended to a more general public, for example in the form of newspaper articles that present the material on which the play is based (e.g. Anon. 2002c). It can also be observed in the number of symposia held on the meeting in Copenhagen,[9] which are often characterised by an interesting combination of speakers. At the University of New York, for example, a symposium called *Copenhagen* includes presentations in the areas of science, history and theatre studies, thus bringing together the physicists' work, their biographies and the use of these biographies in productions of Michael Frayn's play (cf. Lustig and Schwartz). Furthermore the play has led to new developments in the realm of biographical research. Finn Aaserud from the Bohr archives explains the decision to publish some letters written by Bohr as follows:

> In particular, the play has renewed and strengthened an already intense debate among historians of science about why Heisenberg came to Copenhagen and what transpired at the meeting. In the course of this debate, reference has been made to a draft of a letter to Heisenberg about the meeting that Bohr never sent. By making the documents accessible on the Internet we forgo the normal archival practice of making material available to scholars on application. This decision has been motivated by the high level of interest as well as the wish of the Bohr family to present the material as a whole (Aaserud. 2002).

On an even bigger level than *Amadeus*, which according to Peter Shaffer has given rise to an increase in the publication of biographies on Mozart, *Copenhagen* has thus exercised an influence on the course of events outside the play, shaping the way in which these historical lives are seen. Consequently, it is regarded to have acquired the status of a document in the historical debate – one that is even included in a bibliography about Niels Bohr (cf. Ottaviani and Leland Purvis. 2004).

Just like *Amadeus*, *Copenhagen* is grated a different status, a change that is also reflected in the number of comments on the playwright's versions of the events and the historical figures. A great number of people have published their opinions at conferences, in newspaper articles and letters to the editors, both defending and attacking Frayn's point of view. Unlike the comments on *Amadeus*, however, the reactions are not only directed at Frayn's interpretation of the two

---

[9] The New York University Graduate Centre who devotes a website to the phenomenon gives a list of no less than 7 symposia on the theme, cf. University of New York. 2005.

physicists, but also the historical context. Stressing the connection to other important historical events, particularly to Nazi Germany, they connect this information to the characters in the play. As a consequence, the presentation of a historical figure that is related to this regime, in which this person is not utterly and unreservedly condemned, has caused strongly-worded attacks on the playwright. In Tom Paulin's words "Heisenberg was a Nazi sympathiser, his return to Germany proves that. His actions cannot be excused. Frayn does not possess the ethical intelligence to see this" (Paulin. 2002). At a conference on the topic, Frayn is even accused of "subtle revisionism . . . more destructive than [David] Irving's self- evidently ridiculous assertions - more destructive of the integrity of art, of science, and of history".[10] More distanced and neutral in tone than Peter Shaffer, Frayn defends himself against these accusations in a similar way, i.e. by citing historical documents that support his interpretations of the events.[11] Despite the affirmation that the past cannot be reconstructed as it was in the play, he thus accepts the fact that his writing is read as a historical document and answers his critics on the basis of the assumption that it can actually be read as such. Such a reaction could appear to be even more necessary, as the attacks against him extend to other areas of history and raise clearly ethical questions about the way in which historical evil doers can be presented on stage. For those who do not agree with his interpretation of the events, his choice undermines the moral integrity of the playwright.

Speer

A similar connection to ethical problems can be found in the context of *Albert Speer*. Even before the production, its potential for controversy becomes evident in newspaper publications: in addition to the historical figure named in the title, who is highly contentious himself, one critic observes that the "chief interest was always going to be the portrait of Hitler" (Gore-Langton. 2000, 684). Many reactions to the production at the National Theatre confirm the idea that not just the treatment but the mere choice of these historical figures is regarded as problematic. In addition to the voices that condemn the play for casting Speer "as the victim, not only of his ambition but of his love for Hitler, [a] dangerous distortion of truth" (Anon. 2000b, 12), others declare that they have problems with the idea of giving Speer a forum to state his ideas, an approach that could, for them, only be justified by "insight, analysis and revelation" (Clapp. 2000, 685).

Interestingly, the sentiment of a greater responsibility that is attached to some historical figures is expressed equally by the authors of the play. In a newspaper interview, Gitta Sereny justifies her approach on the basis of her objective of making history understandable (and thus repetitions avoidable, one could add): "if you don't show the human Hitler you cannot understand why the Germans loved him" (Anon. 2000a, 3). In the light of the discussion of

---

[10] Quoted from Frayn's article Frayn. 2002, 22. Further reference to this statement made by Paul Lawrence Rose at a conference can be found in Anon. 2002

[11] For the most complete answers to his critics, cf. Frayn. 2002.

controversial reactions to *Copenhagen* and *Amadeus*, it could be assumed that this feeling of the obligation to use the portrayal in order to give insight into the past is based on the knowledge that biographical plays can be understood as documents that convey information about a historical character. A positive presentation of either Albert Speer or even Hitler, could then, be used as a vindication in their favour, and the play could mark an important step towards a change in their reputation (as *Amadeus* became important for contemporary ideas about Mozart). The lack of a well-defined line between fact and fiction in plays – a line that can hardly be defined theoretically in other areas either, but which is nevertheless felt to exist by many people and which guides their behaviour in everyday life – thus leads to fears that the "wrong" elements may be integrated into the spectators' life world knowledge.

The article quoted above expresses this fear directly when it locates the danger of *Albert Speer* in the possibility that, "rather than relying on the living eyewitness testimony of the participants, audiences trust film and theatre as the source of the truth" (Anon. 2000b, 12). Even though most critics would not agree with the polemical style and the simplistic defence of a moral high ground in this particular article, similar concerns also underlie more moderate opinions – the impression that either a playful variation of the degree of extra-theatricality, or even a highly inventive treatment of a historical character is inappropriate in some cases as it can read to unacceptable mis-readings is not limited to the popular press.

Under these circumstances, the responsibilities of the playwright and the production team are altered as well, and criticism of the plays can often go beyond aesthetic judgements. Peter Shaffer complains that some of the people who were discontent about the presentation of the composer seemed to accuse him of conspiring to "'murder Mozart's character'" (Anon. 2000c, 5), and the reactions to Michael Frayn extend his reputation as a playwright to an attack on his morality when he is accused of being a Nazi apologist (cf. above).

Possible Ethical Concerns

While the consequences of these perceived differences between historical characters are clearly visible, the reasons for them are less well-defined. Although most critics seem to agree on the potential for controversy of individual historical figures, no explicit reason is given for their evaluations. On the basis of the examples discussed in the previous chapter, it could be suggested that the concern with the presentation of figures of the past seems to be fuelled by questions of justice. In the case of *Amadeus* critics of the play feel that it does not do justice to the historical figures on whom the characters are built, nor to their music. This could be seen to be related to the idea of slandering, a concept that shows that the idea of an obligation to portray people correctly is found in other areas of society and culture as well. For the other two plays, the main concern is the question whether justice is done to those around the historical figures. As both of the plays have a link to the Nazi government through the characters, a physicist who is connected to it through his nationality and place of residence (Heisenberg) and two key

players in the dictatorship respectively (Hitler and Speer), the critics of these plays feel that a presentation that makes these perpetrators appear to be less harmful than they were affects the memory of the countless victims of their regime.[12] Such an idea of doing justice to people can provide an explanation of why biographical theatre is judged not merely on its aesthetic values, but also according to ethical principles that determine how individuals or recognisable imitations of them may be shown on stage. In addition to the spectators' capacity to apply different modes of reception to a play, their perception is thus further limited by considerations related to this idea of moral limitations. This concept could thus explain better why introducing unexpected elements can seem funny in the context of some historical personalities, while the same procedure can cause controversy for others.

The ethical concerns described above are dependent on the historical characters and the contextual knowledge that can be evoked by the recognition of a historical figure in a stage character. Controversy can thus only be provoked where spectators have sufficient information about the relevant life in order to judge whether the performance does justice to the subject or those related to him. Where they can recognise this, their decision whether it is of utmost importance that this justice is achieved has to be based on further considerations of this past life. While extensive research is necessary in order to describe the basis for these decisions, a possible hypothesis is that one possible influence on this decision is the degree to which misrepresentation is felt to cause human pain. This is also suggested by David Barnett: arguing in favour of a post-dramatic staging of *Copenhagen*, he nevertheless admits that the fact "that Hiroshima is also mentioned substantiates the real historical stakes [in] the play. [It] is not an 'easy' musing on postmodern epistemology" (Barnett. 2005, 146). His doubts thus seem to be related to the experience of the victims of the attacks that were done with the bomb to whose creation the scientists indirectly contributed.

Despite the fact that this is far from being an absolute criterion, there is still a great amount of consent with regard to the decisions about the (in)appropriateness of versions of the past, and these shared attitudes towards history could thus explain why it is often predictable whether plays will be granted the freedom to experiment with the relationship between the play and the world or not, while deviations from the moral consensus can account for the different positions taken in controversies over individual plays. The necessity to avoid human pain through misrepresentation that could violate the sense of respect for individual human experience might therefore be a further factor that influences the reception of biographical theatre.

As a consequence, these published reactions to biographical plays do not just confirm the mode of reception established on the basis of the theoretical model and the interview study. They also suggest the need for further research into ethical concerns that introduce further factors that

---

[12] Similar concerns are discussed in the context of concepts of the self and accountability in Holocaust biographies in Tridgell. 2004, 91 – 99.

shape the perception of historical characters. If these rules are indeed based on the idea that misrepresentation of human experience can cause disappointment and pain for those that are directly or indirectly involved in them, none of the plays that are used for the interview study is likely to cause much controversy. Most of the historical figures portrayed in them are dead, and their immediate relatives are not very likely to come across these productions,[13] nor does any of them propagate any outrageous **and** probable ideas about the models for their character.[14] It is therefore not possible to make further enquiries that could support or contest the idea of this ethical principle within this group.

This means that further research will be needed in order to explore the validity of this suggestion in more detail and to connect it to other discourses about the presentation of individuals in different cultural contexts. Despite its status as a hypothesis, the idea is nevertheless interesting, as it could provide an explanation for the differentiation between plays that present a fictional world that is only loosely connected to the life world and plays in which both worlds share many characteristics. Ethical concerns could then explain why the theoretical postulate of the dissolution of the dichotomy of fact and fiction is not reflected in the way in which biographical theatre is made and received. While a functional approach allows a description of this situation, the idea of further factors that are motivated by the consideration of the potential effect that biographical plays may have in the life world points ahead to a possible explanation of it.

---

[13] The only exception is *Letters Home*, where Aurelia Plath was directly involved in the writing process and Ted Hughes was alive at the time of the first productions. As a student production, this particular performance is, however, not very likely to cause an uproar.

[14] It could be assumed that alternative versions have to possess a certain degree of probability in order to cause anxiety over possible misinterpretations.

Chapter 12: Conclusions and Further Research

The Insight Gained in this Thesis

Before possible steps for further research into the role of ethical concerns and other aspects are discussed, a short recapitulation of the insights gained in this thesis can outline the point of departure for new approaches. The relationship between biographical plays and the life world is at the heart of the enquiry, and the first section of the thesis examines the origin and the consequences of this close link between the two on the production of biographical plays. With the help of texts that describe references to the past in other discourses, such as historiography or biography, it provides a range of different models for this relationship, including the idea of a faithful reconstruction on the one hand, and on the other that of a narrative that cannot claim a higher degree of authenticity because it is strongly influenced by the perspective of the author and the relativism of language. In the analysis of individual scripts, the two extremes are echoed in the attempt to model the play as a reflection of past lives in the life world to the highest possible degree, or in the use of elements that raise questions about biography. The scripts can thus be seen to reflect the theoretical discourses that are presented both with regard to their great variety, as well as with regard to individual concepts, linking dramatic writing firmly to other areas of cultural practice or reflection that deal with past events or lives. A comparative analysis of a number of biographical plays outlines various ways in which the impression of historical authenticity can be heightened, diminished or questioned, showing how the concepts are expressed in the language of the theatre and providing a point of comparison for a more detailed discussion of individual plays in the future. On this basis it establishes some recurring patterns in biographical performances, such as the use of a few recognisable token elements, whose power to bestow credibility extends beyond themselves to other aspects of the play, or the effect of formal extra-theatricality.

In addition, the first section suggests that playwrights and other theatre practitioners use a double standard for their work with historical characters. Whereas only a few of them adhere to the idea of reconstructionist biography, countered on stage by the poetic license which it inherits from a dramatic tradition, many practitioners are more sceptical about the idea of absolutes such as fact and fiction. In spite of this, they often operate under the premise that they bear a higher responsibility for the presentation of historical figures, a concept that is somewhat surprisingly reminiscent of that of a hybrid form situated between fact and fiction. Although seldom directly informed by them, their practice shows divisions and contradictions that are similar to those presented in the context of theories of history and biography.

In the second part, the study of reactions to biographical plays offers a more detailed account of this continuing notion of hybridity. On the one hand it shows that spectators differentiate between elements that they regard as exclusively valid in the world of the play and elements that they recognise from their life world. On the other hand, they do not apply these categorisations

to the performance as a whole, but merely to individual elements of it – the categories are no longer valid in their previous form as classifications for entire works, nor are they necessarily felt to be absolutes as they change depending on their concept of their contextual knowledge. The consequences of this decision can be observed both in the reception process, as these spectators rely to a high degree on specific information from the life world, but also in the use that is made of the information given in the play. Where it is felt to be valid in both worlds, its flow can become bi-directional and it can be integrated into their contextual knowledge. Finally, the last chapter suggests that this effect could be the source for ethical concerns and controversies about the presentation of some historical figures. These results suggest that a functional approach offers an appropriate framework for the discussion of biographical drama. In contrast to the seemingly unsolvable contrast between postmodern theoretical positions that abandon the differentiation of fact and fiction and the initial impression that spectators do react differently to the use of biographical material, a description of the use of life-writing that concentrates on its effect can show patterns in its creation and reception that distinguish it from non-biographical theatre.

Further Research

Continuing the Research Begun Here

The detailed description of the consequences of the specific referentiality introduced by historical characters then does not only lead to a better understanding of the functional differences between these plays and those without biographical material. It also raises new questions that can be addressed in future research, and the role of ethical concerns is the most interesting one to explore, as it could shed new light both on the feeling of responsibility expressed by many practitioners, and the controversies surrounding some biographical performances. In order to establish how the importance of the presentation of individual historical figures is evaluated, the role of life-writing and historiography in our society has to be described in a broad context. Previous attempts to include this aspect in publications on historical drama present a range of different "functions and potential meanings" of dramatised history, including "political legitimation, confirming and upgrading the identity of social groups, as substitutes for experiences, for instance in tourism, period drama and some travel writing [...], as opposition to official politics of remembrance" (Breuer. 2004, 54-5) or to form "collective identities" (Rokem. 2000, 3). The latter is also ascribed to specific traditions of historical theatre, for example in Scotland, where history plays are seen to contribute to "the present and developing state of their nation" (Brown. 1996, 98). The connection to such sensitive issues suggests why the use of historical and biographical material can lead to ethical questions, perhaps even more so in the case of the latter as it is often seen to possess an "almost magical power of resurrecting historical personages from their graves" (Peacock. 1991, 11). Nevertheless, there is a need for research that brings together these and other opinions about the

role of the past in the theatre with research about our use of history in other areas, and with examples from the reception of biographical plays in order to formulate a more extensive answer to this question.

In addition to such an extensive research project based on the findings in this thesis, it is also possible to continue the enquiry begun here with smaller studies. Thus it would be desirable to include non-script based forms of theatre into the discussion, beginning with collectively devised theatre in which the influence of individual practitioners varies from the description provided here. A discussion of forms such as puppet theatre or mime is particularly interesting, as it could indirectly provide new insight into the role of live actors or language through the discussion of their absence.[1] It is also of interest to explore the role of practitioners in more detail, especially that of the actors, as they are most influential for the creation of a historical character, or that of directors. Although their influence has been acknowledged, the fact that their work often cannot be located in specific elements of the performance means that more research is needed in order to describe ways in which they can and do exert their impact. Finally, the function of names could be subjected to further scrutiny. Their power to establish a specific reference with minimum effort, and the importance of the unity of name and historical figure have already been outlined in this thesis, but a more detailed discussion of plays in which their functioning is deliberately interrupted, such as *Early Morning*, can lead to further insight into their role in biographical theatre.

The examination of audience reactions to the use of life-writing on stage can also be continued, or indeed extended. On the basis of the results produced here it is possible to formulate a questionnaire that could help to confirm whether the key reactions established in this study apply to a broader range of spectators as well. Alternatively a further study could include both plays with and without historical characters in order to challenge, modify or confirm the results in comparison to plays that do not contain such a specific reference to the life world. In addition to further work on the main questions about referentiality, it would also be of interest to follow up aspects that are not discussed thoroughly in the previous chapters, such as the reactions to biographical recognition on the sensory level. Examining the effect of astounding similarities between the actors and the historical figures on whom their roles are based could, indirectly, also lead to new insight into the importance of live actors for biographical theatre in contrast to the textual creation of a biographical subject in prose writing.

---

[1] A first step towards this could be, for example, an examination of the collective process of creation and the casting of a devised ensemble piece such as *Thatcher – The Musical* that is also interesting with regard to its use of biographical presentation. Both mime and puppet plays with biographical references are hard to find, and further searching is necessary in order to find material other than *Comedia Tempio* (cf. chapter 9) and *Six Dead Queens and an Inflatable Henry* by Foursight Theatre, in which Henry the VIII is indeed impersonated by an inflatable puppet.

Research into Other Aspects of Biographical Theatre

Further research departing from the results obtained in this study could allow valuable insight into biographical theatre and its relationship to the life world. Nonetheless, one has to concede that all of these approaches are based on a deliberate concentration on referentiality as one of the key aspects of these plays, and the continuation of this work would therefore inherit this restriction. The foundation created here, however, could also serve as a background for entirely new approaches that focus on other aspects. This could lead to studies that see biographical theatre in connection with the tradition of story telling, or research that focuses on the creation of identity in these and in non-biographical plays. Similarly, the question of intersubjectivity and the way in which we understand the other could inspire interesting readings, and in recognition of the meaning-making activities of the audience, it might be interesting to compare the cultural contexts in which biographical theatre is made and received. Richard Knowles's combination of semiotics and cultural materialism (Knowles. 2004), for example, could provide an interesting basis for a study that shows how the material conditions of making theatre impact on the presentation of historical figures, and how cultural assumptions on the part of the audience influence their reception.[2]

Furthermore different issues that are related to the biographical subject could be examined. Questions about the choice of historical lives, for example, often arise in the context of this thesis, general discussions with colleagues and directly and indirectly in other publications on this or related topics, but so far no detailed study is available. Freddie Rokem explains his choice to discuss plays about the French Revolution and the Shoa with the contemporary relevance of these events, and various academics see the popularity of artist figures in biographical plays as the consequence of the playwrights' interest in the role of the artist in connection with their own situation (Berger.1985, Schaff. 1992, Innes. 1999, Plath Helle. 1989), but presently there is no thorough discussion of a larger number of historical characters and the reason for their inclusion in plays. Such an examination could also take into account pragmatic aspects, such as the fact that previous knowledge can "raise interest in a play whose further content is yet unknown" (Schaff. 1992, 226) and the ensuing commercial incentives.

Another interesting aspect is the role of achievements in life-writing. Whereas many plays about writers integrate some extracts of their work, just as the designs of plays about artists are often inspired by or indeed include their paintings,[3] others such as *Tom and Viv* concentrate entirely on their private life. Schaff offers some observations on this aspect in the context of plays about artists (Schaff. 1992, 146ff.), but the discussion about the role of public achievements in life-

---

[2] Custen presents a concrete list of such concerns for cinematic biography that includes issues such as "censorship, problems of casting and star image, and a host of legal issues surrounding the depiction of a real person" (Custen. 1999b, 134), which can partly be used for theatre as well.

[3] *Larkin With Women*, for instance, includes poems, and the use of visual references to artists' work in designs is discussed in Chapter 7.

writing, often connected to the idea of feminist biography, has not raised equal interest in the context of biographical theatre. Finally, humour and the comic situations that originate either by putting historical characters in unlikely situations, or by attributing unexpected thoughts, feelings or actions to them deserve academic attention[4]. Examining the reasons for our delight in seeing history changed in these ways, this analysis might also indirectly produce interesting observations about the reasons for the popularity of biographical material in theatre.

Biographical Theatre as a Form and its Connection to Other Fields

The wealth of proposals for further research into biographical theatre reflects the fact that despite its popularity on stage this form of theatre is not yet sufficiently established as an object of academic study. Focusing on its specific referentiality as an outstanding feature which, at the same time, can differentiate it from other theatrical forms, this thesis has shown that this specific link to the world leads to consequences in the way in which these plays are created and received. At least from a functional point of view, biographical plays can therefore be regarded as a particular form of theatre that deserves further discussion and investigation. The initial description of the use of biographical material in the theatre thus offers a justification for the classification, as well as a first description of the field.

Moreover, its results can inspire research in a broader context as many of the issues that are raised in it are related to questions that go beyond this specific topic. Even though the idea of a functional approach is born out of the need for a theoretical framework that can describe the specific referentiality of biographical theatre, it can potentially be applied to any performance or text, as all of them are characterised by their different relationships to the life world. Where postmodern criticism has shown that language is inherently relative and that every view on the world is necessarily located, an analysis of the effect of different discourses could nevertheless show that they are not used in the same ways. Without ignoring the insights gained through postmodernism, a focus on function might thus allow a more fruitful discussion of them. This applies particularly to neighbouring genres which share the use of material from the past and can therefore be expected to be connected to the world in a relatively similar way. The theoretical and perhaps even methodological framework developed here might prove to be of help for a new discussion of historical drama, which centres around the way in which the historical material is perceived to be related to the world both by the creators and recipients, rather than following most existing studies that attribute a different ontological status to it. The same approach could be used for documentary theatre,[5] but here special attention could be paid to the effect of verbatim quotations from original material, and it is also suitable for the discussion of biographical and historical material in other media, for example for bio-pics or television plays.

---

[4] A good example for the first is *Insignificance*, the latter can be found, for instance in *Early Morning* and Florence Nightingale's physical attraction to Queen Victoria.
[5] A first attempt in this direction can be found in Canton. 2006.

In an even broader context, further elaboration of this framework could even provide new ways of addressing the question of fictionality *per se*. In spite of postmodern reservations about this concept, it remains one of the most influential ones in the study of various forms of artistic expression, including theatre and literature. If fictionality is defined as a specific relationship between a performance and the life world, then individual forms of this situation of reference can allow conclusions about the concept as a whole. Instead of attributing a different ontological status to fictional discourses, the way in which they are seen to combine invented material and material from the life world could be considered to be variable. Rather than a clear opposition between two categories of discourses, one of which is supposed to be mainly identical to the life world and one of which is thought to be only loosely based on it, there might be a scale of different degrees in which performances are seen to share information with the life world. The position of individual plays on this scale would be based on the degree of recognisable elements in them and the way in which they are used subsequently. The framework suggested in this thesis has to be developed significantly in order to address such an important question, but it could provide a basis for such an approach. This shows that the issue of biographical theatre does not have to be studied for its own sake. In order to address its special characteristics, one has to address more fundamental questions about issues such as our perception of the life world and its consequences for our understanding of the role of theatre in it.

Appendix 01

Plot Summaries of the Plays

Arden, John and Margaretta D'Arcy. 1969. *The Hero Rises Up*. London: Methuen
After introductions presented by the main characters Nelson, Emma and Captain Nisbet, the play follows some of Nelson's most important battles and his affair with Emma, contrasting his fame as a soldier with the disrepute caused by his relationship. Using song and dance, the play clearly emphasises its theatricality.

Bartlett, Neil. 2000. *In Extremis*. London: Oberon
Oscar Wilde visits Mrs. Robinson, a palm reader, and asks her for advice of whether he should stay in England and risk imprisonment, or whether he should flee abroad.

Bennett, Alan. 1992. *The Madness of George III*. London: Faber
The play follows George III during a period of illness, charting both his personal suffering and the political consequences of his ailing. Switching between private and public places, the play shows the connections between the two, portraying the man and the King.

Bennett, Alan. 1986. *Kafka's Dick*. London: Faber
In the first scene Kafka asks his friend Brod to burn all his books, a promise that is famous for not having been kept. Returning from the Dead in later scenes, the two characters have to face the consequences of Brod's decision when they pay an unexpected visit to suburban couple Sydney, a Kafka fan and insurance employee, and his wife Linda. When Kafka's parents join them: Sydney and Herman Kafka hatch plans to rewrite the role of the latter in his son's biography, an undertaking that could also satisfy Sydney's ambition for a more challenging career in literary history.

Bolt, Robert. 1970. *Vivat! Vivat Regina!* Oxford etc.: Heinemann
At the heart of Bolt's play is the political conflict between Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I. Both Queens are shown to be surrounded by groups with different interests that try to manipulate them.

Bond, Edward. 1993a. [1974]. *Early Morning*. Plays One. London: Methuen
While many characters bear the name of famous historical models, some of their characteristics and actions can hardly be linked to them. One of Queen Victoria's Siamese twins and her husband plot an attempt on the Monarch's life, and Florence Nightingale, who is to be married to one of Victoria's sons, accuses the Queen of raping her. Victoria defends herself by ordering one of her sons to be shot first. The various complots are continued in heaven in later scenes, where further complications are brought about by their inclination for cannibalism and the fact that bodyless heads can survive unless they are eaten.

Bond, Edward. 1987 [1980]. *The Fool*. Plays One. London: Methuen
Bond presents scenes from the life of the poet John Clare: discovered for his writing, he is torn between allegiance to his old friends and social class and the offers of Mrs. Emmerson who tries to support his talent and to introduce him into middle class society.

Brenton, Howard. 1989. *Bloody Poetry*. Plays Two. London: Methuen
Following the friendship and affairs between Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, Claire Claremont and Byron, the play explores their ideals and the gap between these theories and their practice. Polidori, a biographer of Byron, is introduced as a narrating figure, offering often amusing comments on the events as they evolve.

Brenton, Howard. 1989. *H.I.D.*. London: NHB
Brenton presents a highly complex combination of different strands of plot, each of which defies some of the more common assumptions about history. Journalist Palmer interviews Charity, the widow of Luber, a scholar who predicted Hess's death in Spandau, but who has since passed away himself. She offers him material from her husband's work, but many of the tapes mix recordings from different resources, and the fact that she has a studio with video editing equipment in the mental sanatorium where she resides does not heighten the confidence in her sources. Her mental state and the use of clearly artistic forms, such as dance, also limit the trustworthiness of her direct reports. A second strand of the plot shows two historians who are brought together by Allied military officials in order to create recommendations for the announcement of Hess's death and the funeral arrangements. Shortly after handing over their propositions, they are given a video in which Luber burns x-rays that supposedly prove his idea that the Spandau inmate was not Hess at all. The scholars however, decide that they cannot take back the official statement they prepared, and Palmer's investigation does not enlighten Hess's death either.

Brenton, Howard. 1974. *The Churchill Play.* **London: Methuen**
A group of prison inmates prepares a play about Winston Churchill as a recreational and educational activity, much to the disgust of prison officials who regard such occupations as unnecessary, if not dangerous. The play focuses primarily on the power structures and questions of social (in)justice in prisons, but the devising process of the play leads to some interesting observations about the creation and uses of biography.

Brittain, Victoria and Gillian Slovo. 2004. *Guantanamo. Honor Bound to Defend Freedom.* **London: Oberon**
Based on interviews with the families of Guantanamo inmates, the two journalists trace the stories behind the headlines. The testimonies by the families and, where letters are available, the detainees are put into context through the use of political speeches about the American Camp, including Lord Justice Steyn's polemic against the praxis and a press interview given by Donald Rumsfeld.

Brown, Ben. 1999. *Larkin With Women.* **London: Faber and Faber**
Brown presents Larkin together with the three women with whom he (simultaneously) shared longer relationships, often connecting these experiences to his intellectual life and his poetry.

Corrie, Rachel and Rickman, Alan (ed.). 2005. *My Name is Rachel Corrie.* **London. NHB**
On the basis of emails, letters, diary entries and messages on answering machines, the play traces Rachel Corrie's development from a socially conscious schoolgirl to being an activist in Palestine, where she is killed by an Israeli tank. After a series of monologues for one actress, her death is announced by one of her fellow activists in a recording, followed by a video that shows 10 year old Rachel reading out a declaration against poverty at her school.

Dallmeyer, Andrew. *Hello Dalí.* **Unpublished Manuscript**
Salvador Dalí offers the audience the chance to choose from a series of chapters in the painter's life, starting with Death and moving on to Childhood, his Fetishes and Phobias, Surrealism, his wife Gala, his Spanish Inquisition, America, Orifices, the Dangerous Dalí, Painting, the Atomic Dalí, Old Age and finally Birth. Rather conventional in its format of a one-person show, the choice of the topics presented makes this romp through Dalì's life as extravagant as its subject.

Dear, Nick. 2000. *In Ruins. Plays One.* **London: Faber**
In a long monologue King George III talks about the issues that worry and please him. A servant, the only other character, remains nearly mute, leaving the stage to the King, whose perturbed mind is thus not put into contrast with others.

Dear, Nick. 2000. *The Art of Success. Plays One.* **London: Faber**
In a climate of artistic and scientific innovation, William Hogarth introduces his affordable prints that contribute to changes in the role of art in society. Together with his relationship to three women, his wife, his favourite prostitute and a female prisoner who he draws the day before her execution, questions concerning the role of art and the responsibilities of the artist are examined.

Dromgoole, Nicholas. 2000. *Marriage in Disguise.* **London: Oberon**
A couple's decision to make love in Molière's bed brings back three characters, all of whom claim to be Molière, albeit at different stages of his life. Unable to see themselves as one person, Young, Middle Aged and Elderly Molière discuss their experiences with lovers, politics and art. They try to explain their part of their life to each other in order to connect them into a complete whole and to decide whether they failed or succeeded.

Eagleton, Terry. 1989. *Saint Oscar.* **Derry: Field Day**
After an introductory song from the chorus, the first act is hosted by Oscar Wilde, who tells the audience about his birth, his opinion on art and his rejection of naturalness. He is joined by his Mother who tries to win him for the Irish cause, and by Richard Wallace who is equally interested in finding in him an activist for Socialism. A warning song from the chorus ends the first act and leads into the second where his trial is restaged, a process in which his identity as a foreigner is stressed and he remains defenceless against the accusations brought forward by the choir of rent boys. Towards the end of the play, he comments on his time in prison and meets Bosie, who eventually leaves him.

Edgar, David. 2000. *Albert Speer.* **Based on Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth by Gitta Sereny. London: NHB**
Imprisoned in Spandau, Albert Speer tells Casalis, the prison priest, the story of his rise in the Third Reich and his fascination for Hitler who, contrary to his own father, supports and praises him. He tries to come to terms with his involvement in the dictatorship and his slow disillusion with Hitler that ends in his deliberate refusal to fulfil his order to burn industrial plants. The structure of a memory play is given up in the second act. Here Speer's life after Spandau is presented. It shows the estrangement from his family, and his desperate attempt to maintain his ignorance of the Endlösung in the face of constant accusations – a position that ultimately proves untenable.

Foursight Theatre. 2006. *Thatcher – the Musical!* **Unpublished Manuscript**
The play follows Thatcher from childhood in Grantham, through her early days in politics and the three periods in office as PM. Her memories are connected by an Old Margaret who introduces and comments on her younger selves and their experiences. Speeches alternate with songs and the references to Margaret Thatcher's life are mixed with references to theatrical tradition.

Frayn, Michael. 2003. *Democracy.* **London: Methuen**
Günther Guillaume, the Stasi spy who infiltrated the Social Democrats and later became the PA of Chancellor Willy Brandt, tells the story of his double life and his relationship with the politician that vacillates between admiration and betrayal. Concentrating on the mechanisms of politics and personal decisions, Frayn's play is often applauded for making the unpalatable topic of German politics in the seventies interesting and relevant.

Frayn, Michael. 2000. *Copenhagen.* **London: Methuen**
After their death, Werner Heisenberg and Niels and Margarethe Bohr try to reconstruct the events of their meeting in Copenhagen in 1941, which ended the long lasting friendship between the two men. In spite of several attempts, they cannot agree on any version of what was said and done.

Freeman, Sandra. 1995. *Madame Colette. Three Remarkable Women.* **Sussex: Temple House**
Prompted by a request for an interview, old writer Colette relives memories of her mother, her lovers and her work.

Friel, Brian. 1989. *Making History.* **London: Faber**
Friel presents the life of the Irish Chief Hugh O'Neill from the time of his last marriage to Mable Bagenal, the daughter of English settlers, to his disastrous last battle and the time of Exile. The realist presentation is put into question by the presence of Lombard, Bishop and writer, who prepares a biography of O'Neill, but shows more interest in producing a national hero than in historical objectivity.

Furse, Anna. 1997. *Augustine (Big Hysteria).* **Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers**
Based on material about a patient in Charcot's Salpêtrière, Anna Furse writes the story of Augustine, a young woman who is brought to the clinic with symptoms of hysteria. In contrast to Charcot's observation of her body language, the young Freud (who historically visited the Salpêtrière various years after Augustine's stay) is intrigued by the talk of the young women that tells a story of rape and trauma – she becomes the catalyst for his later theories.

Gee, Shirley. 1991. *Warrior.* **London: Samuel French**
Gee's play presents the story of Hannah Snell, who dressed up as a boy and became a soldier in the English Navy before working as a circus attraction and becoming imprisoned in Bedlam. Contrary to the biography on which Gee bases her character, she flees Bedlam at the end of the play.

Gems, Pam. 1998. *The Snow Place.* **London: Oberon**
Alone in a badly heated hut near Gdansk, Stanislawa Przybyszewski writes her play about the French Revolution. Identifying strongly with Robbespierre she relates the historical events to memories from her own life, a connection that is further emphasised by the doubling of actors for various roles on the different levels of plot. Obsessed with her work, she rejects any criticism of the conditions in her house and of her drug habit, and finally dies of hypothermia before finishing her play.

Gems, Pam. 1996. *Marlene.* **London: Oberon**
During the preparations for a concert in Paris, Marlene Dietrich remembers events and people in her life.

Gems, Pam. 1996. *Stanley.* **London: NHB**
The play presents Stanley Spencer and his art in the context of his relationship to his first wife Hilda and his second wife Patricia.

Gems, Pam. 1985. *Piaf. Three Plays*. Hammondsworth: Penguin
Beginning with a series of breakdowns, the singer's life is seen in light of her later difficulties. Gems presents Edith as a street girl with a great talent whose discovery brings her fame and money, but also the feeling of not belonging and loneliness. The play follows her from the first concert through the peaks of her career, the relationships with various lovers, her drug addiction and finally her illness and death.

Gems, Pam. 1982. *Queen Christina*. London: St. Luke's Press
In the first scene, Christina's birth is greeted with disappointment over the fact the King's child is once again a girl. Without a male heir, Christina's father decides to educate her as a man, and the play follows her life and the conflict she experiences in her role as governing King and fertile woman.

Graham, James. 1988. *Albert's Boy*. London: Methuen
Returning as a POW in Korea, Peter Bucky visits the ageing friend of his family, Albert Einstein, who lives retired suffering from loneliness and is deeply disturbed by the thought that he indirectly contributed to the creation of the nuclear bomb. During the course of this visit both men are haunted by their experiences with war which explain their very different positions on the use of nuclear arms.

Gray, Frances. 1997. *Spoken in Darkness*; Unpublished Manuscript
On the basis of Anne Imbrie's novel about her investigation into the murder of a school friend, the play follows Ann's investigation into the life and death of her friend Lee. She remembers their school days, and in imaginary conversations with her Ann tries to understand why Lee's life developed the way it did.

Gupta, Tanika. 2005. *Gladiator Games*. London: Oberon
The great majority of the speeches are taken directly from the Zahid Mubarek Inquiry, although some private conversations among the Mubarek family are not marked as quotations by the author. A character based on Zahid's cousin Imtiaz comments on the family's efforts to find out the truth, but the official form of the inquiry is reinforced through the identification of speakers as witnesses in this process.

Hampton, Christopher.1983. *Tales from Hollywood*. London: Faber
While the writer Ödön von Horváth was killed in Paris in the late 30s, the protagonist Horváth merely stands by when another person is hit by a falling branch in a thunderstorm. In his prolonged theatre life he emigrates to the US, where he shares his time in exile with other famous German authors, such as Berthold Brecht and the Mann brothers. Hampton thus presents the life of emigrated German intellectuals in Hollywood through the eyes of his protagonist.

Hare, David. 2004. *Stuff Happens*. London: Faber
David Hare traces the political events that lead up to the invasion of Iraq, quoting from original documents, but also adding private conversations between the world leaders.

Hare, David. 1998. *Judas Kiss*. London: Faber
The first scene takes place shortly after Wilde's conviction has been pronounced. Urged by Ross to leave the country, Wilde falters and finally follows Bosie's wish to stay. In the second scene, their life together in Italy, marked by poverty and Bosie's inclination to seduce local young men, ends when Bosie is given the chance to return to his family on the condition that he abandon Oscar.

Hastings, Michael.1984. *Tom and Viv*. Hammondsworth: Penguin
Concentrating on the private life of T.S. Eliot and his wife Viv, the play follows their marriage, their separation and Viv's time in a home for the mentally unstable that follows it.

Hastings, Michael. 1966. *Lee Harvey Oswald. A Far Mean Streak of Independence Brought On by Neglect*. Hammondsworth: Penguin
Mixing original transcripts from the trial of Oswald with invented scenes that recreate his life previous to the crime, Hastings gives a detailed portrayal of the man who was convicted for J.F. Kennedy's murder.

Jeffrey, Stephen. 1998. *The Libertine*. London: NHB
Presented in the same season as *The Man of Mode*, Jeffrey offers an alternative image of the Earl of Rochester as a rebel who nevertheless suffers from his incapacity to find fulfilment in anything. Being rejected by the actress Elizabeth Barry, whose training he has taken upon him, he becomes desolate and soon begins to suffer the physical consequences of his drinking as well.

Johnson, Terry. 1993. *Hysteria*. London: Methuen
In his morphine induced dreams, Sigmund Freud is visited by Salvador Dalí and Jessica, a mysterious young woman who threatens to undress and to cause a scandal if Freud does not agree to discuss one of

his cases with her. She points to the fact that changes in Freud's theory coincide with a letter in which he mentions possible symptoms of neurosis in his sister and she accuses of him changing his theories rather than facing the fact that his father might be to blame for abusing his sister – a decision that had disastrous consequences for Jessica's mother who committed suicide after being told that she had only imagined the scenes of abuse discovered during her therapy with Freud. Delivered in a series of absurd and funny scenes in the tradition of farce, the play mixes humour with serious questions about his life.

Johnson, Terry. 1982. *Insignificance.* **London: Methuen**
Although none of the characters is named, their similarities to Albert Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, Senator McCarthy and Joe DiMaggio are indicated in the text and maintained by their physical appearance in most productions. Only shortly after the Senator has left the Professor, hoping that he convinced him to co-operate with his Committee against UnAmerican activities, the Actress arrives in order to express her admiration and to prove to him that she understood his theories. On her heels follows her jealous baseball player husband, whose arrival leads to a marital crisis. Creating an unexpected meeting between these American icons, Terry Johnson carefully balances similarities to their historical models with invented elements.

Leiman Goldemberg, 1983. *Letters Home.* **in: Wandor, Micheline (ed.).** *Plays By Women 2.* **London: Methuen**
Based on the correspondence between Sylvia Plath and her mother Aurelia, the play charts their relationship and the events in the poet's life.

Lochhead, Liz. 1989. *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off & Dracula.* **Hammondsworth: Penguin, 8-67**
Narrator La Corbie guides the audience through the play, commenting on the conflict between the two Queens. Doubling their roles with those of their servants and girls on the street, Lochhead examines the political and private conflicts in which Mary and Elizabeth are involved, in terms of their experience as women who face the expectations of society concerning their behaviour and their ability to bear children.

Mitchell, Anthony. 1971. *Tyger.* **London: Jonathan Cape**
Blake is presented as a rebel against the establishment, and the contemporary references make his position understandable to audiences today. Loosely following various events of his life, the play presents him in the context of his marriage, his relationship to other artists and his conflict with the state.

Nelson, Richard. 1996. *The General from America.* **London: Faber**
The play shows the background of Benedict Arnold's decision to desert to the British army and the consequences this brings for him and his family.

Pinnock, Winsome. 1989 *A Rock in the Water.* **in: Brewster, Yvonne (ed.)** *Black Plays 2.* **London: Methuen, 45-91**
Pinnock's play presents Claudia Jones's experiences as a child who accompanies her mother when she works as a cleaner, an experience that is shown to be an important influence on her later activism for her community in Notting Hill.

Pownall, David. 1983. *Master Class.* **London: Faber**
Stalin and his assistant Zhdanov bring together the composers Shostakovich and Prokoviev in an attempt to make them follow the official party line for music. With threats they force them into composing a piece of music according to Stalin's taste.

Pownall, David. 1979. *An Audience Called Edouard.* **London: Faber**
The models sitting for Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* chat about the painter and his life, including his illegitimate son. In the second act, they are joined by Hugo, a Marx-like character who discusses his economic theories with them. The painter himself, however, is not present on stage, but is addressed as an imaginary figure in the audience.

Shaffer, Peter. 1985. [1980]. *Amadeus.* **Hammondsworth: Penguin**
Mozart is portrayed as a child-like genius, an outsider in musical circles who is blissfully unaware of social etiquette and uses foul language. Salieri, the narrator figure, recognises his talent and tries to sabotage his career before finally murdering him.

Stoppard, Tom. 1999. [1993]. *Arcadia. Plays Five.* **London: Faber**
The scholars Hannah and Bernard try to reconstruct the events at Sidley Hall at the beginning of the 19th century, but the mixture of literary criticism, scientific advances and hormones that lead to the turbulent events there is hard to entangle. The parallels between the two time levels show that these factors are equally important on the level of the present.

Stoppard, Tom. 1997. *The Invention of Love.* **London: Faber**
As a guest in Charon's boat in the underworld, Alfred Edward Housman (AEH) remembers important moments of his life spent surrounded by Oxford Deans and Oscar Wilde in a climate where his love for fellow student Moses Jackson is considered to be unacceptable. He tries to converse with his younger self (Housman) and to convince him of the necessity to come to terms with both sides of him, the poet and the scholar, but realises that he can no longer change his life and has to come to terms with it.

Stoppard, Tom. 1975. *Travesties.* **London: Faber**
Carr's memories of his time in Zurich and the preparations for a performance of *The Importance of Being Ernest* often take on a strong resemblance to Oscar Wilde's play. Many of the other characters also bear some similarities to this theatrical model, and the combination of historical events and figures with these intertextual references leads to unexpected performances, including a dancing James Joyce.

Teale, Polly. 2005. *Brontë.* **London. NHB**
Teale's play mixes events in the Brontës' lives and their fiction, trying to illuminate the question of how these women, who lived such a retired life in Yorkshire, could produce some of the greatest literature in English.

Tomalin, Claire. 1991. *The Winter Wife.* **London: NHB**
The play follows Katherine Mansfield's stay in Menton, where, accompanied by her friend Ida Baker, she tries to cure her tuberculosis while having to write in order to survive.

Wertenbaker, Timberlake. 1998. *After Darwin.* **London: Faber**
A theatre company rehearses a play about Darwin in which his theory of evolution clashes with the Christian beliefs of Fitzroy, the Captain of his ship. Similar conflicts evolve among the actors and the director of the play, who find themselves confronted with the threat of social Darwinism.

Wright, Nicholas. 2002. *Vincent in Brixton.* **London: NHB**
Nicholas Wright presents his version of the events that might have taken place during Van Gogh's time as a lodger in London. Having fallen in love with the daughter of the house, he is soon attracted to her mother. For her, the relationship with the younger man who seems to understand her depression brings new hope in life, which does not last as Vincent leaves.

Yeger, Sheila.1990. *Self Portrait.* **Charlbury: Amber Lane**
Scenes from the life of Gwen Jones are presented in parallel with the story of modern women who organise and visit an exhibition of her pictures. Emphasising similarities in their experiences as women, the play suggests that historical models like the painter can become important role models for contemporary women, such as Barbara, a friend of the exhibition's curator who finds a powerful inspiration in Gwen's pictures and life story.

Yeger, Sheila. 1991. *Variations on a Theme by Schumann.* **In: Castledine, Annie (ed.).** *Plays by Women 9.* **London: Methuen**
On her journey to archives in Berlin, Louise imagines conversations with her psychotherapist Last and her mother, as well as scenes from the life of the subject of her biography, Clara Schumann. Being confronted with her fears and hopes as she meets various women on her journey whose stories reflect her own difficulties, she realises that in researching Schumann, she learned more about herself than she did about the composer. At the end of the play, she is able to abandon her work and to overcome the traumas of the past.

Appendix 2

Productions and Documentation

After Darwin. **Hampstead.1998**
Reviews

Albert's Boy. **Finborough Theatre. 2005**
Live Performance 13.08.05. Reviews
The room in which the meeting between Albert Einstein and Peter Bucky takes place is presented in a detailed, realist way. This impression is further supported by the acting. The only interruption of this realist form is the presentation of a nuclear blast, but the general prevalence of stage realism, and the previous emphasis on the characters' inner life and struggles suggest that it exists merely in Einstein's mind.

Albert Speer. **National Theatre. 2000**
Video 05.07.00. Reviews. Photographs. Programme. Newspaper Articles
This production places great emphasis on the central character and his motivations and fears. In the first act, Speer's conversations with Casalis are clearly separated from his memories, as they take place further downstage than the latter. The psychological realism of the plot is supported by the restricted realism of the presentation, in which key elements can evoke specific places.

Amadeus. **Derby Playhouse. 2004**
Reviews

Amadeus. **National Theatre. 1979**
Photographs. Programme
(In)Famous for the childish behaviour of its protagonist, the production contrasts the splendour of Mozart's music and the surroundings – elements of the palace of Schönbrunn are presented on backdrops – with the unexpected, but psychologically motivated portrait of the composer.

An Audience Called Edouard. **Greenwich Theatre. 1978**
Photograph

Arcadia. **Birmingham Repertory Theatre. 2004**
Live Performance 30.10.04. Reviews. Programme
This production bears great similarity to the first production of Tom Stoppard's play. Although the funny aspects of the characters are emphasised, they do not become psychologically incredible.

Arcadia. **National Theatre. 1995**
Video 24.05.95 of the second cast. Photographs of the first cast. Program
The design with bay windows that open onto the garden evokes conventions of the well-made play, and the production is clearly placed in this theatrical tradition to which it alludes, often slightly tongue in cheek. In spite of the comic aspects and some typical characteristics of a play of ideas, however, the production never entirely leaves the realm of the realistically possible.

The Art of Success. **Royal Shakespeare Company. 1987**
Photographs

Artaud in Wonderland. **Etcetera. 2000**
Reviews

Augustine. **Paines Plough. 1991**
Reviews

Brontë. **Shared Experience. 2005**
Live Performance 29.09.05. Programme. Reviews
At the beginning of the production, the actresses change into 18th century clothes, taking on their parts in the play at the same time. While the experiences of the Brontë sisters are presented in a realist style in the following scenes, this metabiographical comment is expanded later in the play through a biographical reading of their novels, whose characters are not just shown to bear great resemblance to the sisters, but

are sometimes played by the same actresses as well. Straightforward realism is also interrupted by the use of physical theatre and dancing for these scenes.

Chinese Whispers. **Warwick Arts Centre. 2004**
Live Performance 24.02.04
Francesca Beard presents poetry and storytelling that shed light on her cultural identity.

Copenhagen. **National Theatre. 1999**
Video. 27.07.99. Photographs. Programme. Reviews
The production focuses strongly on the characters and their stories, an emphasis that is supported by the neutral and relatively bare design in the round that consists of a wall, a door, and two chairs. Although the dialogue specifies that the protagonists speak from an afterlife they are presented in the tradition of psychological realism. Lighting supports the creation of different atmospheres and highlights the temporal structure of returning elements and various versions of the past.

Copenhagen. **Sheffield University Theatre Company. 2003**
Live Performance 29.10. 03. Programme
SUTCO also presents the play in a minimalist design with realist acting. Lighting is used to explain the physical theories presented in the play.

Democracy. **National Theatre. 2003**
Live Performance. 07.05.03. Photographs. Reviews. Newspaper Articles.
The café in which Guillaume meets his Stasi contact is situated in one corner of the stage that is dominated by the offices of the members of the Bundestag. The constant presence of Brandt's PA underlines the fact that some of the events are told from his perspective, introducing the idea of a report rather than direct presentation. During the course of the play, the set is used to represent a variety of places: the office chairs are turned into a train compartment, and the upper offices substitute a balcony from which Brandt speaks to his followers. Thus the production emphasises its theatrical context and the use of report and storytelling, while at the same time, Frayn's programme note suggests that it tries to do the historical figures justice.

Faust. **Faust Ensemble. 2000**
Newspaper Articles

The General from America. **Royal Shakespeare Company. 1996**
Video 30.07.96. Reviews
A costume drama that charts Benedict Arnold's downfall in a realist manner: the acting demonstrates psychological motivation, the setting and lighting evoke spaces from the life world and the temporal scene changes are carried out in the dark. A conventional use of music further supports the creation of atmosphere.

Gladiator Games. **Sheffield Theatres and Theatre Royal Stratford East. 2005**
Live Performance. 10.05.05. Reviews. Programme
Much of the evidence from the Zahid Mubarek Inquiry is presented in direct addresses to the audience, often by actors highlighted through a single spotlight. The centre of the stage accommodates basic props and items of furniture, such as a bed or a table to allow the scenes between the characters to be acted out.

Guantanamo. **Tricycle Theatre. 2004**
Live Performance. 07.08.04. Reviews, Programme. Newspaper Articles
The performance contains a number of elements that establish a visual and audible connection to reports about Camp Delta in Gauntánamo Bay, such as wire cages, the call of a muezzin, and orange boiler suits. The characters who tell the story of their loved ones detained there are sitting down-stage, addressing the audience, while the letters from the inmates are written from the wire cages. The speeches by politicians on the other hand are, again, addressed towards the audience.

Hello Dalí. **Edinburgh Fringe. 2004**
Live Performance. 20.08.04
The performer shares the stage with a machine that is used to make the audience choose which chapter of Dalí's life is to be told next. Thus prompted, the character Dalí tells and enacts various episodes from it using a minimum of props.

H.I.D. **Royal Shakespeare Company. 1989**
Photographs. Reviews. Prompt Book.
The different levels of the action are presented on a relatively bare stage as well as on the screens distributed on it. Just as the dialogue mixes realist conversations with poetry, the acting switches between psychological realism and elements of physical theatre that are used to present versions of the past.

Holy Dirt. **Kulturbahnhof. 2005**
Live Performance 03.06.05
Marco Martínez mixes elements of traditional storytelling, theatrical monologues and even physical theatre in his autobiographical performance.

Hysteria. **Minerva Theatre. 2000**
Reviews

Hysteria. **Royal Court. 1993**
Reviews

Insignificance. **Lyceum Theatre Sheffield. 2005**
Live Performances. 28.02.05 and 07.03.05. Programme. Reviews
The imitation of an up-market hotel room is combined with a metal-construction that reaches down towards the audience. Similarly, the emphasis on comic lines occasionally interrupts the realist creation of the characters who otherwise imitate the accent, voice and physical appearance of the historical models.

Insignificance. **Royal Theatre Northampton. 2004**
Reviews

Insignificance. **Minerva Chichester. 1999**
Reviews

Insignificance. **Donmar Warehouse. 1995**
Reviews

Insignificance. **Royal Court. 1982**
Reviews

The Invention of Love. **National Theatre. 1997**
Video 08.11.97. Photographs. Programme. Reviews
In front of two gigantic bookshelves, Charon's underworld, Oxford meadows and other places are evoked. Although individual elements bear resemblance to the life world, the co-presence of various time levels and places in the same setting, and the use of theatrical lighting and effects avoid the impression of realism. The lack of similarity and understanding between old AEH and young Housman supports the impression that the world on stage is relatively independent from the life world.

Kafka's Dick. **Derby Playhouse. 2004**
Live Performances 17.11.04 and 23.11.04. Programme. Reviews
The strong influence of elements borrowed from pantomime distracts attention from Alan Bennett's text and the meta-biographical elements in it. Visual jokes, such as flamingos walking through the garden, often accompany conversations between actors, whose work is also clearly inspired by this tradition. The first scene is presented on screen, as is a short film about Derby at the beginning of the second act (which is not related to Bennett's script). The last scene is shown on a bare stage with UV effects and added jokes from the actors.

Kafka's Dick. **Theatre Royal York. 2001**
Reviews

Kafka's Dick. **Piccadilly. 1998-99**
Reviews

Kafka's Dick. **Royal Court Theatre. 1986**
Reviews. Correspondence with Roger Lloyd Pack

Letters Home. **Sheffield Centenary Drama Festival. 2005**
Live Performances 19.05.05. Programme.
The performance deliberately tries to emphasise the fact that original material is used and to evoke the impression that Sylvia's experiences are recreated in an authentic way. Within the limits of a student production, a realist setting is created. The focus on the mother – daughter relationship allows a high degree of psychological realism.

The Libertine. **Royal Court. 1995**
Reviews. Interview David Westhead.

Life Game. **National Theatre. 2004**
Reviews. Website of Improbable Theatre.

The Madness of George III. **Birmingham Repertory Theatre**
Live Performance 25.10.03. Reviews for the same production at the Yorkshire Playhouse

The Madness of George III. **National Theatre. 1991**
Video 28.11.91. Photographs. Programme
Period clothes and a few key elements evoke the era of George III, yet their scarcity allows swift changes between the short scenes. The focus is placed clearly on Nigel Hawthorne's portrayal of the King and his development from the Monarch who dominates the scene to a helpless ill man trying to defend himself against the often torturous treatments ordered by his doctors.

Man for All Seasons. **Globe Theatre. 1960**

Marlene. **Oldham Coliseum. 1996**
Photographs. Reviews

Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off. **Comunicado Theatre. 1987**
Reviews. Correspondence with Anne Lacey

Master Class. **Haymarket, Leicester. 1983**
Article about the design. Correspondence with Timothy West

Moscow Gold. **Royal Shakespeare Company. 1990**
Video 01.11.90. Photographs. Programme. Reviews. Newspaper interview with Barry Kyle
The individual scenes are presented in elaborate, stylised settings, that present well-known visual elements in new sizes, combinations and, literally, light. The enormous size of the stage at the Barbican further supports the grandeur of the design. Although the acting is hard to discern on the video, production stills show the surprising similarity between David Calder in the role of Gorbachev and its historical model.

My Name is Rachel Corrie. **Royal Court Theatre. 2005**
Live Performance 22.10.05. Reviews. Programme
In the first act the design resembles a teenager's bedroom, in the second a computer placed in front of a wall loosely evokes an indoor and outdoor space in the Occupied Territories. Rachel's monologues are partly spoken while she is seen writing letters, diary entries or emails and partly spoken towards the audience. The announcement of her death and a short recording of Rachel as a young student are presented on a small screen.

Piaf. **Royal Shakespeare Company. 1978**
Video 05.10.78. Photographs

Queen Christina. **Royal Shakespeare Company. 1977**
Photographs

Saint Oscar. **Field Day Theatre Company. 1990**
Reviews

Self Portrait. **Orange Tree. 1992**
Reviews

Stanley. **National Theatre. 1996**
Photographs. Reviews. Programme

Tales from Hollywood. **National Theatre. 1983**
Photographs
Photographs from the production show that banners were used in order to present a short biographical note for Horváth and indications regarding the space where scenes are supposed to take place. They also reveal the attempts that are made to imitate the physical appearance of the historical models for the characters.

Tales from Hollywood. **Donmar Warehouse. 2001**
Reviews

Thatcher – The Musical. **Warwick Arts Centre**
Live Performance 08.02.06. Programme
The play presents key events from the Prime Minister's political and private life in a highly theatrical form. The design is reminiscent of a step dancing revue with stairs leading up to a central door, marked Nr. 10. These elements are used in order to connect the presentation of political events, such as the changes in her cabinet, in a highly theatrical forms – the ministers, for example, resemble dancers in a revue. An older version of Margaret Thatcher acts as a narrator and all the actresses in the production play the Prime Minister at some point of the performance. Her reminiscences are connected by the narrator figure, often sitting in a mini-living room accommodated in a handbag, who introduces and comments on the stage action.

Travesties. **Royal Shakespeare Company. 1994**
Video 15.01.94. Programme. Reviews. Newspaper Interview with Antony Sher
The sets resemble a living room with a fireplace and a library, but their dimension, colour and the combinations of different elements give them a clearly theatrical note. Sher marks the difference between old and young Carr clearly in his demeanour, and all of the actors integrate elements of music hall and comedy, such as short dances or rhyming into their performance.

Tyger. **National Theatre. 1971**
Photographs. Programme. Reviews

Vincent in Brixton. **National Theatre. 2002**
Live Performance August 2002. Programme. Reviews
The detailed recreation of a Victorian kitchen and the preparation of a meal during the first scene create naturalist surroundings for Vincent's experiences. Lighting and sound further support this by imitating occurrences in the life world, such as rain. The psychological motivation of the characters is emphasised, as is the development of the relationship between Vincent and Ursula Loyer.

Vincent in Brixton. **Library Theatre Manchester.**
Live Performances 28.09.04 and 11.10.04. Reviews. Programme
The production of Wright's play at the Library Theatre is also placed in the naturalist tradition, although the acting gives the characters less depth than it does in the original production.

Interview Structures

Interview before Vincent

1) Information: the title of the play is *Vincent in Brixton*

    questions: Has the participant heard of it? If so, what did s/he hear?
                  What does the name tell you about the play?

2) Information: the participant is shown the flyer

    questions: If the participant sees the flyer somewhere: what does it tell you about the
                  play?
                  follow up questions about the suggestions given by the participant

                  What would you tell someone who has not seen this flyer about the play?
                  clarification if necessary

                  Would the flyer make you interested in seeing the play?
                  follow up questions: why? which elements are interesting?

                  If you wanted to convince a friend to come along, what would you tell
                  him / her?

3) Background to the play

    questions: What do you know about Van Gogh? (try to pick up any mentioning of the
    name from the participant)

                  Check: knowledge of paintings, life, other associations
                  follow up any hints from participant

                  Ask whether their knowledge has any impact on their expectations about
                  the play

Interview after Vincent

1) Expectations

    questions: Was the play as you expected it to be?
                  follow up any differences or similarities the participant suggests?
                  try to identify individual elements that are perceived to be different or
                  similar and to find out why they are seen this way

                  Did you like the fact that it was different / similar?
                  follow up any reasons for such an evaluation; try to identify individual
                  elements

2) Actors

    questions what did you think about the actor playing Vincent?
                  clarify: which are the elements you liked / disliked
                  reasons why someone did (not) like him; if possible try to relate it to the

What about the other actors? Did you like or dislike anyone in particular?
follow up: why did you like / dislike an actor?
follow up: compare to Vincent (do not mention why!)
clarify: without direct questioning: in how far do they distinguish between actor and character? find out about their level of awareness of a distinction

3) Program

questions   Did you have a look at the program? Which sections did you read?

Do you think that reading the program / these sections changed the way in which you see the play?
follow up: which pieces of information had an influence? why do you think they did / did not?

4) Vincent van Gogh

questions   How important do you think is Vincent van Gogh for the play?
follow up: why do you think he is (not) important?
which aspects are important (painter, love story)

Do you think that the play changed your way of thinking about Van Gogh?
(if the participant differentiates between character and historical figure: ask about historical figure; otherwise leave it open; follow their categories)
follow up: find out about details that are changed; ask about consequences and evaluation (more / less interested etc)

5) Would you recommend the play to friends?

questions   Would you recommend it? Why, why not? What would you tell them about it?
follow up: would they recommend it to all or to specific friends? why?

6) Things they would like to discuss?

questions   Is there anything else you would like to comment on? Anything you thought was particularly interesting / confusing/ worth mentioning?

Interview before *Kafka's Dick*

1) Information: play is called *Kafka's Dick*

questions: Has the participant heard of it? If so, what did s/he hear?
What does the name tell you about the play?

2) Information: the participant is shown the flyer

questions: If the participant saw the flyer somewhere: what does it tell you about the play?

follow up questions about the suggestions given by the participant

What would you tell someone who has not seen this flyer but wants to know more about the play?
clarification if necessary

Would the flyer make you interested in seeing the play?
follow up questions: why? which elements are interesting?

If you wanted to convince a friend to come along, what would you tell him / her?

3) The Author

question   Do you know Alan Bennett? If so, where do you know him from

Does this influence your expectations about the play?
clarify: in how far? try to get a detailed idea of the elements that are influenced by these expectations

4) Background to the Play

question   What does "Kafka" in the title suggest for you?
follow up according to answer from participant: life, books; get detailed idea of their knowledge
follow up where did you hear about Kafka before? try to find the origin of their ideas

return to the part where the participant mentioned Kafka and their background knowledge; ask: how does that influence you expectations about the play

Interview after *Kafka's Dick*

1) Opening Question

question: Did you find it funny?
follow up: What exactly did you find funny? Do you remember some scenes etc?
follow up: Can you say why it was funny
clarify: if the participant relates the comic elements to Kafka or the idea of biography, find out why; if it is related to their previous knowledge, try to follow this discreetly

2) Sense of Authenticity

question   What did you think about the first scene?
clarify: does it look like a dream? Does it feel unreal?
follow up if necessary: How would you compare it to other scenes? How are the first and the second Kafka related?

This is a surprising question → How did you know at the beginning that the character is Kafka?

3) Kafka

question   Kafka as the central character – what do you think the other characters thought about him?

follow up if they point out that opinions are divided: do you agree more with one or another? Do you think the play suggests that one character is right?

follow up if possible: Brod's role and his authority

follow up if it has been mentioned above: Do you think that they treat Kafka fairly? If they mention the interrogation: try to follow this up, what do they think of it?

What do you think about their plans to write about Kafka?
clarify: is the scene important for them?
if necessary: ask individually: what do you think about Sydney's idea to write a book? What about Herman and his attempt to change his relationship with his son?
clarify: why do you think this?

4) Actors

question   Did you like the actors?
follow up: try to direct attention to Conor Moloney?
if possible without being too clear: did he play Kafka the way you expected him? try to find out if they say him as protagonist? How important is Kafka?

5) Programme

question   Did you read the program? Which sections did you read?
Why were you interested in reading it? Why not?
clarify is their interest is related to biography

6) Title

question   Do you think the title is appropriate?

7) Comparison to *Vincent*

question   If this particular participant said they learned something about Van Gogh: ask
if they learned about Kafka as well
if they say that the play told them less: why?
otherwise: what did you learn?
if they react to the topic: would this play work with another character?

8) School Group

question   If you were a teacher who takes a school group to see the play, what would you discuss? (check if biography is a relevant aspect for them)

9) Things they would like to discuss?

questions   Is there anything else you would like to comment on? Anything you thought was particularly interesting / confusing/ worth mentioning?

Interview before Insignificance

1) Information: The play is called *Insignificance*

    questions: Has the participant heard of it? If so, what did s/he hear?
                      Have you seen publicity in Sheffield?
                      What does the name tell you about the play?

                      Have you heard about Terry Johnson?

2) Information: the participant is shown the flyer

    questions: If the participant sees the flyer somewhere: what does it tell you about the play?
                      follow up questions about the suggestions given by the participant

                      What kind of play would you expect?

                      What would you tell someone who has not seen this flyer but wants to know more about the play?
                      clarification if necessary

                      if they have seen the poster: how do they connect the pictures to the text?

3) Location and Time

    question   Does the setting (time and place) influence your expectations?
                      follow up: what would the setting look like? what would the characters look like?

                      What do you know about this time in America?

                      if they have seen the photos: what do you know about the figures you recognise?

Interview after Insignificance

1) Expectations

    question   What is your first impression: did you like it?

                      Was the play the way you expected it to be?
                      follow up: why was it similar / different?
                      clarify: which specific elements were similar / different?

2) Describing the Play

    question   How would you sum up the play if you wanted to describe it for a friend?

                      What would you tell them about it? Would you recommend it?
                      follow up if they say it is funny: why is it funny? try to find out if humour is related to historical characters?

3) Characters and Actors

question　If they say that they had seen the photos in the foyer: How did you recognise them in the play?
follow up with specific question about each of the characters (appearance, spoken information, activity, relationship to others? SPEND TIME ON THIS!!)

If they had not seen the photos
same questions + when did you recognise them? Did this change your perception of the play?

Did they like seeing these famous figures impersonated on stage?

What did they think about the actors?
follow up for each of them; do not differentiate between actors and roles if they do not make this distinction

4) Program

question　Did you read the program? Which sections did you read?
Why were you interested in reading it? Why not?
clarify is their interest is related to biography

5) Situation

question　What do you think of their encounter? Why is it interesting? Why might an author have written it?
follow up: find out if they think it was true and why they thought this?
do not use words such as true without knowing that they use them

follow up: would it matter if I told you now that it is / is not based on a historical encounter? In how far would this change your point of view? Why?

6) Evaluation

question　Did they like it?
What was the main function of the play for them? entertainment, education?

7) Things they would like to discuss?

questions　Is there anything else you would like to comment on? Anything you thought was particularly interesting / confusing/ worth mentioning?

Interview before Letters Home

1) Information: The play is called *Letters Home* by Rose Leiman Goldemberg

questions:　Has the participant heard of it? If so, what did s/he hear?
Does the name give you any idea?

2) Student Production

question   The play is a student production. Does that influence your expectation in any way?
            clarify: what could be different in comparison to a professional production? (actors, sets, kind of play?...)

3) Information: the participant is shown the poster

questions: What do you think now? Any changes to your idea?

             What would you tell someone else you wanted to take along?

4) Sylvia Plath

question   if participant has not mentioned the name yet: try to bring attention to it
            what do you know about Sylvia Plath?
            clarification: find out about the area of their interest – work, life?

            What do you imagine a play described as "A Play about Sylvia Plath" could be like?

5) Letters

question   if they mention the idea of letters at some point: take this point up and try to find out how they interpret this idea

            if they think about dramatised letters try to find out exactly what they imagine
            follow up: would they see the idea of dramatised letters as positive?

Interview after Letters Home

1) Expectations

question   Was the play the way you expected it to be?
            follow up: why was it similar / different?
            clarify: which specific elements were similar / different?

            if it was different: did you like the unexpected elements?
            clarify: which elements exactly were different / the same?
            if it was similar: would they have preferred something different?

2) Actors

question   Did you like the actresses? Was there one you liked more than the other?
            follow up: did you like one more than the other? Why?

            Were they (wait for them to specify actress / character) more or less the way you expected them to be?
            clarify: why / why not?

            Was there anything you particularly liked or disliked about their actuation?

3) Sylvia Plath

question   How important do you think Sylvia is for the play (if necessary refer back to similar question about Vincent)

Did you imagine her to be like this?

if the participant had some idea of Plath before: did the play change your impression of her?
in any case: did the play make you more interested in her?

4) The style of the play

question   What did you think about the form in which it was presented on stage?
clarify: are they talking about the letters? realist style? simplicity?

if they mention the letters: would they have preferred to read them rather than seeing them presented on stage?
follow up: why / why not?

5) Program

question   Did you read the program? Which sections did you read?
Why were you interested in reading it? Why not?
clarify is their interest is related to biography

6) Recommendation and last comments

question   Would you recommend the play? why / why not?

Is there anything else you would like to comment on? Anything you thought was particularly interesting / confusing/ worth mentioning?

7) Comparison of the Plays

question   What do you guess my research is about? Is there anything you would say all these plays have in common that I might be interested in?
follow up: the topic they mention, ask for details
if the mention biographical elements: follow up: did you like this?
follow up: is that something they have observed in any other context?

Do you have a favourite play among the ones we saw for the project?
follow up: why this one? what did you like particularly? Is there a second favourite? What did you dislike about others?

Appendix 4

Marketing Material Used in the Pre-Show Interviews

Vincent in Brixton

front
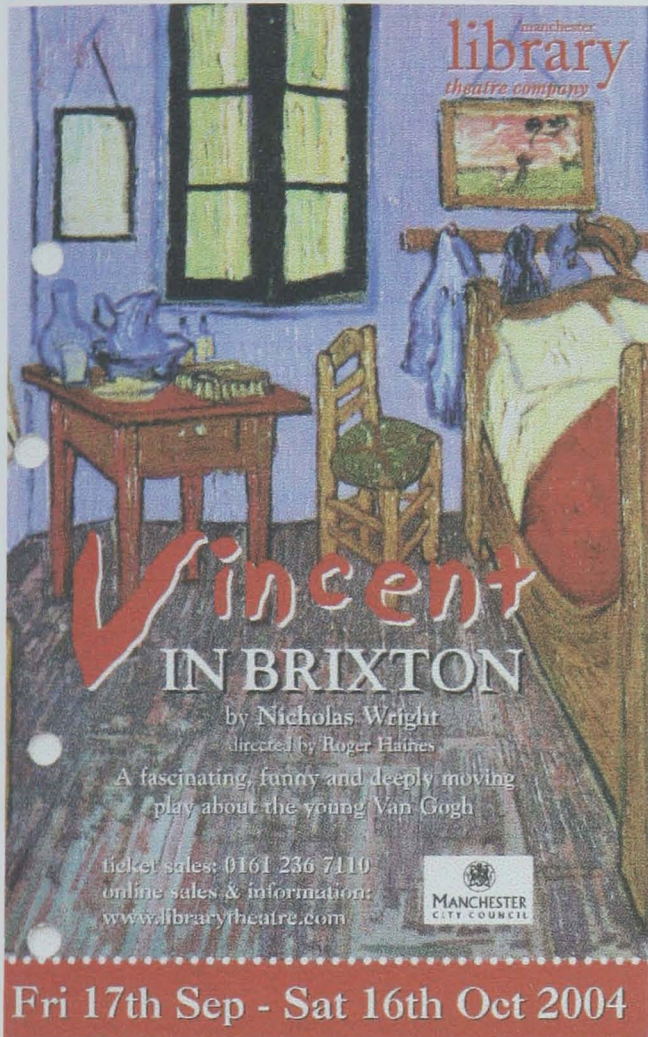
back

Friday 17th September - Saturday 16th October 2004

A Library Theatre Company production of

Vincent In Brixton
by Nicholas Wright

The poignant story of the young Van Gogh on the brink of genius, first love and self-discovery. Brixton 1873 and this brash young Dutchman, working for the London branch of an international firm of art dealers, rents a room in the house of an English widow. Three years later, he returns to Europe on the first step of a journey which will end in breakdown, death and immortality.

This fascinating, funny and often deeply-moving play explores the transforming effects of love, sex and artistic adventure.

Kafka's Dick

front and back

242

inside

derbyplayhouse ◉

Dame Sarah Brignall presents

Kafka's Dick

An irreverent comedy about one of the 20th Century's literary legends...

"two hours of comic bliss"

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

In this absurd comedy, suburban couple Sydney and Linda are shocked to find literary legend Kafka and his best friend Max Brod back from the dead and in their house. If only Linda hadn't kissed the tortoise!

Directed by Cal McCyrstal
Designed by Sue Mayes
Lighting Designed by David Phillips
Sound Design by Paul Delaney
Video Design by Kit Lane

From Cal McCrystal, the acclaimed director of *Loot*

'If I see anything more uproariously funny on stage I'll die laughing'

Ashley Franklin – Derby Telegraph on *Loot*

Preview Performances – 6–10 November

Tickets

Monday–Thursday	£15 (£11)
Friday and Saturday	£20 (£15)
Matinees	£12 (£9)
Reduced Price Previews – Weekday £12 (£9)	Saturday £15 (£11)

Please note concessions are available for Monday–Friday evening, Matinee and Preview performances only. All prices are subject to availability.

Sign Interpreted Performances
Thur 25 Nov @ 7.30pm

Audio Described Performances
Wed 24 Nov @ 7.30pm

Backchat
25 Nov

BOX OFFICE 01332 363275
www.derbyplayhouse.co.uk

The cast:

Tim Barlow – Hermann
Dame Sarah Brignall – Linda
Ajay Chhabra – Sydney
John Delaney – Father
Conor Moloney – Kafka
Neil Warhurst – Max Brod

How should we judge our literary legends?
On the quality of their work?
On their conduct in private life?
Or on the size of their private parts?

You can decide in this wickedly funny staging of Alan Bennett's comedy.

Not for the prudish!

A Dame Sarah Brignall production

"Do come along and laugh your knickers down."

Dame Sarah Brignall

Insignificance

front

A Sheffield Theatres Production
Insignificance by Terry Johnson

**24 February —
12 March 2005**

sheffieldtheatres.co.uk/buyit
0114 249 6000
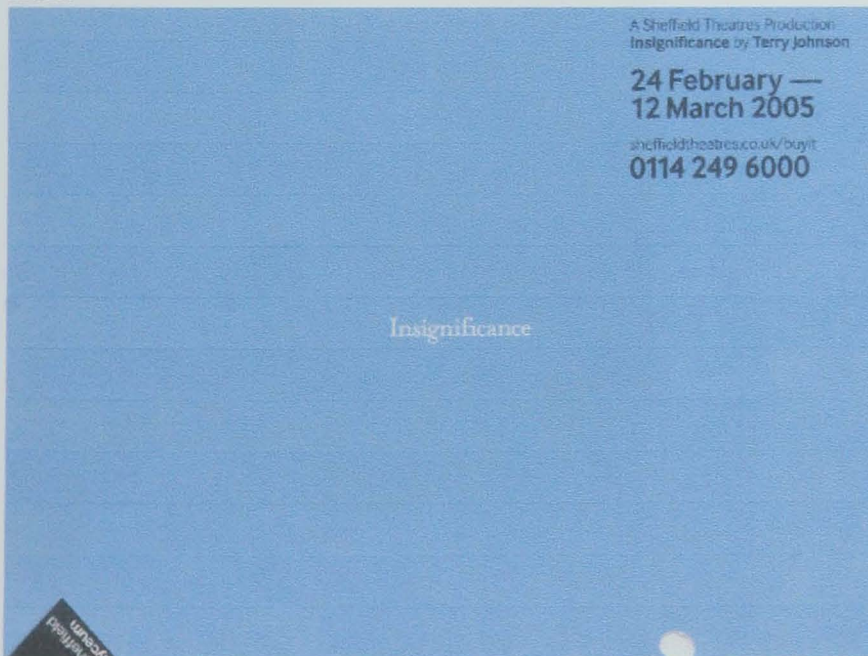
Insignificance

back

Insignificance by **Terry Johnson**

Director
Samuel West
Designer
Tom Piper
Lighting Designer
Neil Austin

It is New York. 1953. High above the city, in a luxury hotel bedroom, on a hot summer's night, four of America's most famous legends — a beautiful film star, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, a renowned baseball player and an infamous senator — meet for an extraordinary confrontation.

A piece that works on just about every level: the intellectual, the emotional, the playful... one of the landmark plays of the decade.' The Guardian

This production will tour nationally after completing its run at the Lyceum.

Letters Home

front only

Letters Home
by Rose Leiman Goldemberg

A Play about Sylvia Plath

£ 3/ 5   19th May; 2.30 & 7.45pm
tickets can be reserved under 0114-2228455
or bought on the door

Appendix 5

Excerpts from the Interviews

In the following the excerpts from the interviews that are cited in the thesis are presented in their original context, where they are marked in bold print. The questions from the interviewer are marked with UC. Sometimes a long speech is assigned various numbers – in this case no extra space is left between them.

<u>Before Vincent</u>

Participant 1

10
I don't know. The first Vincent I would have thought of wouldn't have been Vincent Van Gogh, and looking at the poster it kind of makes me think: "Oh, it looks like an art exhibition rather than a play". But that's because it's, you know, a picture by him, on the postcard. And, yes, my expectation are somewhat altered in that, I don't know, that something to do with Brixton, my mind automatically goes to the statues on Brixton station, which bears no relation whatsoever to Vincent Van Gogh, so that was kind of [] where my thoughts were going rather in terms of social issues rather than thinking about an artist in Brixton, which is obviously a whole different cattle of fish.

19
UC: Hm, what kind of story would you imagine?

20
(pause) Probably, because he's returning, it might be series of flashback of periods of his life from before, you know, reintroducing characters that he's met before, ehm, and, obviously, given the ending, which will "end in breakdown, death and immortality", hm, you know, probably coming to some sort of climax **about his work and life**. Presumably through significant characters that could have always be introduced, you know, they're not just going to be the postman or someone who lives down the street (laughter).

21
UC: Imagine that after we've met and you've seen the information you meet a friend and, or I'm your friend and I say: "Oh, well you know, I heard that in Manchester they're doing a play called *Vincent in Brixton*, What would you tell me about if from what you know now.

22
Ehm, **It sounds like a historical story about Van Gogh in Brixton**, in London, obviously, where he's coming back after a period of absence from there. Ehm, and it's supposed to be really good – little flower is quite pro it, obviously – and you know, it sounds like an interesting investigation into lots of different social issues and into lots of different genres really as well, if it's covering the romantic side of things and it's adventure and it's arty and, you know, I think I'd probably be quite specific about who I invited to come with me.

Participant 2

9
UC: Ehm, just from the name, what would you imagine is the play going to be, that the play is going to be like?

10
Well, **I imagine Brixton to be an area of London that is not so, ehm, well kept. It is often associated with social problems etc., so I should imagine it will be a story about a young guy** and possibly growing up in Brixton. I don't know if I would have to make agues about it, I'd say it'd be a young man's struggle against society for some reason, but that would be all pure speculation just from the name. But Brixton certainly conjures specific images, areas in my mind. Ehm, yeah I can't really say more than that from the title.

11
UC: It's just a guess. Ehm, imagine you saw this flyer as a poster somewhere: in how far does that change – take your time to read it if you ...

12
Well, **the first thing I point out as I look at the flyer straight off is that Vincent is Vincent Van Gogh, because you've got the Impressionist painting** there. So, ehm, "a fascinating, funny and deeply moving play about the young Van Gogh". Well that would change what I'd expect it to be. I'd expect it to be, eh, because Vincent in Brixton, you wouldn't expect the, I think **he was Dutch Vincent Van Gogh, you wouldn't expect him to be in London, in Brixton.** So, I'd expect this to be a funny take, almost a parody, a look at Vincent Van Gogh's life in a different light.

Participant 3

16
Yeah.... Yeah, actually I could see from the writing as well, perhaps a bit of comedy in there as well, as well as, thing like that too. Ehm, don't know what to say about it really ... **about the young Van Gogh.... which I have obviously heard of before,** but... I don't know what else.

Participant 4

17
UC: How do you imagine the story. What do you think the story of the young Van Gogh is?

18
Probably someone quite, well you just picture a **young artists, struggling and trying to make an aim for himself,** sort of struggling with day to day life, poverty and just his experiences and **eventually he, eh, he is successful.**

Participant 5

7
UC: Ok, ehm, if I show you a flyer of the production, if you imagine you saw this as a poster, if you want to take some time to look at it and read it, in how far does this change your expectation of the play?

8
SH: Ehm it's totally changed, 'caus I think I've got completely the wrong idea there. It seems obviously **about the artist Vincent Van Gogh,** so it's sort of **more of an arty type of play.** Ehm, maybe about his life and his background. I can't, I wouldn't have thought it would have been a comedy, **I wouldn't have associated Van Gogh with comedy,** but ...

9
UC: Why?

10
SH: I don't know, I suppose you sort of, well I assume the arts to be quite serious and, mind you, **he was known to be mad, wasn't he,** so. But no, that's not what I expected at all.

Participant 6

9
UC: If I show you this flyer and imagine you say this as a poster, just take some time to read it through. In how far does that change your expectations?

10
Quite a lot, this is about ehm, **the artist.**

Participant 7

11
UC: What do you think it is?

12

About the young Van Gogh, I don't know, maybe as a child, what he got up to, just about his room, about his personality maybe, getting to know a bit more about him when he was younger, really.

28

Yeah, it seems they are going to **show more of, not particularly his paintings, more of his life around it, and who he meets and his friends** and things like that.

After *Vincent*

Participant 1

19

Yeah, I did. I thought, I think maybe in a way it made me feel a lot more, I don't know what the word is, like they were being a lot more truthful about the story than I was expecting it to be. **I think the fact that it was so real, you therefore make assumptions that all the history and all the facts that they are telling you were actual facts.** They weren't, you know, just some fictional narrative that they put these characters in so I think, yeah, in that sense it helped to bring you to reality: this is real fact, this is history, this is what happened, but it wasn't portrayed in a way that many historical things are, like there are the facts. It was more, you know, taking you in, looking at it and making up your own mind of what was actually happening.

22

And I don't know, his portrayal of it as well. I didn't surprise me about his character in himself, but it revealed things about Vincent Van Gogh that I didn't know before ever.

23

I didn't realise about **his strong faith**, previously, which was really interesting. Yeah, I think everything seemed so appropriate to what he was trying to convey, there wasn't anything that was crunch-worthy. Yeah, I thought , I thought it was good. Even his changing relationships with people and his ageing, it was all done so subtlely and so well, I was very impressed.

30

Yeah, it was probably within a couple of seconds of him coming on. Initially by his dress it wouldn't have given it away. But as soon as he started speaking and engaged with them, you know, ok, fine I'm in there, I know who is who, but first impressions were just of a well-dressed Englishman, rather than... What I thought was kind of more my impression of Vincent Van Gogh was when he came in from the garden, and he was dressed in the boots and the hat, and, you know a more relaxed shirt. You know that was more my image of him, so again, it was interesting to see that contrast of, you know, very, very smart, business-like person, which I think he was, **possibly another side of his character that isn't usually portrayed in a very maximised manner**, really.

56

UC: Do you think it makes him more, you find you like him more or less in a certain way?

57

I think more, because, I suppose it's getting to know anybody: the more you know, usually the more you know, the more you are getting to like people. Ehm, so, yes, so I think you definitely feel a **greater empathy with him**, and you start to sympathise with him really, you can kind of understand... I remember talking about paintings with this kind of turmoil, where you can see everything he is going through previously and you're kind of seeing the run-up to what it led up that perhaps. It does definitely make him more endearing to towards him, I think.

Participant 2

27

By realism I don't mean it wasn't believable, it wasn't interesting I wasn't involved, I just mean they weren't there solely to do this total depiction of life. And I can't think of exact examples, but [pause] no, I'm still trying to think of example. I think quite a lot, well for example the way Van Gogh's sister, the way she used phrases wrong and her stubbornness and slamming the doors and her general attitude like the stomping attitude, we wouldn't really say that was a realistic way of portraying, but it did lead to a very strong comic character. In fact, I think, she is probably the best example through it, 'cause I think

she's **the most unrealistic, yet deeply comic of the characters in the play**. And it's the smallest part as well, we didn't see her till act two, did we? She didn't come into it till act two.

28

And for me it's one of the most memorable characters in the play, Van Gogh's sister, I guess because she'd been built up so much throughout act one and her role in the actual story of the play was quite a sad one. It was **showing the audience of the, the ehm gap that had occurred between Van Gogh and his supportive family**. We're not really aware of that until she starts bringing it up, and coming round and basically saying: Vincent, you're a disgrace to your family. It's only then we learn it, so her role is quite a serious one, but played in a very funny way.

29

UC: Did you expect Vincent to come over in one part as a disgrace to his family.

30

I didn't expect him to be a disgrace to his family as such, I didn't expect them to hate him. But I expected there to be some reason why he wasn't with them. I don't know, I think, I know very little about Van Gogh and his family, but I do know that he **spent a lot of his life on his own, so I presume there was, there were rifts between him and his family**, I presume that's historically noted. I don't know, I thought it was funny when it came though, especially through his sister. I thought, I thought the way we learned about it was very well done, in terms of a script, a story rather than a performance, but I thought, yeah.

47

For a start it would be a reason to see the play, it is **a very clever way of writing a variation on a theme and to get people to come and see it**. Secondly I think, you were asking me what I expected last week, and the fact that they put somebody that everybody has heard of in the title and they based the play around him, it does mean that you have these expectations to what you're going to see, if it would have been like *Ursula and lover*, it just wouldn't, you wouldn't have that.

Participant 3

28

Yeah, he, he sort of ehm, 'cause **he convinced me that he was like, you know, from Holland and stuff, obviously he's not speaking with an English accent** and it did seem, yeah, **played the part quite well I thought**, I haven't got much experience, but I thought he was quite good.

81

UC: What would you have, I mean, imagine I hadn't imposed this "don't speak about the play". What would you have liked to talk about in the car, what would you have liked to ask the other people?

82

I would have liked to ask them what they thought of the ending, definitely, like ehm, whether they knew what was going to happen next, whether they thought it was a bit soon. I would have talked about whether they thought the actors were any good, because I'm not entirely sure, so I'd ask the actual question. Ehm, I'd asked them whether they thought like it was funny or whatever, or not particularly, because some people were laughing and some people weren't. It depends if they like that sense of humour I guess. Eh, but, ehm, what... But I'd asked them whether it was actually all true, 'cause I wasn't, when I was in there **I wasn't entirely sure, like every bit was like all true or whatever**.

90

I was just wondering whether that was entirely like, actually what happened, just because that's not at all how you'd imagine him to be, I wouldn't anyway. But I guess it must be true, because hm, it probably is [not clear on tape].

91

UC: So, I don't know. Did you, you said you were wondering now. Do you think you're going to check what happens next or do you think you're also going to find out if what the play says is actually based on evidence?

92

Yeah, well, if; I think I probably would, just to check that I wasn't **being stupid**. Well, I might be being stupid. Yeah, I would actually, yeah.

98

And like he's like **sacked from his job and things and like ehm, and the girl he loves, you know, has gone of and married someone else, that's made me think it's actually probably true, 'cause it's like tragedy, what I'd associate with him.**

104

Ehm, well, trying to think. Well the fact that it's like one set, like always in the kitchen, I think, yeah, kind of made it more true, I think. Yeah, I'm just trying to think. Might, not very sure to be honest. I have to think about that for a little while.

105

UC: Don't worry. Ehm would it matter? I mean imagine I told you now that all of it is based on evidence, or if I told you that it is completely invented?

106

It wouldn't matter at all, I'd **be interested to find out, but as far as the story goes that wouldn't bother me at all,** no.

Participant 4

2

It was quite different, actually. I expected it to be more about **Vincent's work as an artist,** but very little of it, I found, was to do with art, and also the fact it was all pretty much set in one, well, it was all in one room. I thought they would have been they would have changed sets or something at some point.

44

It didn't really, 'cause I still **thought it was going to be more about his work,** but **with most plays, films, songs, there's always some sort of love interest in it somewhere.**

53

UC: If I told you either that the play was meticulously researched and all the details are found in other documents or if I told you that it is complete imagination, would that make any difference to how you see it?

54

Well, if **it is meticulously researched,** then I suppose that it **will have changed my opinion about how I thought Vincent was,** but, if it is not researched at all I suppose then I'm still stuck with my original views.

55

UC: Would it influence the way you think about the play?

56

Ehm, I think, ehm, it could possibly influence it and for some reason if it was actually researched and that is how it was, I probably wouldn't have formed like such a strong dislikes to certain characters and likes for other characters, it would have for some reason.

57

UC: Which characters would you have liked more and which ones less?

58

I think if it was all, **if it was all real, I would have probably liked Vincent more.** I can't really give a reason for that, it's, I think it's more, it's sort of the case of: if that's how he was that's how he was, and we're just looking at that.

102

What, made it more believable, as though it's true?

103

UC: Yeah,

104
Ehm, well, trying to think. Well **the fact that it's like one set, like always in the kitchen, I think,** yeah, kind of made it more true, I think. Yeah, I'm just trying to think. Not very sure to be honest. I have to think about that for a little while.

Participant 5

1
UC: Ok, ehm, I don't know, shall we start with a very general question? Was it more or less like you expected it to be?

2
Not at all. **I expected a more sort of, I don't know, more of his life. I didn't expect it to be just like, I think it was one year,** wasn't it, out of his life when he was really young, I expected him to be older. It was, no, I don't know, just totally different to how I expected.

8
Ehm, like I say, my, my perception of him is when he was older, you know, **looked a bit trampy** and, bit sort of like a lunatic really, **bit mad. In this he was very smart, very intelligent,** and he wasn't as far as I'm aware actually an artist at that time. He was just working for the family firm, so that in itself was sort of completely new to me as well.

46
I think it maybe both, maybe the actor and the character, because obviously, I don't **know how they found out about Sam and his character. I don't know how much they knew about him and how much the actor has actually put his own, what is the word?** I can't think of the word.

53
UC: Ok, obviously you had a look at the program. Which sections did you read?

54
I read all of it, actually.

55
UC: Oh, wow.

56
I particularly liked the bit they included, his sort of **life history right from sort of when he was born until he died. I liked that bit a lot.**

57
UC: The chronology bit?

58
Yeah. **Because it sort of filled in a lot of things, you know, which I didn't realise.**

77
UC: If you say that for you it is positive experience to be educated in that way, would you see the play as positive theatre experience as well?

78
Yeah, I would and I have already spoken to my friends about it, on the way down I was telling them about it. And they said, what is it about, you know, *Vincent in Brixton*. Again, like me, they didn't understand what it was about, so when I told them and explained it was funny, and, you know, it was about his life when he was younger, they were like, uh, it did sound interesting. I would recommend it as a way of an **educational experience** and just for **enjoyment as well.**

Participant 6

64
A little bit, because I thought it was probably mostly the truth and just a it more of writer's license to dramatise it a bit, but it is more what someone thought what happened and theorized and made it into a

story, rather than his actual life. He did live there, and they think he had an affair, they don't quite know the truth.

65
UC: Did, no sorry, go ahead...

66
No, I finished.

67
UC Does that make any difference, or?

68
No, it was just a play, it's just a **piece of fiction.** I suppose it is fiction really, to entertain us, and I thought it did a really good job.

Participant 7

60
A little bit, not fully. I think I'd probably go and look into it a little bit more now, because it made me get quite interested, I want to see, I want to find out a bit more about him. Yeah, I've got a bit of a perception about what he was like, as a person, I think he was **quite set,** I mean not set in his ways, but **once he decided to do something he'd do it** without uh, I don't know whether it was without the consideration of anyone else, but more that he decided that he was going to do that and everyone else would just have to accept that like staying in Brixton and then going to Paris and things like that. I think he said what he meant as well. He said what he wanted to say most of the time as well.

106
I thought it did seem quite natural. At the beginning I was a bit shocked 'cause I thought, well, I didn't think they'd be doing that, but then **I suppose it is a kitchen, so it's quite natural to do things like that when you are in the kitchen, like they were peeling potatoes and chopping them off and things.** It just seemed a bit weird.

Before Kafka

Participant 1

14
Ehm, eh, very masculine based, I would imagine [laughter] And, possibly quite a personal like a, that is sounding really dodgy, like an intimate, almost **maybe autobiographical thing,** but obviously given the title, be not just an impartial person, but someone obviously quite involved, ehm, quite close to that life. Ehm, I suppose it's an element of kind of the shock to the title, like "really, what, he?" which is quite I suppose possibly avant garde, but then we might just be really dirty minded, I don't know. [laughter]

36
UC: He's a writer. Does that prompt bring anything at all?

37
Ye, well, yeah, I knew he **wrote,** but, ehm, yeah **it's Kafka's Motorbike,** isn't it, but ehm, further, he's probably been **travelling,** but really I wouldn't know absolutely...

Participant 2

10
Well, he's a very contemporary writer, he's very into characterisation as in, he like, he's very for strong forward thinking characters, I mean *Talking Heads* style, he often gets very celebrated, famous, not so much famous, just very talented character actors like Julie Andrews and people like this to play his talking heads. But I don't know, I haven't actually read any Alan Bennett, I've just seen *Talking Heads*, I mean, I met him a few times, I've heard him talking and I know that he's a very down to earth, he's a very, very funny guy as well and I get the impression that he's very intelligent, so I think it would be, **because it's Kafka, I should think that it's quite intelligent humour.** It will be interesting to see the play now having studied Kafka.

32
"Suburban couple Sydney and Linda are shocked to find literary legend Kafka and his best friend, Max Brod, his best friend in their house. If only Linda hadn't kissed the tortoise. Right, well, back from the dead in their house, yeah, well again, this, **it could be very similar to this metamorphosis thing, waking up as, "as Gregor Samsa woke from easy dreams** to find himself in his bed transformed into a giant insect, ehm, I very possibly, I can't remember that much about it, but if I saw that, I wouldn't be surprised, and it's what people know about Kafka as well, name, if you can find people that are going to know one work by Kafka, it's the play where there's a guy who is a beetle. Right, ehm; twentieth century literary legend actually, that surprises me, I thought he was a little bit later than that, I thought he was pushing 21st, so well, but I, be wrong, that's just misinformation..."

Participant 3

11
UC: We had lots of misunderstandings about the title [shows title written], I didn't invent it, it is really dick.

12
[laughter]: Alright, ok, well, to be honest, I, that doesn't really like say anything to me, because it's **obviously, well not English**, but the title anyway, so... I wouldn't really know what to expect to be honest, because obviously, as you know, I am not really a theatre goer, and the title doesn't really say anything to me that I would know. You know, I'd have to learn more about it to be honest. It sounds quite, interesting, the name anyway, but...

20
JT: Well it sounds like a, well, it's obviously a comedy, it sounds quite as like **it's a silly comedy**, like ehm, just like stupid things happening all the time, that sort of comedy, ehm, which is, which sounds quite good actually. Sounds like my sort of thing, sounds interesting. And, eh, the review makes it sound quite good as well, especially as it's from the Daily Telegraph, "uproariously funny". Ehm, the story sounds a bit strange, but quite good.

Participant 4

3
UC: **Just from the title, what would you imagine?**

4
Ehm, **I think Kafka was a writer** and I just vaguely remember him being mentioned when I studied some George Orwell book a long time ago, but I didn't actually read Kafka and then I've only heard of him one other time, which is in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, something they say with Kafka's Motorbike, so I don't really know much about Kafka, so *Kafka's Dick*... Ehm, probably ehm, Dick may be a person. Possibly someone who is interested in whatever Kafka did and, besides, I can't really think of much else other than that...

16
I mean, **bringing people back from the dead and kissing tortoises it seems to be something quite surreal.** Ehm [pause], I mean, there's not a lot to go on, and I don't know. Maybe the tortoise is actually Kafka or his best friend or something. I don't think that the story is going to be something you could just sit down and guess, it's going to ... I kind of, I'm expecting something which in the end is a, ehm like a whole lot of unrelated material, but it's just held together by some loose connection to Kafka, Like it might just be a story, but it's just how the name added to it...

17
UC: What kind of unrelated material would you imagine?

18
[pause] I think what I mean is, ehm, it could like, you could have a story about anybody being brought back from the dead. And, well, I don't know much about Kafka, but I know that, I'm kind of guessing that. **His work didn't contain anything sort of, which is that much to do with tortoises and bringing people back from the dead.**

19
UC: Not really, no.

20
And, like, how can I explain it? Alright. To get to the, to make a story about bringing people back from the dead and linking a tortoise to it somehow, it all sounds to me like it's going to be sort, it's going to be sort, it's going to be **just a variety of different things, which are being held together loosely by some central theme.**

Participant 5

4
I have got no idea, I take, I'm getting there might be a foreign feel to it, from the first bit *Kafka's*, but I've got no idea whether it's like Greek or Russian or Spanish, I've got no idea, but I'm getting an element of foreign, of foreignness to this play.

Participant 6

10
Is it a person, Kafka?

22
Oh, it's probably going to be quite rude.

23
UC: What kind of play would you expect it to be if it's probably quite rude?

24
Ehm, **a comedy?**

25
UC: Ehem...

26
Ehm, crazy, I don't know probably about his love life then.

After Kafka

17
Ehm, that he was an author that was slightly introverted who didn't want to blow his own trumpet in any shape or form, yeah, ideas seemed to contradict that, the ideas seemed to be very big and worldly what he was writing about, It might be some intricate thing, but kind of blown up into some magnificent kind of thing, but very, kind of self-reflective and, or from what they said about his **relationship with his father, that he kind of almost had a repressed childhood** and possibly that, you know, then influenced how he reacted to the outside world.
18
And you almost get the impression that he was quite a loner, was quite friendless despite the fact that he seemed to have a very close friend in the play. You almost got the feeling: is it a true relationship, or is it, you know, it's a very superficial thing, where they're friends on one level, but you know if it came to the crunch, would they be there for each other? Let me think what else. Obviously, **the volume of text that he actually produced as well, and the fact that there has been a lot written about him, as well,** so that kind of says something about his status as well.

68
UC: Ehm you just said the title sort of suggests unreality ...

69
Yeah.

70
UC: Do you think the production did as well?

71

Yes. [laughter]

72

UC: Why do you think so?

73

I suppose partly because it was very much as if it was on the set, because the characters would talk to the audience as themselves, so that kept off the feeling that it was really quite real. And the fact that **half the characters were dead**, also slightly surreal. Ehm, but, that, and that was, you know, that kind of kept of going consistently, so that really – it wasn't made such a big thing off, but then when you got towards the end and you had Alan and Gordon Bennett like taking the scenery on and off, then they all started floating around in like UV heaven, so you felt just like: wow, what's going on? And that was really very surreal.

Participant 2

10

Ehm, well, yes, to me, as I said, I haven't read the play, so I don't know whether it was in, but **I thought the beginning scene was almost unnecessary.** There was this whole thing with the theme that was underlying the play, it was Max Brod that said "Yes, Kafka, I'll burn all your books and then he goes and publishes them, and all the way through the play there's this riff – he doesn't know, he doesn't know about the books and they hide the books and this is a big thing throughout the play.

13

Hm. Ehm, there was, I don't think my **knowledge of Kafka added anything to the play that we saw on stage.** I don't think it was necessary and I don't think the play presented anything new. I don't think it gave me any new things towards what I know about Kafka. I think if focused on certain elements of Kafka's life and what people know about Kafka and just use those, so it wasn't there to paint a serious portrait of Kafka and as I said, it didn't add anything to what I knew or even take away from what I knew, it was just, it chose to focus on certain given elements of what we're taught about Kafka I guess.

14

UC: If you think it didn't pain a serious portrait of Kafka, do you think there's any particular reason why Bennett chose Kafka?

15

Ehm, [pause] my brain wants to say no, no I don't think there is, I think Bennett could have likewise chosen any writer of the 20th century. I think that with Kafka, there is, we are given this kind of history of Kafka, we are given this basis with Kafka, we are told that Kafka was, had deep psychological problems, he never had any success with women and he hated his father and he was depressed being, practically a recluse all the time and we learn it hand in hand with Marx or the society problems and these writings, so I think it's a very good basis to write a play, especially seeing it in a non-serious manner, it does, **it does pose the question of whether what we know is totally one-sided** and whether maybe, I don't know, they suggested possibly that Kafka's father was a great man.

20

Ehm…. Kafka, there were certain elements that I could, I could look past, for example Kafka's costume, the way he was presented. I felt he was almost a little bit bright in his tweed suit and his socks pulled up, but we can, we can look through that, because I mean, it is a comedy, it is a character who is dead. **I mean we're not after a hundred percent total realism,** but I found him… **The first thing that I need to mention is his Irish accent.** Now I don't know whether that was the actor's Irish accent or whether it was Kafka's Irish accent. I suspect it was probably the natural accent of the actor because it didn't falter throughout the play and I genuinely don't think any of the actors was good enough to hold an accent for that long. Ehm, I also, ehm, I thought he was a bit happy.

21

He was a bit smiley, you wanted to go and give him a cuddle. If we're asking about the actor, I thought he was deeply unprofessional, he messed his lines up more than, on more than one occasion. I find that wholly unacceptable in a professional production, especially like having seen the cost of the ticket prices. I don't know whether they did that deliberately, it maybe happened in the dress rehearsal and they kept it through all the time and it was a deliberate fumble. I don't know, but I found there was so much, so much suspending the disbelief, or getting in the way of that suspension that what we got, neither was it

unbelievable, 'cause it was funny, but it was just unbelievable in the fact that they had presented that to us a production and they were happy to put that in front of an audience.

22
UC: Ehem. If you think about the other characters and their relationship with Kafka: is there any you find particularly intriguing or you sympathise with more than any other?

23
Well, I think, the two characters that I'd need to talk about are the two that actually had a relation, in my knowledge, on Kafka's life, so that would be Max Brod and his father., I start with Max Brod. Now this whole debate we're getting through the silent film at the moment, I mean, did Max Brod, like deceive Kafka, was this a big deceit on his part? Well, I mean I'm sure academics are debating it in books as we speak, but I mean I tend to think not, but it was almost, this relationship between Max Brod and Kafka, it was very jokey, very fun, very punchy, more like the boys watching the football than **Max Brod was the guy who ultimately made Kafka.**

24
Without Max Brod there is no Kafka, like whether you agree or not, that's the way I see it. Max Brod is Kafka, without Max Brod there would be no Kafka.

Participant 3

21
UC: What, did, why do you think it was necessary to explain at the beginning?

22
Well, **because of people like me, who don't know anything about Kafka at all, that's kind of central to the whole storyline**, so it's kind of essential that you , otherwise don't really get a lot of the plot or the storyline what's going on, even some of the jokes I guess. It's kind of vital to explain that.

27
UC: What do you think you know more?

28
Well, **I just know that he wrote, like, was it *Crime and Punishment*?**

76
Yeah, well, that's quite strange, I suppose. Well, I suppose that **the fact that it's quite a silly play means that it doesn't have to be entirely accurate to how Kafka's character was** for the guy playing Kafka. And Sydney, ehm, he seemed to have decided to have played someone who was like really lively and really enthusiastic. And obviously he did it very well, so if he had prepared to do that, then he was quite good.

93
I would like to find out, well I thought about reading the program, I'd **quite like to see more about Kafka**, because I didn't really get a huge amount of detail out of the play about who he actually was, and whether the person playing him was actually playing him as he was in real life, 'cause you can't really tell, because obviously it's such a silly play. So, yeah, I mean the play has made me liked intrigued me to find out a little more about him and see what he was like and whether it's all true. Because – well, you obviously don't really know with the last play whether it was all true or not.

Participant 4

4
Ehm, the **way the characters were played**, it was, I don't know if that's how it was supposed, how it's written, but they **just seemed completely overdone**, like taking each character to extremes.

58
[pause] Well, I'm not completely sure what Sydney's motive is, but Kafka's father is like, is already portrayed as sort of, not the ideal father and so, like I said, the father is **more bothered about how he looks** and he sees his son as an extension of him and what his son does reflects on him, so he is sort of more bothered about his own image and that's the reason that he's trying to change it.

70

Ehm, that he was a writer and that he, eh, I mean the book they mention in the play, I think it is *The Trial*, it's **something about a man waking up and finding that he is a cockroach** or something. Ehm, I would mention that and, the thing about him actually, that he wasn't particularly famous during his lifetime and wanted his books to be burned when he died, that's quite interesting if in fact it is true. Ehm

71

UC: Do you think it is?

72

Yeah, I do, I do sort of think so, 'cause would you really, like would the play **have been written with the name of someone that like famous and then completely not have any sort of proper link to them.** 'Cause I was actually interested in finding out a bit about Kafka after the play, but I haven't done that, yet. So...

Participant 5

20

I didn't have a chance to speak to them before the play, because I mean, I only found out what it was just before and I didn't see anybody before the play, so...

21

UC: So, when you watched the play, you still weren't quite sure if it was a fictional character or one based on a...

22

It was towards, after I suppose, maybe, I don't know, rough guess, half hour or so, that I realised that it was a real, **I felt really stupid.**

23

UC: No, no, no, no. How did you realise?

24

I suppose they were going on about his works and his books and things like that at the beginning, so I realised that he was actually a writer.

25

UC: Did you, how did this going on about his books convince you that he was a real writer and not an invented one?

26

Ehm, I don't know, that's really difficult, it's really difficult to answer that one, ehm I'm trying to think of a bit in the play where, I can't remember. I don't know, it was just the way they went around and portrayed it, and Sydney was, you know, had all his books and things. I don't know, it was just **the way they portrayed it that gave me the feeling that he was a real character.**

88

UC: Which ones do you think are fictional?

89

The couple.

90

UC: Why?

91

I can't find anything here [programme] about, you know, a couple I mean, plus it's set in the future. They've just brought into it, I suppose, to create, you know to create a certain scene to create the play.

Participant 6

34

UC: Do you think that, do you think that they have plausible reasons for attempting to change everything or not?

35

Noo. It was **just him and Herman trying to come up with a plan that would make both, well, one famous and the other one sounds better**. Not particularly.

Participant 7

45

UC: Why do you think you're not quite sure who understood him more, or who understood him less.

46

Because they only really met him that time, so **you can't really understand someone from reading their work, or reading autobiographies on them, because obviously different people have different perceptions about people,** so, from reading them, he might get a biased understanding of Kafka, whereas she will just get the personal understanding.

87

UC: Do you don't think the play told you anything else?

88

Ehm, probably about his childhood that his father **was not very nice**, and the bit about, what did they say about two of his brothers dying, or did I read that, I might have read that in, or is it just me making that up?

89

UC: I don't know, it might be. I think, yeah, actually I think that…

90

I might have read that in the program, I'm not sure. Possibly, and that his friend, he had actually told him to burn the books and the fact that he hadn't actually burnt them was how the books obviously got published and that's the whole, that's all I really know about it, really. I wouldn't really know what he wrote about, well, maybe a beetle or a cockroach.

Before Insignificance

Participant 1

9

UC: Ok, just from the poster and the title, what would you guess the play might be like?

10

Possibly quite ironic, maybe quite satirical, because they seem to be fairly significant people with the rather contradictory title. Ehm, and, possibly the fragmentary pictures kind of suggest maybe lots of individual bits of story happening under one big umbrella title, rather than just one complete narrative. Ehm yeah, I think that's probably about all.

44

Yeah, I would expect them to be familiar as well, but, or maybe not familiar to me, but familiar to other people who are more interested in different fields. Ehm, and, yeah, I'm sure they're all **very famous people and therefore probably iconic photographs of those people as well.** Ehm, but they didn't leap out at me.

Participant 2

18

Here, like you can, "an infamous senator", like you can imagine he is probably going to be, maybe, possibly not a very nice chap, self-centred, egotistical, overpowering film star being incredibly shallow.

19

I don't know, this is just purely what I'm guessing, but **the Nobel winning prize scientist would be very clever**, very logical, very – analytical in what he says and probably able to quite easily patronise the others. Ant the renowned baseball player, ehm, it's the one I'd be the least able to stereotype, but I'd expect someone, somewhere on the film line, somebody who'd be very famous, maybe catch phrases, maybe overpowering. And they meet for "an extraordinary confrontation". I think what it would be, the scenario, you take these four people who normally wouldn't go together and put them in a scenario where they all have to act together. Yeah, I think that's what I'd expect from reading that.

Participant 3

23

UC: Does that create any expectations about what the set would look like, or the characters would look like or how they would behave or...

24

Ehm, the set. I guess it would be like, quite a small room, but quite a classy, expensive looking, maybe like a high race sort of place. Ehm, **1950s, so, well, 50s clothing obviously**, and eh, it's just in a bedroom, isn't it.

Participant 6

23

UC: Why do you say "obviously not true"?

24

I don't know. It seems a bit that it wouldn't actually happen. You wouldn't get a film star, a scientist, a baseball player and a senator in the same room together. Ehm, what **might be quite funny is their conversations**, 'cause **the scientist is going to be really intelligent. The film star – they tend not to be. The baseball player – might be all macho I suppose**. Senator – a bit crazy, so it could be interesting.

Participant 7

22

Yeah, you could imagine them like arguing quit a lot about different things. It's **a bit weird, thinking about four people like that sharing a hotel room.**

After Insignificance

Participant 1

23

UC: You just said that he was very much like you expected him to be. Ehm, does that differ for the characters where you can make out the historical background?

24

Ehm, I don't think so. I think again that they did act very much as I would expect them to act in that kind of situation and **seemed to portray quite effectively the characters who they were being**. Ehm, and yeah, you know, I can't, I can't really say they didn't meet my expectations of how I would expect them to be. I guess it's kind of a little bit of an unusual circumstance to be in to start anyway, but, ehm, but, like, yeah, I think that it was a reasonably realistic impression of how they would be.

42

UC: Ehem. If you say that in a certain way there might be an explanation of why their meeting is slightly more believable. Does that mean that you would also integrate that in your knowledge about Albert Einstein and Marilyn Monroe now, that they met in a hotel room at night?

43

Ehm,

44

UC: With two other people.

45

I don't know, that is quite a difficult question. Ehm. 'cause, yeah, it does make it a bit more comprehensible if they did meet how they meet, but again, but I don't **know, not knowing much about the history it does seem kind of an odd scenario that such people should meet** in the first place, let alone how and when. Ehm, and I don't know if it would affect how I perceive these characters as, you know, real people in history, I don't know if it would make me think differently of them, like oh, he might have met Marilyn Monroe and almost slept with her, like I don't really think that that would kind of be taken seriously enough to know as fact without any other literature supporting it.

48

UC: Does the fact that you very much doubt the idea that the encounter happened like that influence your perception of any of the things they say about the historical characters?

49

I don't think so, which **probably sounds a bit contradictory if I can accept the characters for who they are so believably, in that, you know, if it didn't happen.**, But then it's like a whole different kind of writing if you're writing about two people that actually existed but it's the what if scenario of what would happen if they met, how would they react, and if you studied those characters sufficiently well to know how they would react in all sorts of different circumstances then I think you could pull it off equally as a completely fictional thing. But obviously if it, if it did actually happen, then there'd be proof and then there'd be kind of inspiration to prompt how they did react to one another and how they did go on, what happened between them.

Participant 2

3

UC: Could you develop a bit on the idea of the, the way it was written?

4

Well, I think the best thing about it was, apart from the fact that it was set in the past and it was the 1950s whenever, the scenario itself was almost entirely believable, like you could almost be able to believe that these people were there and it did happen like that. When in actual fact, you're almost tempted to belief, it's almost a fact that there is no way on earth that these four people would meet in a situation like that is presented on the stage, so I liked **the fact that it was a very unbelievable scenario presented as a nice believable story.**

10

Well, Joseph McCarthy is a senator or the characters is senator and I would imagine more in the sphere of politics would be more imaginable for a politician to try and find somebody with a big name to support their evidence. That's, I mean Einstein is a scientist and the government would like scientists to prove their own point. Whereas Marilyn Monroe turning up in the bedroom of Einstein – I cannot see a reason why Marilyn Monroe would turn up in the bedroom of Einstein, to that's just not a match made in heaven. Marilyn Monroe does. Marilyn Monroe does not turn up to explain the theory of relativity to Einstein, it's just, no it's unenvisageable.

11

UC: Well, she is famous for having had relationships with many men? Why not Einstein?

12

Well, to be honest, I think the play answ..., like the play gave that exact question itself. Why not Einstein? Everybody assumes Einstein is this eccentric old man who spends his life buried in his books and we did see on stage quite a likeable, charming Einstein, so I think, I think the play more than anything asks that. But I think if you were to take a sample of people and ask them, which of these combinations seem more likely, **nobody would say that Marilyn Monroe and Einstein would go together**. I might be wrong if you undertake the research, but I, I can't really say. I mean you assume Marilyn Monroe is less intellectually sound than Einstein, it would be an assumption, maybe a wrong one, but Marilyn

Monroe is the typical feminine, 50s icon. Yes dear, yes dear. She's a typical dolly bird for want of a better expression, whereas Einstein is very renowned scientists that challenged many of our views on science.

13
UC: Ok, perhaps we could talk about the characters a bit. You just said Einstein and Marilyn Monroe. How did you know it was them, when did you realise?

14
Well, I, do you want me to talk about each one separately? Well, firstly **Marilyn Monroe was purely visual**, the style of Marilyn Monroe. As soon as that door opened and the glasses were there with that scarf on her head and the big fur coat, I mean it was very clear that nobody else could have been, so that was purely visual.

15
UC: Was there anything later on, a visual image or information given by what they say that actually tied in with what you knew about Marilyn Monroe that confirmed this idea?

16
To be honest my knowledge about Marilyn Monroe isn't as good as other people's, but there was, there were a number of things, for example the whole, the whole skirt, they were standing on the road and the skirt blowing up. I mean that is one thing that I think everybody knows about Marilyn Monroe that famous aspect there. I think that was the most striking thing, but ehm, yeah, I thought that was the main clue within the script itself that it was definitely Marilyn Monroe. Having not read the script, I think for Marilyn Monroe it is more visual. Einstein I think there was a lot more in the script that gave away that Einstein was Einstein. Ehm, I thought they like **replicated the photo where he looks startled very well in the appearance of the character**. But the script with such things as **the theory of relativity** and that series that he was working on when he died that he never did in the end, but, ehm I think the script was stronger towards Einstein than Marilyn Monroe, but Marilyn Monroe was far more visual.

19
UC: Other things that sounded familiar and which you could associate with the two historical figures?

20
Well, there is a, there is the, I mean the whole thing about the theory of relativity for a start, that for example there is nobody else that it could have been. They were also talking about, when they looked out of the window they were talking about the fans and the picture on the billboard. I can't think of concrete examples of where the play gave those two characters gave away, but I thought it was fairly clear who all the characters were. **I wouldn't have been able to put a name on Joe DiMaggio to be perfectly honest, I wouldn't have been able to put a name on him until afterwards when I read the program.** But the other three it was very clear who they were.

21
UC: How about McCarthy then?

22
McCarthy was the one that took me the longest to get, because I don't know very much about American politics. I was saying that in the first interview I could imagine mean American senators. **The stage that I knew that it was McCarthy was when Einstein handed Marilyn Monroe a program that was for the** *Crucible* **and then it all fell into place, because Marilyn Monroe was married to Arthur Miller who wrote** *The Crucible* **which uses the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts as a allegory for McCarthyism** and that is pretty much all I know about McCarthyism. I know it more through the *Crucible* than I do through politics. And when he was asking Einstein to stand in a trial to help try these Communist warlord or however it was that he put it, that's when I got McCarthy, I mean it was fairly late on that I was able to put a name on McCarthy.

31
UC: Why do you think you would give him more respect if it had actually been based on something...

32
I don't know, but I think it's harder to produce as piece such as that which is, I mean it's such a **clever combination of fact and fiction**. Ehm, these characters in this scenario and I think it's a lot cleverer to write something like that which is largely based on fact and that the only thing which is unbelievable or

inconceivable is the scenario in which the characters find themselves. I think it's **very easy** for the playwright to take a situation or take characters that people are aware of and then, I won't use the word lie but build on stereotypes, exaggerate, so that what you're left with isn't a true reflection of these characters, it's just a playwright's stereotypes within a play.

33
UC: Where do you think is the line between what you would except as something mostly based on truth and something invented? Thinking about this particular play, which things do you think have to be...

34
I think **the strong thing about this play would be that it's the characters that are based on truth and the scenario, the setting and the situation are based on fiction.** I think, I think for me the line would be if this, the information we learned or even about the characteristics about the characters were then found to be untrue. 'Cause I think the play worked fantastically in integrating things that we know into an unfamiliar setting and building those, so for me, I would like to believe that the characters were as truthful as they could possibly be and that it was the setting that was fictional.

40
Yeah, I think certainly it does for a number of reasons. Firstly **the audience, eh, are given something that they already know something about.** Everybody in the audience would know something about at least one of the characters. So from a literal point of view, it prevents the playwright or the actors having to spend the first 15, 20 minutes of the play just like: we are the characters, this is our history, like the general kind of Stanislavskian given circumstance. I also think eh that it kind of sells better. It sounds better in a blurb, these characters.
41
I mean it didn't mention anything in the blurb about the fact that it was these characters, but I'm sure if people, I'm sure many people would have been attracted to the play if I'm sure in reviews and in things like that it would say it is these characters and in fact it said in the program it will always be remembered as the one where Marilyn Monroe explains the theory of relativity to Einstein. And I think that not only makes **it very attractive to the audience as it means they can relate to it more**, I think it's important to remember as well that theatre is a business and it's written like that to get bums on seats, to get people into the theatre to see the play.

46
UC: Is there any kind of information you thought you would have liked to have after seeing the play and you would have liked to see in the program?

47
There is information I would certainly be looking for after seeing he play, such as that. Whether I find it in the program, if they had put it there for me that would be brilliant, but **I'd like to have seen a bit about each of the characters that were clearly represented on stage**, McCarthy, Monroe, Einstein and DiMaggio, I wouldn't have minded seeing an overview of their lives and the whole thing we were talking about, about stereotypes, **it may have been good to mention that Marilyn Monroe did or didn't have a higher than average IQ.**

Participant 3

11
UC: We were talking about the characters. How did you recognise them? You said obviously it's Marilyn Monroe, when did you realise?

12
Like as soon as she walked in, really, because like she's wearing the classic dress that she's always seen in film and the hair and the make up. And when she talk abut the way **her skirt is blown up**, that's like the classic picture you get on posters like that and stuff and films. And you can tall it's Einstein obviously 'cause they're talking about relativity and like having invented it as he obviously did. And his whole look as well, **the moustache and crazy hair**. You can almost tell straightaway just from that look rather than what they say and then after what they say it just confirms it really.

34
Well, just because the other two people were, so I guess that he probably was as well. On who though I don't know. 'Cause I don't really know much about the politics at that time, but he's **obviously very**

concerned with Communism and stuff and anti-American things and he's always a little, he's slightly corrupt maybe as well, which I guess also, that reminds me of that time in America as well I guess, as well.

54
Ehm I think that the person who played Marilyn Monroe was good as well. It's just because I'd imagine she isn't American and **the way she portrayed herself is pretty much how I remember Marilyn Monroe**. It's probably what helped me to see and she portrayed that very well I think. Einstein was good, but mainly because I thought he was funny and he like, the way he delivered lines was very good and comic timing and things.

80
UC: Were there any other elements of the play where you thought: hm, I'm not quite sure about this one?

81
Not quite sure if it was real, or? Ehm, let me think [mumbles] ehm, when he threw put his papers of the window, I wasn't sure whether that was actually true and the fact that he had only one copy as well. I was slightly dubious because of him being a scientist... I know he was eccentric but I thought he would have had more copies than just one pile of papers. And **I wouldn't imagine he would throw them out of a window, because that would be like a famous thing, I would imagine I would have remembered if he had done.**

Participant 4

19
UC: Ehm, I mean, Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe were really married. Would it make any difference if you knew that they actually did meet in real life?

20
Ehm, I don't think it would make a difference, it's like, in the, like while watching the play I kind of, I wasn't **sure like how much of it was actually based on facts or not. And, but it didn't really affect like what I, like the way I perceived or enjoyed things.**

30
Ehm, right, you wouldn't expect her to know or be able to explain it. You wouldn't expect her to be in a hotel room with Einstein, **even if she was in a hotel room with Einstein she wouldn't make a pass at him**...

31
UC: Why do you think she wouldn't?

32
Because it just doesn't fit in with the image that I had of her.

49
UC: Were, which aspects of Marilyn Monroe did you think you recognised and were aspects where you thought, oh I heard of that before or I've seen that before?

50
Ehm, the **having affairs with people** I'd heard of before and then, I think, I'm not sure how she died but I know it wasn't, it was under some sort of abnormal circumstances maybe to do with, I don't know, her frame of mind or something. In the play like you got this impression that she was child-like in some ways and troubled and sort of wanted attention but didn't get in from the people she wanted it from. Like she's getting it from fans but not the actual people who are close to her who could have made a difference to her in the way she needed it.

69
UC: Were there, were there then other elements later that sort of confirmed your idea that it was Einstein?

70
Ehm, when they started **talking about the scientific things** that confirmed it.

85

UC: Did it strike you as odd that you had two people you could clearly associate and two people you couldn't?

86

Ehm, not odd, but I did think: **you can recognise two of them, should I be able to recognise the others.** And, like, the Baseball Player, I thought, yes if I knew a bit more, I could maybe work out who that was, but as for the Senator I don't like, I'm just not sure whether there was any real basis, like if he was a real person or not.

Participant 5

15

UC: Why can't you imagine that they might have met in history?

16

Ehm, I suppose it's very biased, but it's just completely **different social circles and I assume interests.** Ehm, I think, you now, she was in films he was in science and I know that sounds stupid and they can overlap, but as far as I'm aware, to my knowledge, they didn't overlap. I'm probably completely wrong now, I'm sorry.

24

Possibly not, no, I mean, the link to me is still quite tenuous, you know. **I still can't see how to make a story out** of that. **Unless it was something that had happened, you know in history** that I'd think, alright that makes some sense to me. But the fact that it was Marilyn Monroe and Albert Einstein, it still confuses me...

25

UC: Ehm, if we could talk a bit about the characters. You said they're never named, but how did you recognise the female character as Marilyn Monroe?

26

As soon as she cam through, you know, as soon as the door opened and she stood there I had this picture I described before, you know, 50s actress, blonde, you know, very glamorous, and so I suppose it was just, she is such an icon that it was immediately her I thought of. **Then I think it sort of confirmed it a bit when the baseball player, when she said it was her husband that I thought that must be Marilyn Monroe** and...

35

UC: How about Einstein, how did you recognise him?

36

Initially I thought there was passing resemblance 'cause I suppose the grey hair, I know that's quite a tenuous link and then further on, they mention his **work** and you know, **his theories** and so, then I thought, hm, must be, they must be on about Albert Einstein.

Participant 6

25

UC: You just said about Einstein. How do you know it's Einstein? They never say any names...

26

No, I know, it's very clever how they never say anything about who they are, but it was E = mc2, one of them mentioned that and I was like: Einstein, and Marilyn Monroe because of *The Seven Year Itch* with the skirt blowing up. I heard who the baseball player was because someone behind me was saying that, apparently Joe DiMaggio, so her husband and McCarthy.

35

UC: Ehem. How about the Senator?

36

Ehm, **I didn't know whether it was supposed to be Joe McCarthy or one of his side kicks** or something because it was a bit subtle or something and I didn't know whether it was actually be supposed to be him or not. Because he could have been someone else on that committee.

47

UC: What do you find unprofessional about him?

48

Turning up with a bottle of whiskey, going round drinking it. He was a lot more threatening than I would have thought somebody who was trying to do a job, but then I don't know if he was actually like that or not.

53

UC: Did it make any difference to the play when you started to associate the characters with real people?

54

Yeah, **it made me feel for them more, especially for Marilyn Monroe with, I don't know if this about the baby is true and everything, but that made me feel really sad for her.**

70

UC: Did you like the fact that instead of just a ballplayer or just an actress you had these very clearly recognisable people on stage?

71

I liked that. It just made them more, **more like people, I suppose, three-dimensional as opposed to just characters on a stage.** You could see, when she was on about the film, you knew what she was on about and you could see her. You knew what the scientist was talking about, vaguely. When he was going on about stuff, you knew basically what he was talking about.

82

UC: Ehm, which effect do you think this may have? Did it make it more interesting or funnier or...?

83

I think it made it more interesting and gave them, the **characters that just extra little bit of substance, I** suppose.

Participant 7

3

UC: What did you find interesting?

4

Just getting to know what they're like really, I didn, it was obviously, sorry, eh, **I don't know how much of it was actual truth, but it was quite interesting to know what the people were actually like.** That was interesting.

25

UC: How do you think you were expecting her?

26

I would have expected her in **that dress, 'cause that's all I really know about her and the blonde hair** and, just the dark glasses and the head thing, and the head scarf. That was why I thought she would be in it.

53

UC: Ehm, were there any things in the play where you thought, yes, I think that is probably based on fact.

54

Ehm, **maybe the rocky relationship between Marilyn Monroe and her husband, because I think they did divorce,** so I know she'd been married, but I didn't know who to and I knew she was divorced,

so I thought that was, would have been true, it would be a bit rocky and then he, he would be not very happy with working, not seeing him, seeing her I mean, I thought that might be true, but...

After Letters Home

Participant 1

21

No, I think it would be quite relevant, that if it was to come up in discussion that I would draw on **the experience from that and use that to inform my thinking** really as a kind of basis for talking that forward. It kind of gives you a [unclear] stand in that kind of argument. Yeah, I think it is the case that if you don't know anything about them, but if you know more about them, then you maybe question it more, or you think that you know more about them, that might be the significant thing, really.

22

UC: If I now told you either that yes, the information is all taken from original letters or if I told you, actually it's all invented, wouldn't that make any difference to the way you see the play.

23

I think if you said it was **fake I might be quite disappointed now, ehm, because, because I did believe it**, and so in that context, yeah, it would, it would like sway my opinion of the play. But at the same time, I've seen it and that was my experience of the play, so I don't know, I think I'd, I think I'd probably question you if you said it wasn't true.

46

UC: If you want to, imagine you spoke about the project in ten years, yeah there was something and you wanted to sort of describe each of the plays in a line or so to friends, how would you describe them?

47

Phew, ehm, I think I'd probably make a point of the **fact that they're plays that relate actual events in history and kind of give you an insight into these people's lives** in a different way than you probably would have read about. And, do you want me to be more specific about each play?

Participant 2

5

UC: You said you expected real letters, do you think that's a form you like or would you rather prefer a different script.

6

No, absolutely not, I don't think as a play that it works. For me, I mean going to the theatre is something completely different to literature in my eye theatre, and literature are worlds apart, I don't have an interest in literature, but I do in theatre and for me it was too much like a literary presentation like an actual play. No offence to the direction or anything, because it was well performed and well put together, but **it could easily have been performed on the radio or it could have been read in a book.** I don't think putting it on the stage did anything for the script that could have been done by any other medium.

12

Well, if we go back to say, *Insignificance*, which contained real people, it was a very interesting, out of the ordinary, different take on a subject and I really liked that production because although we were given real characters we were shown parts of that characters that we otherwise wouldn't have thought of: Marilyn Monroe and her intelligence. And although *Letters Home* really did show Sylvia Plath as a person and not through her work, that's what it was trying to do, it was trying to get behind her and not what she was famous for.

13

But I think what it misses out on is entertainment value and I said it in every one of the interviews I've had: for me a lot of theatre is getting people on the seats and making something interesting and exciting and something people want to see and to be honest, I don't think that the play would give you that, so I'd want a different take, not a set of letters being written. If someone were to do a play on the same thing, to **go totally off what's written and use their own ideas rather than trying to keep rooted in what has already been done.**

60

RW: Ehm, well, *Vincent* was **a portrayal of the life and times of Vincent Van Gogh when he came to London**. *Kafka's Dick*, which I had heard of before, I think I have to use the work Bennett in there, **it's Bennett's take on the life of Franz Kafka**. *Insignificance*, I couldn't really do in one sentence, but I know in the program, it's always about, it did mention it's the one where Marilyn Monroe explains the theory of relativity to Einstein, I think that's nicely put, I think that's probably what it will be famous for, so that's nice. And *Letters Home*, I think the tag line "about Sylvia Plath" I think, I think they would have to suffice.

61

UC: What did you think was sort of most attractive about each of them?

62

Each one of them involved real people like Vincent Van Gogh, Kafka, and like in *Insignificance* we had a few of them, so **each one was a stage portrayal of somebody that has existed**, which actually isn't that frequent in theatre, many of the plays are totally fictional, totally invented, which brings a different element to what you're seeing because we can talk about accuracy in the plays. Any play that isn't a characterisation or a dramatisation cannot do that, but with these we can say that was right or wrong, and I think that's probably the most interesting thing, especially with people I know a certain amount about, like Van Gogh or even Kafka who I have studied to the cows come home. I think they were interesting to see to assimilate my previous knowledge with what they were performing on the stage. Sylvia Plath was a little harder for me to do, because my knowledge was limited.

Participant 3

4

Ehm, well, **I didn't really know about Sylvia Plath beforehand, now I obviously do**. It was kind of different, 'cause I thought Letters Home would be like, I wasn't sure whether it would be based on letters written or whether it would be like someone writing letters, I was kind of unsure about that. Ehm, the fact that it was all based, the dialogue just on letters was something new to me. Ehm, the stage and things were kind of what I expected it would be as a student production, I guess. Ehm, other than that I didn't really know much about Sylvia Plath so I couldn't really say.

12

I think it was interesting, 'Cause the way she like had such high expectations and things seemed to go really well, and at other times things went really badly and like keep switching between those. I found that quite interesting actually, like she **had just so many interesting things going on in such a short life, and, yes, such highs and lows. I thought that was good**.

36

Ehm, I **quite liked the fact that the mother was sitting down most of the time and she was on the other side because that gave the impression that she was like in one place and Sylvia was a long way away**, like in England or the other part of America each time. Yeah, I liked that idea, having something to adjust us, a slight separation for most of the time and then just occasionally coming together at like maybe a couple of moments. If they come together more often it gets a bit confusing like are they actually in different places or not.

44

Ehm, yeah, while I was there. I can't quite remember what it said. It was ehm, the introductory bit was about the fact that it was written purely from the letters and ehm.

45

UC: Did you find that interesting to know?

46

Yeah, definitely, because like **I didn't know about her at all although she is well known**, I didn't. Yeah, it have **that introduction helped me to understand what is going on in the play** definitely.

62

JT: Oh yeah, that's right. Ehm, yeah, the first three all had a strong element of humour to them, ehm,

they're all professionally done and the last one was a bit more serious. They're all, **they all seem to be based on very famous people,** like obviously Van Gogh and Einstein and things like that, so it's like you should have an idea of what the play is going to be like because you know about their lives.

67
UC: If you say that it doesn't really matter that you get what you expect, why do you think the expectation is important when you go in?

68
Ehm, just because I can, if I know the person I have like at least an idea, and, it probably makes more engaged with what the play is about and when **it's something different** then I go, uh that's a bit different and then you like **listen more closely.** Don't know, it just gives me a way of like getting into the play at the start I think. And then if it's different it makes me think why is that different and that's normally a good thing. Yeah, don't know what else.

Participant 4

13
UC: Do you, if you say you didn't learn anything in any detail, does that mean you didn't get any details of events or anything, or does that mean the way they described it was superficial. Is it the content you want in more detail or is it the way they talk about it you want in more detail?

14
Probably the content. It was just, it **just went from one thing to the other too quickly and it probably would have been more interesting if it had maybe just picked something and looked at it in more detail** and still have the other like bits in between.

70
Well, again, I'm just thinking, I'm trying to think this play way written and someone's actually gone to the trouble of publishing it and performing it. If it was so bad that **the writer was so uncreative to make that out of something that could have been a lot better.** I was thinking the only justification is that it is historically correct and made out of real letters, which might, someone who actually sort of lives and breathes for Sylvia Plath or literature or something would actually find it interesting.

78
Insignificance, **I would recommend people to go and see that, just because the idea of it was a bit bizarre and, well the material is quite interesting.** Sylvia Plath, I wouldn't recommend to anyone except whether they were big fans of her or something.

79
UC: If you, if you have a look at all the four plays, do you think that there is anything that describes all of them, anything that all of them share?

80
Just the fact that **they are about famous people who I've probably heard of but haven't done actually much about.** They sort of, they're kind of, they're not about the main things about these people that they're famous for, they're kind of looking behind that.

81
UC: Do you think the fact that they all have famous people at their centre is something you like or do you prefer completely fictional characters?

82
I didn't, I did like the fact that they were about famous people and that **you do learn things about them that you wouldn't otherwise known** and that some of them have like actually **made you more interested in going and finding out things about them yourself,** whereas before you just ehm, like Van Gogh, for you, you just know he was a painter and you just accept that and you not, you don't really think about the rest of his life. You just know him for his painting and then to actually ehm like be presented with a play about part of his life that you wouldn't normally think about, that learning something about them, which isn't what they're famous for, that is quite enjoyable.

Participant 5

2

A little bit, but not really. I can't remember what I said in the first instances, but the title *Letters Home* gave me the impression that there was this sort of, I didn't realise that it was going to be the main thing, that the whole play was going to be about the letters so I had an impression that the letters might have been part of the play. But **because I didn't know anything about Sylvia Plath to start with I didn't realise that it was going to be about her and the relationship with her mother and the other people in her life** and the poetry and so on, so that bit was sort of a bit of a surprise to me.

11

UC: As you didn't know very much about Sylvia Plath did that play make you more interested in any way?

12

Yeah, because I think it gave me a **bit of a sense about what she was like as a person**. I think it said somewhere in there that it didn't want to focus on Ted Hughes her husband, because there has already been a lot about that and they wanted to focus more on her, so from knowing absolutely nothing about her, I've now got a bit of a better picture, you know about her life.

41

UC: If you think about the form of letters, did you, would you say that they were the original letters, or would you say that they were invented, that something was added to them. [pause] Or does it matter at all?

42

I think it would have mattered, I didn't think there was anything, I would have said that was how...

43

UC: ...that they were the original ones

44

yeah, which I think would be quite important. I think if you had changed it, it might have changed how you saw her. **I like to think that it was her writing,** so you can **actually get a feel for her, rather than somebody else's perspective of her letters,** you know writing about her. Does that make sense?

Participant 6

54

Ehm, oh dear. *Letters Home* **is about the poet Sylvia Plath and how she descends into depression.** *Insignificance* is about how different events can come together and be completely insignificant for the rest of the world but completely significant to who is there. *Kafka's Dick* **is just a crazy comedy with a tortoise running across the stage** and you have to see it, it's very funny and the other one, I can't remember its name...

Bibliography

Biographical Plays

Arden, John and Margaretta d'Arcy. 1969. *The Hero Rises Up*. London: Methuen

Barnes, Peter. 1982[2].*The Bewitched. Plays One*. London: Methuen

Bartlett, Neil. 2000. *In Extremis*. London: Oberon

Bennett, Alan.1992. *The Madness of George III*. London: Faber

Bennett, Alan. 1991[2]. *Two Kafka Plays. Kafka's Dick and The Insurance Man*. London: Faber

Bennett, Alan. 1986. *Kafka's Dick*. London: Faber

Bolt, Robert. 1991. [1960]. *A Man for All Seasons*. Oxford etc.: Heinemann

Bolt, Robert. 1970. *Vivat! Vivat Regina!*. Oxford etc.: Heinemann

Bond, Edward. 1993a. [1974]. *Early Morning. Plays One*. London: Methuen

Bond, E. 1993b [1973]. *Bingo. Plays Three*. London: Methuen

Bond, Edward. 1987 [1980]. *The Fool. Plays One*. London: Methuen

Brenton, Howard.1989. *Bloody Poetry. Plays Two*. London: Methuen

Brenton, Howard. 1989. *H.I.D.* London: NHB

Brenton, Howard. 1974. *The Churchill Play*. London: Methuen

Brittain, Victoria and Gillian Slovo. 2004. *Guantanamo. Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*. London: Oberon

Brown, Ben. 1999. *Larkin With Women*. London: Faber and Faber

Corrie, Rachel and Alan Rickman (ed.). 2005. *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. London. NHB

Dallmeyer, Andrew. *Hello Dalí*. Unpublished Manuscript

De Angelis, April. 1994. *Playhouse Creatures. A Play*. London: Samuel French

Dear, Nick. 2000a. *The Art of Success. Plays One*. London: Faber

Dear, Nick. 2000b. *In Ruins. Plays One*. London: Faber

Dear, Nick. 2000c. *Mrs. Klein. Five Plays*. London: NHB

Dromgoole, Nicholas. 2000. *Marriage in Disguise*. London: Oberon

Eagleton, Terry. 1989. *Saint Oscar*. Derry: Field Day

Edgar, David. 2000. *Albert Speer*. Based on Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth by Gitta Sereny. London: NHB

Edmundson, Helen. 1994. *The Clearing*. London: NHB

Foursight Theatre. 2006. *Thatcher – the Musical!*. Unpublished Manuscript

Frayn, Michael. 2003. *Democracy*. London: Methuen

Frayn, Michael. 2000. *Copenhagen*. London: Methuen

Freeman, Sandra. 1995. *Colette. Three Remarkable Women*. Sussex: Temple House

Friel. Brian. 1989. *Making History*. London: Faber

Furse, Anna. 1997. *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers

Gearing, Nigel. 1998. *Dickens in America*. London: Oberon

Gee, Shirley. 1991. *Warrior*. London: Samuel French

Gems, Pam. 1998. *The Snow Place*. London: Oberon

Gems, Pam. 1996. *Marlene*. London: Oberon

Gems, Pam. 1996. *Stanley*. London: NHB

Gems, Pam. 1985. *Piaf. Three Plays*. Hammondsworth: Penguin

Gems, Pam. 1982. *Queen Christina*. London: St. Luke's Press

Graham, James. 1988. *Albert's Boy*. London: Methuen

Gray, Francis. 1997. *Spoken in Darkness*. Unpublished Manuscript

Gupta, Tanika. 2005. *Gladiator Games*. London: Oberon

Hampton, Christopher. 1991. *Total Eclipse. The Philanthropist and Other Plays*. London: Faber

Hampton, Christopher.1983. *Tales from Hollywood*. London: Faber

Hare, David. 2004. *Stuff Happens*. London: Faber

Hare, David. 1998. *Judas Kiss*. London: Faber

Hastings, Michael.1984. *Tom and Viv*. Hammondsworth: Penguin

Hastings, Michael. 1966. *Lee Harvey Oswald. A Far Mean Streak of Independence Brought On by Neglect*. Hammondsworth: Penguin

Holliday, Joyce. 1991. *Anywhere to Anywhere*. in: Griffiths, Gabriele and Elaine Aston (eds.). *Herstory. Vol.2*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press

Hughes, Dusty. 1986. *The Futurists. Futurists and Commitments*. London: Faber

Jeffrey, Stephen. 1998. *The Libertine*. London: NHB

Jellicoe, Ann. 1966. *Shelley, or the Idealist*. London: Faber

Johnson, Terry. 2003. *Hitchcock Blonde*. London: Methuen

Johnson, Terry. 1993. *Hysteria*. London. Methuen

Johnson, Terry. 1982. *Insignificance*. London: Methuen

Leiman Goldemberg, Rose. 1983. *Letters Home*. in: Wandor, Micheline (ed.). *Plays By Women 2*. London: Methuen

Lochhead, Liz. 1989. *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off & Dracula*. Hammondsworth: Penguin

Lochhead, Liz. 1985. *Blood and Ice*. in: Wandor, Micheline (ed.). *Plays by Women 4*. London: Methuen

McGuiness, Frank. 1987. *Innocence*. London: Faber

Meyer, Michael. 1981. *Lunatic and Lover*. London: Methuen

Mitchell, Anthony. 1971. *Tyger*. London: Jonathan Cape

Mitchell, Julian. 1986. *After Aida or Verdi's Messiah*. Oxford: Amber Lane Press

Nelson, Richard. 1992. *Columbus and the Discovery of Japan*. London: Faber

Nelson, Richard. 1996. *The General from America*. London: Faber

O'Brian, Edna. 1981. *Virginia*. London: The Hogarth Press

Pinnock, Winsome. 1989 *A Rock in the Water*. in: Brewster, Yvonne (ed.) *Black Plays 2*. London: Methuen

Pownall, David. 1983. *Master Class*. London: Faber

Pownall, David. 1979. *An Audience Called Edouard*. London: Faber

Shaffer, Peter. 1985. [1980]. *Amadeus*. Hammondsworth: Penguin

Shaffer, Peter. 1978. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. London: Longman

Stoppard, Tom. 1999. [1993]. *Arcadia. Plays Five*. London: Faber

Stoppard, Tom. 1997. *The Invention of Love*. London: Faber

Stoppard, Tom. 1975. *Travesties*. London: Faber

Teale, Polly. 2005. *Brontë*. London. NHB

Teale, Polly. 2003. *After Mrs. Rochester*. London: NHB

Tomalin, Claire. 1991. *The Winter Wife*. London: NHB

Wertenbaker, Timberlake. 1998. *After Darwin*. London: Faber

Wertenbaker, Timberlake. 1996. [1984]. *New Anatomies. Plays*. London: Faber

Whelan, Peter. 1993. *The School of Night*. London: Chappell

Whitemore, Hugh. 1987. *Breaking the Code*. London: Samuel French

Wright, Nicholas. 2002. *Vincent in Brixton*. London: NHB

Yeger, Sheila.1990. *Self Portrait*. Charlbury: Amber Lane

Yeger, Sheila. 1991 *Variations on a Theme by Schumann*. in: Castledine, Annie (ed.). *Plays by Women 9*. London: Methuen

Other Primary Works

Amadeus. By Peter Shaffer. Dir. Milos Forman. Perf. F. Murray Abraham, Simon Callow. Warner Home Video. 1984

Queen Christina. Dir. Rouben Mamoulian. Perf. Greta Garbo, John Gilbert. Metro- Goldwyn-Meyer, 1993

Richard III. Dir. Richard Loncraine. Perf. Ian McKellan. MGM, 1995

The Seven Year Itch. Dir. Billy Wilde. Perf. Marilyn Monroe, Tom Ewell. 20th Century Fox, 1955

McKenna, John. 1993. *Clare. A Novel*. Belfast: Falstaff

Stoppard. 1999. *Indian Ink. Plays Five*. London: Faber

Performances

After Darwin. By Timberlake Wertenbaker. Dir. Lindsay Posner. Perf. Michael Feast, Jason Watkins. Hampstead. 13.07. – 08.08.1998

Albert's Boy. By James Graham. Dir. Max Lewendel Perf. Victor Spinetti, Gerard Monaco. Finborough Theatre. 13.08.05

Albert Speer. By David Edgar. Dir. Trevor Nunn. Perf. Roger Allam, Alex Jennings. National Theatre. 05.07.00

Amadeus. By Peter Shaffer. Dir. Stephen Edwards. Perf. Paul Ewing, Julian Forsyth. Derby Playhouse. Sept.04

Amadeus. By Peter Shaffer. Dir. Peter Hall. Perf. Paul Scofield, Simon Callow. National Theatre. 1979

An Audience Called Edouard. By David Pownall. Dir. Alan Strachnan. Perf. Jeremy Irons, David Burke. Greenwich Theatre. 19.10.78

Arcadia. By Tom Stoppard. Dir. Rachel Kavanaugh. Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Company and Bristol Old Vic at the Birmingham Rep. 30.10.04

Arcadia. By Tom Stoppard. Dir. Trevor Nunn. Perf. Maria Miles, Alexander Hanson, July Legrand, Dearbhla Molloy, Paul Shelley. National Theatre transfer to the Haymarket Theatre. 24.05.1995

The Art of Success. By Nick Dear. Dir. Adrian Noble. Perf. Niamh Cusack, Michael Kitchen. Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican The Pit. 13.08.87

Artaud in Wonderland. Dev. and Perf. Damian Wright. Etcetera. 06. – 10. 2000

Augustine. By Anna Furse. Dir. Anna Furse. Perf. Shona Morris. Paines Plough at Lyric Studio. 11. – 29.06.91

Brontë. By Polly Teale. Dir. Polly Teale. Perf. Diane Beck, Catherine Cusack, David Fielder, Natalia Tena, Matthew Thomas, Fenella Woolgar. Shared Experience at Warwick Arts Centre. 29.09.05

Chinese Whispers. By Francesca Beard. Dir. Rachel Mars. Perf. Francesca Beard. Warwick Arts Centre. 24.02.2004

Copenhagen. By Michael Frayn. Dir. Michael Blakemore. Perf. David Burke, Mark Henderson, Sarah Kestelman. National Theatre transfer to the Duchess Theatre. 27.07.1999

Copenhagen. By Michael Frayn. Dir. Tristan Moriarty. Sheffield University Theatre Company. 29.10. 2003

Democracy. By Michael Frayn. Dir. Michael Blakemore. Perf. Roger Allam, Conleth Hill, David Ryall etc. National Theatre transfer to Wyndham Theatre. 07.05.2003

Faust. By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Dir. Peter Stein. Perf. Bruno Ganz. Faust Ensemble. 2000

The General from America. By Richard Nelson. Dir. Howard Davies. Perf. James Laurenson. Royal Shakespeare Company. Swan Theatre. 30.07.96

Gladiator Games. By Tanika Gupta. Dir. Charlotte Westenra. Perf. Ray Panthaki, Tom McKey. Sheffield Theatres and Theatre Royal Stratford East. Crucible Studio Sheffield. 10.05.05

Guantanamo. Honor Bound to Defend Freedom. Taken from Spoken Evidence by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo. Dir. Nicholas Kent and Sacha Wares. Perf. Badi Uzzaman, Patrick Robinson. Tricycle Theatre transfer to the New Ambassador. 07.08.04

Hello Dalí. By Andrew Dallmeyer. Perf. Tom Jude. Club West at the Edinburgh Theosophical Society Studio. 20.08.04

H.I.D. By Howard Brenton. Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. David Calder, Polly Walker. Royal Shakespeare Company, Almeida. 28.09.89

Holy Dirt. By and Perf. Marcos Martínez. Kulturbahnhof International University Bremen. 03.06.05

Hysteria. By Terry Johnson. Dir. Loveday Ingram. Perf. Ian Bartholomew, Alison McKenna. Minerva Theatre, Chichester. 10. – 28.10.00

Hysteria. By Terry Johnson. Dir. Phyllinda Lloyd. Perf. Henry Goodman, Phoebe Nicholls. Royal Court. 01.09.93

Insignificance. By Terry Johnson. Dir. Samuel West. Perf. Nicholas Le Prevost, Mary Stockwell. Lyceum Theatre Sheffield. 28.02.05 and 07.03.05

Insignificance. By Terry Johnson. Dir. Rupert Goold. Perf. Paul McCleary, Gina Bellmann. Royal Theatre Northampton. May 2004

Insignificance. By Terry Johnson. Dir. Loveday Ingram. Perf. Allan Corduner, Sharon Small. Minerva Chichester. 21. – 31. 07.99

Insignificance. By Terry Johnson. Dir. Terry Johnson. Perf. Alan Armstrong, Frances Barber. Donmar Warehouse. 07.06. – 06.08.1995

Insignificance. By Terry Johnson. Dir. Les Waters. Perf. Ian McDiarmid, Judy Davis. Royal Court. 12.07.82

The Invention of Love. By Tom Stoppard. Dir. Richard Eyre. Perf. John Wood, Paul Rhys. National Theatre. 08.11.97

Kafka's Dick. By Alan Bennett. Dir. Cal McCrystal. Perf. Sarah Bracknell, Conor Moloney. Derby Playhouse, 17.11.04 and 23.11.04

Kafka's Dick. By Alan Bennett. Dir. Damian Cruden. Perf. Matthew Rixon, Michael Glenn Murphy. Theatre Royal York. 20.03. – 07.04.01

Kafka's Dick. By Alan Bennett. Dir. Peter Hall. Perf. John Gordon-Sinclair, Jason Watkins. *Piccadilly*. 10.98 – 02.98

Kafka's Dick. By Alan Bennett. Dir. Richard Eyre. Perf. Roger Lloyd Pack, Andrew Sachs, Alison Steadman. Royal Court Theatre. 23.09.86

Letters Home. By Rose Leiman Goldemberg. Dir. Sarah Bell, Ursula Canton. Sheffield Centenary Drama Festival. 19.05.05

The Libertine. By Stephen Jeffreys. Dir. Max Stafford-Clark. Perf. David Westhead, Jason Watkins, Katrine Levon. Out of Joint. Royal Court. 09.12. – 4.1.95

Life Game. Based on Improvisation by Keith Johnstone. Improbable Theatre at NT Cottlesloe. 06. – 13. 05. 04

The Madness of George III. By Alan Bennett. Dir. Rachel Kavanaugh. Perf. Michael Pennington. Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company and West Yorkshire Playhouse at the Birmingham Rep. 25.10.03

The Madness of George III. By Alan Bennett. Dir. Nicolas Hytner. Perf. Nigel Hawthorne. National Theatre Lyttleton. 28.11.91

Man for All Seasons. By Alan Bolt. Dir. Noël Willman. Perf. Paul Scofield. Globe Theatre. 01.07.60

Marlene. By Pam Gems. Dir. Sian Mathias. Perf. Siân Philips. Oldham Coliseum. 02.10.96

Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off. By Liz Lochhead. Dir. Gerry Mulgrew. Perf. Anne Lacey, Alison Peebles. Comunicado Theatre Company. 21.09. – 10.10.87

Master Class. By David Pownall. Dir. Justin Greene. Perf. Timothy West. Haymarket. Leicester. 27.01.83

Moscow Gold. By Tariq Ali, Howard Brenton. Dir. Barry Kyle. Perf. David Calder, Sarah Kestleman. 01.11.90

My Name is Rachel Corrie. By Rachel Corrie, Alan Rickman. Dir. Alan Rickman. Perf. Megan Dodds. Royal Court Theatre Downstairs. 22.10.05

Piaf. By Pam Gems. Dir. Howard Davis. Perf. Jane Lapotaire, Zoë Wannamaker. RSC, The Other Place. 05.10.78

Queen Christina. By Pam Gems. Dir. Penny Cherns Perf. Sheila Allen. Royal Shakespeare Company, The Other Place, Oct. 1977

Saint Oscar. By Terry Eagleton. Dir. Trevor Griffiths. Perf. Stephen Rea. Field Day at Hampstead. 09.03.90

Self Portrait. By Sheila Yeger. Dir. Annie Castledine. Perf. Barbara Marten, Paola Dionisotti. Orange Tree. 10.02. – 07.03.92

Stanley. By Pam Gems. Dir. John Caird. Perf. Anthony Sher, Deborah Findley, Anna Chancellor. National Theatre, Cottlesloe. 01.02.96

Tales from Hollywood. By Christopher Hampton. Dir. Peter Gill. Perf. Michael Gambon, Ian McDiarmid, Guy Rolfe, Philip Locke. National Theatre. 1983

Tales from Hollywood. By Christopher Hampton. Dir. John Crowley. Perf. Ben Daniels, Phil Davies. Donmar Warehouse. 01 – 23. 06. 01

Thatcher – The Musical. Dev. Foursight Theatre. Dir. Naomi Cooke, Deb Barnard. Warwick Arts Centre 08.02.06

Travesties. By Tom Stoppard. Dir. Adrian Noble. Perf. Anthony Sher, David Westhead. Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican 15.01.94

Tyger. By Adrian Mitchell. Dir. Michael Blakemore, John Dexter. Perf. Gerald James. National Theatre. 1971

Vincent in Brixton. By Nicholas Wright. Dir. Richard Eyre. Perf. Clare Higgins, Jochum ten Haaf. National Theatre transfer to Wyndham Theatre. Aug. 02

Vincent in Brixton. By Nicholas Wright. Dir. Roger Haines. Perf. Gus Gallagher, Sheila Ruskin. Library Theatre Manchester. 28.09.04 and 11.10.04

Secondary Literature

Aaserud, Finn. 2002. "Release of documents relating to 1941 Bohr-Heisenberg meeting." http://www.nbi.dk/NBA/papers/introduction.htm; accessed 24.08.05

Alt, Peter André. 2002. "Mode ohne Methode? Überlegungen zu einer Theorie der literaturwissenschaftlichen Biographik." in: Klein, Christian (ed.). 2002. Grundlagen der Biographik. Theorie und Praxis des biographischen Schreibens. Stuttgart: Metzler, 23 - 40

Anon. 2004a. "Amadeus, Derby Playhouse. 4/5." *Guardian*. 13.09.04

Anon. 2004b. "Bennett Meets Kafka – Why Meddle With a Dream Team." *The Daily Telegraph*. 19.11.04, 23

Anon. 2004c. "Getting to the Very Bottom of Mozart." *Express*. 18.03.04

Anon. 2004d. "Insignificance." *The Times*. 01.05.2004, Features: 27

Anon. 2004e. "Theatre: The Best – and Worst – Way to Tackle History." *Independent on Sunday*. 14.09.04

Anon. 2003. "Settling Old Scores: looking, listening, reading, writing: Lend an ear to Salieri and you may be led to explore the fields beyond the musical." *Guardian*. 11.10.03

Anon. 2002a. "Copenhagen." *Sunday Times*. 28.04.02. Eire Culture: 29

Anon. 2002b. "The Long Voyage of Sir Tom." *Daily Telegraph*. 29.06.02, 2

Anon. 2002c. "Letter Casts Doubt on 'Copenhagen' Theory." *The Independent*. 08.02.02

Anon. 2002d. "Shortcuts: Matters of Dispute: Michael Frayn Nazi Apologist?" *The Guardian*. 27.11.2002

Anon. 2000a. "'At Last We Shall See a Human Hitler." *The Times*. Times 2: 3

Anon. 2000b. "Humanising of Hitler: This Week our National Theatre Staged a Play that Questions the Evil of the Fuhrer's Leading Henchman, Albert Speer, in Murdering Countless Millions." *Daily Mail*. 27.05.00, 12

Anon. 2000c. "Shaffer Wins Duel of Mozart's Curse." *Sunday Times*. 19. 11. 00. News: 5

Anon. 1998. "Amadeus, But Not as We Know Him," *The Times*. 15.10.98, 47

Anon. 1986. "The Art of Success." *Financial Times*. 10.07.86

Appignasi, Lisa and John Forrester. 2000. *Freud's Women*. Hammondsworth: Penguin

Aristotle. 1970. [350 BC]. *Poetics*. Intro. and Transl. Gerald F. Elise. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P

Armory, Mark. 1982. "Spectator." *Theatre Record*. 2 (13): 384

Armstrong, Richard. 2005. *Understanding Realism*. London: British Film Institute

Aston, Elaine and George Savona. 1991. *Theatre as Sign-System. A Semiotics of Text and Performance*. London: Routledge

Backscheider, Paula R. 1999. *Reflections on Biography*. Oxford: UP

Barber, John. 1982. "Daily Telegraph." *Theatre Record*. 2 (13): 383

Barnett, David. 2005. "Reading and Performing Uncertainty: Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* and the Postdramatic Theatre." *Theatre Research International*. 30 (2): 139 – 49

Basset, Kate. 2002. "Independent on Sunday. 27.04.03." *Theatre Record*. 23 (9): 535

Bassett, Kate. 1999. "Daily Telegraph. 23.07.99." *Theatre Record.* 19 (15): 964 – 5

Baugh, Christopher. 2005. *Theatre, Performance and Technology.* Houndsmill: Macmillan

Ben Chaim, Daphna. 1984. *Distance in the Theatre. The Aesthetics of Audience Response.* Ann Arbor & London: U.M.I. Research P

Bennett, Alan. 1976. "The Pith and its Pitheads." *Listener.* 95: 631 - 2

Bennett, Susan, 1997[2]. *Theatre Audiences.* London & New York: Routledge

Berger, Peter A. 1985. "Künstlerdethronisierung als dramatisches Prinzip: Zur Ästhetik des Gegenwartstheaters in Großbritannien." in: Thomsen, Christian (ed.). *Studien zur Ästhetik des Gegenwartstheaters.* Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 209 – 223

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckham. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* Hammondsworth: Penguin

Berninger, Mark. 2006. *Neue Formen des Geschichtsdramas in Großbritannien und Irland.* Trier: WVT; forthcoming

Berninger, Mark. 2002. "Variations of a Genre. The British History Play in the Nineties." in: Knapp, Amelie and Erwin Otto, Gerd Stratmann, Merle Tönnes (eds.). *British Drama of the Nineties. Anglistik und Englischunterricht 64.* Heidelberg: Winter, 37 – 64

Blake, Robert. 1998. "The Art of Biography." in: Homberger, Eric and John Charmley (eds.). *The Troubled Face of Biography.* London: Macmillan, 75 - 93

Borowski, Mateusz and Małgorzata Sugiera. 2005. *Reality Built Upon Fiction: Redefinition of Documentary Strategies in the Recent British Verbatim Theatre.* Paper Presented at the IFTR Postmodernist Theatre Working Group Conference "Fictional / Real in Contemporary Theatre. Cracow. 20.11.05

Boulton, Marjorie. 1960. *The Anatomy of Drama.* London: Routledge and K. Paul

Breuer, Ingo. 2005. *Theatralität von Gedächtnis. Deutschsprachiges Geschichtsdrama seit Brecht.* Köln: Böhlau Verlag

Brown, Georgina. 2002. "Mail on Sunday. 05.50.02" *Theatre Record.* 22 (9): 547 – 8

Brown, Georgina. 1998a. "Mail on Sunday. 06.12.1998". *Theatre Record.* 18 (24): 1573

Brown, Georgina. 1998b. "Mail on Sunday. 31.10.98." *Theatre Record.* 18 (21): 1387

Brown, Ian. 1996. "Plugged into History: The Sense of the Past in Scottish Theatre." in: Stevenson, Randall and Gavin Wallace (eds.). *Scottish Theatre Since the 70s.* Edinburgh: UP, 84 - 99

Bruce, V. and A.W. Young. 1998. [1986]. "A Theoretical Perspective for Understanding Face Recognition." in: Young, Andrew W. (ed.). *Face and Mind.* Oxford: UP, 96 - 130

Burke, Peter. 2005. "Performing History." *Re-Thinking History.* 9 (1): 35 - 52

Burke, Seán. 2002. "The Biographical Imperative." *Essays in Criticism.* 52 (3): 191 – 208

Bussmann, Hadumod. 1996. *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics.* transl. and ed: Trauth, Gregory P. and Kerstin Kazzazi. London & New York: Routledge

Butler, Robert. 1997. "Independent on Sunday. 05.10.97." *Theatre Record.* 17 (20): 1254 – 5

Canton, Ursula. 2006a. Unpublished Interview Naomi Cooke. 15.10.2006

Canton, Ursula. 2006b. "*Guantanamo*: Documenting a Real Space?" in: Middecke and Schreiber (eds.). *CDE 13. Mapping Uncertain Territories.* Trier: WVT

Canton, Ursula. 2004a. "Interview with Michael Frayn". *Theatre Archive Project.* http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/frayn.html

Canton, Ursula. 2004b. Unpublished Interview with Claire Tomalin, 27.02.04

Canton, Ursula. 2003. *Pam Gems and Biographical Drama. Topics, Themes and Dramatic Presentation.* Unpubl. MA Dissertation

Carr, Edward Hallett. 1962. *What is History. The George Macauly Trevelyn Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge January – March 1961.* London: Macmillan

Caruth, Cathy. 1995. "Recapturing the Past: Introduction." in: ibid (ed.). *Trauma. Explorations in Memory.* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 151 – 7

Castle, Denis. 1984. *Sensation Smith of Drury Lane. The Biography of Scenic Artist, Extraordinary, Engineer and Inventor of Stage "Disasters", Soldier, Comedian and Chelsea Casanova. By his Grandson.* London & Edinburgh: Charles Skilton

Cavendish, Dominic. 2000. "Daily Telegraph. 17.00.00." *Theatre Record.* 20 (21): 1395

Chambers, Colin. 1978. "An Audience Called Edouard." *Plays and Players.* 26 (3): 33

Charcot, J. M. 1888-92. *Nouvelle Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière.* Paris : Lescrosnier et Babé

Charmley, John and Eric Homberger (eds.). 1988. *The Troubled Face of Biography.* London: Macmillan

Chaudhuri, Una. 1984. "The Spectator in Drama." *Modern Drama.* 27 (3): 281-98

Christopher, James. 2001. "A Hard Nut Cracked." *Guardian.* 30.04.01

Cinnamon, Martin. 2004. "Kafka's Weak Link." Derby Playhouse: *Programme Kafka's Dick,* 10 - 13

Clapp, Susannah. 2000. "The Observer. 28.05.00." *Theatre Record.* 20 (11): 685

Clark, Ronald W. 1980. *Freud. The Man and the Cause.* London: Jonathan Cape

Claycomb, Ryan. 2004. "Playing at Lives: Biography and Contemporary Feminist Drama." *Modern Drama.* 47 (3): 525 – 45

Clifford, James L. 1970. From *Puzzles to Portraits: Problems of a Literary Biographer.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P

Cody, Gabrielle and Rebecca Schneider. 2002. "General Introduction." in: ibid (eds.). *Re: direction. A Theoretical and Practical Guide.* London: Routledge; 1 - 11

Cohn, Dorrit. 1989. "Fictional vs. Historical Lives: Borderlines and Borderline Cases." *Journal of Narrative Technique.* 19: 3-24

Cohn, Ruby. 1992. "Realism". in: Banham, Martin (ed.). *The Cambridge Guide to the Theatre.* Cambridge: UP, 815

Cole, Toby and Helen Krich Chinoy. 1973[2]. *Directors on Directing. A Source Book of the Modern Theatre.* London: Peter Owen

Collins, Judith. 1996. "Stanley Spencer and the Idea of Heaven." NT: *Programme Stanley,* 3 – 6

Collinwood, R.G. 1961. [1946]. *The Idea of History.* Oxford: UP

Cook, Judith. 1974. *Directors' Theatre.* London: George Harrap & Co

Cork, Richard. 1996. "Angels Might Appear Everywhere." NT. *Programme Stanley,* 7 – 10

Coveney, Michael. 1990. "History on the Cue and a Massage for Gorbachev." *Observer.* 23.09.90

Coveney, Michael. 1982. "Financial Times." *Theatre Record*. 2 (13): 382

Crystal, David (ed.). 1997.[2] *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*. Cambridge: UP

Cuddon, J.A. 1977. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. London: André Deutsch

Cushman, Robert. 1982, "Observer." *Theatre Record*. 2 (13): 381 – 2

Custen, George F. 1999a. "Clio in Hollywood." in: Rosenthal, Alan. (ed.). *Why Docudrama. Fact and Fiction on Film and TV*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 19 – 34

George F. Custen. 1999b. "Hollywood and the Research Department." in: Rosenthal, Alan. (ed.). *Why Docudrama. Fact and Fiction on Film and TV*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 133 – 145

Davies, Tracy J. and Thomas Postlewait. 2003. *Theatricality*. Cambridge: UP

Dear, Nick. 1986. "Play Note." NT. *Programme The Art of Success*

De Jongh, Nicholas. 2003. "Evening Standard. 10.09.03." *Theatre Record*. 23 (18): 1201

De Jongh, Nicholas. 1995. "Evening Standard. 01.12.95." *Theatre Record*. 15 (24): 1634

De Jongh, Nicholas. 1993. "Evening Standard. 17.09.93." *Theatre Record*. 23 (19): 1051

Delgado, Maria and Paul Heritage. 1996. *In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre*. Manchester: UP

DiGaetani, John. 1991. *A Search for Postmodern Theatre: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights*. New York & London: Greenwood Press

Dugaw, Dianne (ed.). 1989. *The Female soldier; or, The surprising life and adventures of Hannah Snell*. Los Angeles: U of California P

Edel, Leon. 1973 [1959]. *Literary Biography*. Bloomington & London: Indiana UP

Edgar, David. 2000. "Interview with Gitty Sereny." NT. *Programme Albert Speer*

Edgar, David. 1981. "Putting Politics on Stage." *New Socialist*. Nov / Dec: 38 – 41, 38

Edwardes, Jane. 1991. "Time Out. 04.12.91." *Theatre Record*. 11 (24): 1484

Elam, Keir. 1980. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London Methuen

Ellis, David. 2000. *Literary Lives. Biography and the Search for Understanding*. Edinburgh: UP

Elton, G.R. 1969. [1967]. *The Practice of History*. Sydney: Fontana

Engel, Pascal. 2002. *Truth*. Chesham: Acumen

Epstein, William H. 1987. *Recognizing Biography*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P

Evans, Mary. 1999. *Missing Persons. The Impossibility of Auto/Biography*. London & New York: Routledge

Eyre, Richard. 2003. *National Service. Diary of a Decade*. London: Bloomsbury

Favorini, Attilo (ed. and intro.). 1995. *Voicings: 10 Plays from the Documentary Theatre*. Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press

Forster, E.M. 1974 [1927]. *Aspects of the Novel*. ed. Oliver Stallybrass. London: Penguin

Foss, Roger. 2000. "What's On. 07.06.00." *Theatre Record*. 20 (11): 686

Fotheringham, Richard. 1984. "The Last Translation: From Stage to Audience." in: Zuber-Skerritt, Ortrun (ed. & introd.). *Page to Stage: Theatre as Translation.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 29 – 39

Frank, Katherine. 1980. "Writing Lives: Theory and Practices in Literary Biography." *Genre* 13: 499-516

Fraser, George MacDonald. 1999. "Hollywood and World History." in: Rosenthal, Alan (ed.). *Why Docudrama. Fact and Fiction on Film and TV.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 12 – 18

Frayn, Michael. 2003. "Democracy." National Theatre. *Programme Democracy,* 4 - 10

Frayn, Michael. 2002 "'Copenhagen' Revisited." *New York Review of Books.* 49 (5): 22 – 24

Frayn, Michael. 2000. "Note." National Theatre: *Programme Copenhagen*

Frisch, Max. 1972. Tagebuch 1966-1971. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp

Garber, Marjorie. 1996. "Introduction to Part V." in: Riehl, Mary and David Suchoff (eds.). *The Seductions of Biography.* New York: Routledge, 175 - 8

Gardiner, Caroline. 1994. "From Bankside to the West End: a Comparative View of London Audiences." *New Theatre Quarterly.* Feb. 1994. 10 (37): 70 – 86

Gardner, Lyn. 1991. "City Lights. 14.03.91." *Theatre Record.* 11 (5): 279

Gems, Pam. 1996. "Why a Play About Stanley Spencer." NT. *Programme Stanley,* 11 - 12

Gianakaris, C.J. 1992. *Peter Shaffer.* Basingstoke: Macmillan

Giannachi, Gabriella and Mary Luckhurst. 1999. *On Directing. Interviews With Directors.* London: Faber

Gore-Langton, Robert. 2000. "Express. 26.05.00." *Theatre Record.* 20 (11): 684

Grant, David. 1988. "Independent. 22.09.88." *Theatre Record.* 8 (25 -6): 1699 – 1700

Grice, Paul. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP

Gross, John. 1994. "Sunday Telegraph. 18.12.94." *Theatre Record.* 14 (25-26): 1553 – 4
Hammerschmidt, Hildegard. 1972. *Das historische Drama in England (1956 – 1971): Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungstendenzen. Studien zur Anglistik.* Wiesbaden und Frankfurt: Humanitas

Harben, Niloufer. 1988. *Twentieth-Century English History Plays. From Bond to Shaw.* Houndsmill: Macmillan

Harding, James M. 2000. "Historicity, the Cinematic and Pam Gems's Queen Christina." in Voigts – Virchow, Eckart (ed.). *Mediatised Drama / Dramatised Media.* Trier: WVT. 179 – 87

Harweg, Roland. 2001. *Situation und Text im Drama. Einer textlinguistische-fiktionsanalytische Studie am Beispiel von Friedrich Dürrenmatts tragischer Komödie Der Besuch der alten Dame.* Heidelberg: Winter

Hattenstone, Simon. 2004. "My First Night in Guantánamo." *The Guardian.* 06.10.2004; accessed online 13.11.06

Hawthorne, Jeremy. 1994 [1992]. *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory.* 2nd ed. London: E. Arnold

Hendy, Joy. 2000. "Scotsman. 07.08.2000." *Theatre Record.* 20 (25-6): 1642

Hinz, Evelyn J. 1992. "Mimesis: The Dramatic Lineage of Auto/Biography." in Kader, Marlene (ed.). *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice.* Toronto: UP, 195 - 212

Holland, Norman N. 1989 [1968]. *The Dynamics of Literary Response.* New York: Columbia UP

Holmes, Richard. 1995. "Biography: Inventing the Truth." in: Batchelor, John. 1995. *The Art of Literary Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon, 15 - 26

Honan, Park. 1979. "The Theory of Biography." *Novel 1*, 109-120

Howard, Pamela. 2002. *What Is Scenography?*. London: Routledge

Huber, Werner and Martin Middeke. 1999. *Biofictions. The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. Rochester: Camden House

Huber, Werner and Martin Middeke. 1995. "Biography in Contemporary Drama." in: Reitz, Bernhard (ed.). Contemporary Drama in English. Drama and Reality. Trier: WVT, 133 – 143

Hughes-Warrington, Marnie. 2001. *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*. London & New York Routledge

Hurren, Kenneth. 1990. "Mail on Sunday. 18.03.90." *Theatre Record*. 10 (5): 333

Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge

Innes, Christopher. 1999. "Elemental, My Dear Clare: The Case of the Missing Poet." in: Huber, Werner and Martin Middeke. *Biofictions. The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. Rochester: Camden House, 187 – 200

Iser, Wolfgang. 1989. *Prospecting: From Reader-Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP

Iser, Wolfgang. 1972. *Der implizite Leser*. München: Fink

Javed, Khalid Omar. 1990. "What's On. 21.03.90. "*Theatre Record*. 10 (5): 333

Jenkins, Keith. 1999. *Why History?* London & New York: Routledge

Jenkins, Keith (ed.). 1997. *The Postmodern History Reader*. London & New York: Routledge

Jenkins, Keith. 1991. *Re-Thinking History*. London & New York: Routledge

Johns, Ian. 2002. "The Times. 10.08.02." *Theatre Record*. 22 (16): 1051

Jones, Rick. 1991. "Evening Standard. 11.02.92." *Theatre Record*. 21 (8): 176

Kalman Harris, Miriam. 1992. "The Pressure of the Choices." in: Iles, Theresa (ed.). *All Sides of the Subject - Women and Biography*. London & New York: Teachers College P, 68 - 79

Kershaw, Baz. 1996. "Framing the Audience for the Theatre." in: Keat, Russel and Nigel Whitley, Nicholas Abercrombie (eds.). *The Authority of the Consumer*. London: Routledge, 166-86

Koenig, Rhoda. 1990. "Punch. 23.03.90." *Theatre Record*. 10 (5): 337

Kramer. Stephanie. 2000a. *Fiktionale Biographien: (Re-) Visionen und (Re-) Konstruktionen weiblicher Lebensentwürfe in Dramen britischer Autorinnen seit 1970. Ein Beitrag zur Typologie und Entwicklung des historischen Dramas*. Trier: WVT

Kramer, Stephanie. 2000b. "Lebensspuren: Alternative Lebensentwürfe von Dichterinnen und die Problematik weiblicher Autorenschaft im englischsprachigen Gegenwartsdrama." in: Zimmermann, Christian von (ed.). *Fakten und Fiktionen. Strategien fiktionalbiographischer Dichterdarstellungen in Roman, Drama und Film seit 1970*. Tübingen: Narr, 319 – 333

Kramer, Stephanie. 1998. "Imaging / Imagining Women's Lives: Biography in Contemporary Women's Drama" in Reitz, B. (ed.). *CDE. Anthropological Aspects*. Trier: WVT, 69 – 82

Krauss, Kenneth. 1993. *Private Readings / Public Texts. Playreaders' Constructs of Theatre Audiences*. Rutherford. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press

Krieger, Leonard. 1977. *Ranke: The Meaning of History*. Chicago: UP

Kumin, Laura. 2004. "Teatro de la primera."
http://www.elcultural.es/HTML/20041028/Teatro/TEATRO10552.asp; accessed 15.06.06

Kvale, Steiner. 1996. *Interviews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London etc.: Sage and Rubin

Lacey, Anne. 2005. Unpubl. Correspondence with U. Canton

Lacey, Stephen. 1995. *British Realist Theatre. The New Wave in Context 1956 – 1965*. London: Routledge

Lindenberger, Herbert. 1975. *Historical Drama. The Relation of Literature and Reality*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P

Lloyd Pack, Roger. 2005, Unpubl. Correspondence with U. Canton

Lowenthal, David. 1985. *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: UP

Lustig, Harry and Brian B. Schwartz. *Copenhagen in New York*.
http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ashp/nml/copenhagen/Lustig_Schwartz.htm; accessed 24.08.05

Maack, Annegret. 1991. "Charakter als Echo. Zur Poethologie fiktiver Biographien." in: Brunkhorst, Martin and Gerd Rohnmann, Konrad Scholl (eds.). *Klassiker-Renaissance. Modelle der Gegenwartsliteratur*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 247 – 258

Macauly, Alastair. 1999. "Financial Times. 10.02.99." *Theatre Record*. 19(3): 149

Macauly, Alastair. 1998a. "Financial Times. 21.11.98." *Theatre Record*. 18 (24): 1575

Macauly, Alastair. 1998b. "Financial Times. 15.07.98." *Theatre Record*. 18 (14): 898

Mann, P.H. 1966. "Surveying a Theatre Audience: Methodological Problems." *British Journal of Sociology*. 17 (4): 380 – 7

Mark. 1982. "Spectator." *Theatre Record*. 2 (13): 384

Marmion, Patrick. 2000. "Evening Standard. 11.10.00." *Theatre Record*. 20 (21): 1395

Martin, Jacqueline and Willmar Sauter. 1995. *Understanding Theatre. Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice*. Stockholm: Almquvist and Wiksell Int.

McConachie, Bruce. 2001. "Doing Things with Image Schemas: The Cognitive Turn in Theatre Studies and the Problem of Experience for Historians." *Theatre Journal*. 53: 569 – 94

McCrystal, Cal. 2004. Unpubl. Email to Ursula Canton. 04.11.04

McGill, Alice. "Personal Webpage". http://www.theteller.com/storyteller.htm; accessed 13.06.06

McKinley, Jesse. 2004. "Actor for One Day. *New York Times*. 18.09.2004; accessed online 13.11.06

Melada, Geoffrey W. 2000. "The Invention of Love." *The Bi-College News Online*.
http://www.biconews.com/article/view/4392; accessed 08.11.06

Mergenthal, Silvia. 1999. "The Dramatist as Reader: Liz Lochead's Play *Blood and Ice*." in: Huber, Werner and Martin Middeke. *Biofictions. The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. Rochester: Camden House, 96 - 105

Mervant- Roux, Marie-Madeleine. 1998. *L'assise du théâtre. Pour une étude du spectateur*. Paris : CNRS

Moog – Grünewald, Maria. 1991. "Descartes und Pascal im Dialog. Anmerkungen zu Brisvilles Bühnenstück." in: Brunkhorst, Martin and Gerd Rohnmann, Konrad Scholl (eds.). *Klassiker-Renaissance. Modelle der Gegenwartsliteratur*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 67- 74

Moss, Stephen. 2002. "Profile: Tom Stoppard." *The Guardian*. 22.06.02

Munslow. Alun. 2000. *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*. London & New York: Routledge

Murray, Christopher. 1991. "Brian Friel's *Making History* and the Problem of Historical Accuracy." in: Lernout, Geert (ed.). *The Crows Behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 41 - 59

Nadel, Ira Bruce 1984. *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*. London: Macmillan

Nelson, Richard and David Jones. 1995. *Making Plays. The Writer- Director Relationship in Theatre Today*. London: Faber

Neumeier, Beate. 1991. "Past Lives in Present Drama: Feminist Theatre and Intertextuality." in: Fischer – Seidel, Therese (ed.). *Frauen und Frauendarstellung in der englischen und amerikanischen Literatur*. Tübingen: Narr, 63 – 77

Nightingale, Benedict. 2003. "A Stasi Spy's Devotion to His Prey." *The Times*. 10.09.03. Features: 19

Nightingale, Benedict. 1993a. "The Times. 18.09.93." *Theatre Record*. 22 (9): 1048

Nightingale, Benedict. 1993b. "The Times. 04.09.93." *Theatre Record*. 13 (18): 968

Nünning, Ansgar. 2000. "Von der fiktionalen Biographie zur biographischen Metafiktion." in: Zimmermann, Christian von (ed.). *Fakten und Fiktionen. Strategien fiktionalbiographischer Dichterdarstellungen in Roman, Drama und Film seit 1970*. Tübingen: Narr, 15 – 36

Olsen, Christopher. 2000. "Theatre Audience Surveys: toward a Semiotic Approach." *New Theatre Quarterly*. 71. 18 (3): 261 - 75

Ottaviani, Jim and Leland Purvis. 2004. "Bibliography" in: ibid: *Suspended in Language*. Ann Arbor, MI: G.T. Labs; found on: http://www.gt-labs.com/bohr/bohrbibliography.pdf; accessed 24.08.05

Paget, Derek. 1990. *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*. Manchester: UP

Palmer. 1998. *The Contemporary British History Play*. Westport, CT: Greenwood

Pascal, Roy. 1960. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

Paterson, Erika. 1991. "The Self-Determined Audience." *Canadian-Theatre-Review* (CTR). 1991 Summer;
67: 49-53

Patton, Alec. 2004. "Chasing the Train." *Bolz*. 5: 37 - 40

Paulin, Tom. 2002. "Comment and Analysis: Letters: Frayn and Heisenberg." *The Guardian*. 27.03.02

Pavis, Patrice. 1988. *Semiotik der Theaterrezeption*. Tübingen: Günter Narr

Pavis, Patrice. 1985. *Voix et images de la scène*. Lille. Presses Universitaires

Peacock, Keith D. 1991. *Radical Stages. Alternative History in Modern British Drama*. NY: Greenwood

Pfister, Manfred. 1988. *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*. transl. John Halliday. Cambridge: UP

Plath Helle, Anita. 1989. "Re-Presenting Women Writers on Stage: A Retrospective to the Present." in: Hart, Lydia (ed.). *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Michigan: UP, 195 – 208

Plutarch. 1973. [c. 100 aD]. *The Age of Alexander*. transl. Ian Scott – Kilvert. London: Penguin

Postlewait, Thomas. 2003. "Realism" in Kennedy, Dennis (ed.): *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Theatre and Performance*. Oxford: UP 1114

Powell, James M. 1990. "Introduction" in Iggers, Georg G. and James M. Powell (eds.) *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*. Syracuse, N.Y: UP

Ranke, Leopold. 1867 – 1890. *Sämtliche Werke*. 54 Bände, Leipzig; 33

Raulff, Ulrich. 2002. "Das Leben – buchstäblich. Über neuere Biographik und Geschichtswissenschaft." in: Klein, Christian (ed.). 2002. *Grundlagen der Biographik. Theorie und Praxis des biographischen Schreibens*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 55 – 68

Rebellato, Dan. 1999. *1956 and All That. The Making of Modern British Theatre*. London: Routledge

Reitz, Bernhard. 1999. "Dangerous Enthusiasm: The Appropriations of William Blake in Adrian Mitchell's *Tyger*." in: Huber, Werner and Martin Middeke. *Biofictions. The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. Rochester: Camden House, 50 - 64

Rokem, Freddie. 2000. *Performing History. Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*. Iowa: UP

Ronen, Ruth. 1994. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. Cambridge: UP

Rosenthal, Alan. 1999. "Introduction." ibid (ed.). *Why Docudrama. Fact and Fiction on Film and TV*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, xiii - xxi

Rousseau, Jean Jacques. 1964 [1728]. *Les Confessions*. Paris: Folio Classique

Rubin, Herbert and Irene. 1995. *Qualitative Interviewing. The Art of Hearing Data*. London etc.: Sage

Ryan, Carrie. 2001. "Translating The Invention of Love: The Journey from Page to Stage for Stoppard's Latest Play." Journal of Modern Literature 14 (2): 197 – 204; accessed electronically, 29.04.04 http://iupjournals.org/jml/mod24-2.html

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1979 [1916] *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. ed. Bally, Charles and Albert Sechehaya. Paris: Payot

Sauter, Willmar. 2002. "Who Reacts When, How and upon What: From Audience Surveys to the Theatrical Event." *Contemporary-Theatre-Review:-An-International-Journal*. 12(3): 115-29

Sauter, Willmar. 2000. *The Theatrical Event. Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P

Schabert, Ina. 1990. *In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography*. Tübingen: Franke

Schaff, Barbara. 1992. *Das zeitgenössische britische Künstlerdrama*. Passau: Stutz

Scheuer, Helmut. 1979. "Kunst und Wissenschaft. Die moderne literarische Biographie." in: Klingenstein, Grete and Heinrich Lutz, Gerald Stourzh (eds.). *Biographie und Geschichtswissenschaft. Aufsätze zur Theorie und Praxis biographischer Arbeit*. München: Oldenbourg, 81 – 110

Schläger, Jürgen. 1998. "Biography: Cult as Culture." Batchelor, John. 1995. *The Art of Literary Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon, 57 - 72

Schlicht, Michael Winfrid. 1989. "Projektion und Perspektive: Ein letztes Wort." in: Schlicht, Michael W. and Siegfried Quandt. 1989. *Szenische Geschichtsdarstellung. Träume über Wissen*. Marburg: Dr. Wolfram Hitzeroth Verlag, 137 -8

Searle, John R. 1996. [1995]. *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin

Shelston, Alan. 1977. *The Critical Idiom. Biography*. London: Methuen

Sinfield, Alan. 1983. "The Theatre and Its Audience." in Sinfield,-Alan (ed.). *Society and Literature, 1945-1970.* New York: Holmes & Meier

Skidelsky, Robert. 1998. "Only Connect: Biography and Truth." in: Homberger, Eric and John Charmley (eds.). *The Troubled Face of Biography.* London: Macmillan, 1 - 16

Smith, Neil. 1995. "What's On. 06.12.95." *Theatre Record.* 15 (24): 1634

Sorcini, Sara. 1999. *Playing With(in) the Restoration, Metatheatre as a Strategy of Appropriation in Contemporary Rewritings of Restoration Drama.* Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane

Spence, Charles. 2002. "Multisensory Integration, Attention and Perception." in: Roberts, David (ed.). *Signals and Reception. The Fundamentals of Human Sensation.* Houndsmill: Palgrave, 345 - 54

Spencer, Charles. 2003. "Frayn Pulls Off Another Triumph." *Daily Telegraph.* 11.09.03

Spencer, Charles. 1994. "Daily Telegraph. 12.12.94." *Theatre Record.* 14 (25 - 6): 1553

Spiegel, Marc. *"Einstein Alive* webpage." http://www.marcspiegel.com/einstein/whatis.html. accessed 13.06.06

Stanislavski, Konstantin Sergeevich. 1980. [1936]. *An Actor Prepares.* transl. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. London: Methuen

Stanley, Liz. 1992. "Process in Feminist Biography and Feminist Epistemology." in: Iles, Theresa (ed.). *All Sides of the Subject - Women and Biography.* London & New York: Teachers College P, 109 - 25

States, Bert O. 1985. "The Anatomy of Dramatic Character." *Theatre Journal.* 37 (1): 86 - 101

Stauffer, Donald A. 1940. "A Parasitical Form of Biography." *Modern Language Notes.* 55 (4): 289 -92

Stoppard, Tom. 1974. "Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas." *Theatre Quarterly.* 14: 3 – 18

Storr, Anthony. 1995. "Psychiatry and Literary Biography." in: Batchelor, John. (ed.). *The Art of Literary Biography.* Oxford: Clarendon; 73 - 86

Suzman, Janet. 2005. Unpublished Correspondence with Ursula Canton

Tan, Peter K.W. 1989. *A Stylistics of Drama.* PhD Thesis University of Edinburgh

Taylor, Paul. 2000. "Independent. 29.05.00." *Theatre Record.* 20 (11): 685

Taylor, Talbot J. 1992. *Mutual Misunderstanding. Scepticism and the Theorizing if Language and Interpretation.* London: Routledge

Thaxter, John. 2002. "What's On. 14.08.02." *Theatre Record.* 22 (9): 551

Tompkins, Jane P. (ed.). 1980. *Reader-Response Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism.* Baltimore: John Hopkins UP

Thwaite, Ann. 1998. "Writing Lives." in: Homberger, Eric and John Charmley (ed.). *The Troubled Face of Biography.* London: Macmillan, 17 - 32

Tomalin, Claire. 1987. *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life.* London: Viking

Tridgell, Susan. 2004. *Understanding Our Selves. The Dangerous Art of Biography.* European Connections 12. Oxford etc.: Peter Lang

Ubersfeld, Anne. 1982[4]. Lire le théâtre. Paris: Editions Sociales

University of New York. The Graduate Centre. *More Copenhagen Events*. http://web.gc.cuny.edu/sciart/copenhagen/copenhagen.html; accessed 24.08.05

Van Niekerk, Niel. 2001. "The Problematics of Qualitative Research in Theatre." *South African Theatre Journal*. 15: 135 -148

Wagner – Martin, Linda. 1994. *Telling Women's Lives. The New Biography*. New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers UP

Waugh, Patricia. 1984. *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge

Weissmann. 1959/60. "A Lively Theatre of Lives: Portraiture Versus Art." *Modern Drama* 2: 263 – 67

Wertenbaker, Timberlake. 2002. "Dancing With History." in Maufort, Marc and Franca Bellarsi (eds.). Crucible of Cultures. Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of the New Millenium. Bruxelles etc: Peter Lang, 17 – 23

Wessendorf, Markus. 2006. "Postmodern Drama Post-9/11: Adriano Shaplin's Pugilist Specialist and David Hare's Stuff Happens". Paper Presented at the CDE Annual Conference, Augsburg. 2006

West, Sam. 2005. Unpublished Correspondence with U. Canton

West, Timothy. 2005. Unpubl. Correspondence with U. Canton

Westhead, David. 2005. Telephone Interview with U. Canton, 21.04.05

White, Hayden. 1973. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. Baltimore & London: John Hopkins UP

Wikander, Matthew. H. 1986. *The Play of Truth and State. Historical Drama from Shakespeare to Brecht*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP

Wilde, Oscar. 1954 [1895. *The Importance of Being Ernest. Plays*. Penguin: Hammondsworth

Willet, John (ed. and transl). 1978. *Brecht on Theatre*. London: Methuen

Williams, Christopher. 1980 (ed.). *Realism and the Cinema. A Reader*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Williams, Hugo. 1990. "Sunday Correspondent. 18.03.90." *Theatre Record*. 10 (5): 333 – 4

Wolf, Matt. 2003. "NT Platform with Michael Frayn." http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=7664; accessed 29.04.04

Wolfe, Welby B. 1977. *Matters of the Scene. An Introduction to Technical Theatre*. New York etc.: Harper

Woolf, Virginia. 1967. "The Art of Biography." in: ibid: *Collected Essays*. London: Hogarth, 221 - 8

Woolf, Virginia. 1967. "The New Biography". in: ibid. *Collected Essays*. London: Hogarth, 229 - 35

Worth, Katherine. 1973. *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*. London: Bell

Wright, Nicholas. 2002. "Programme Note." NT. *Programme Vincent in Brixton*, 1

Wu, Duncan. 2000. *Making Plays: Interviews with Contemporary British Dramatists and their Directors*. Basingstoke: Macmillan

Würzbach, Natascha. 1984. "Fiktionalität." in: Ranke, Kurt and Hermann Bausinger et al. (eds.). *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*. vol.4. Berlin: De Gruyter. 1105 – 1111

Young, Mary Ann. "History Alive Webpage." http://www.historyaliveshows.com/biography.htm. accessed 13.06.06

Young, Toby. 2002. "Spectator. 11.05.02." *Theatre Record.* 22 (9): 551

Zimmermann, Christian von (ed.). 2000. *Fakten und Fiktionen. Strategien fiktionalbiographischer Dichterdarstellungen in Roman, Drama und Film seit 1970.* Tübingen: Narr

Additional Material

Programmes

Derby Playhouse. 2004. *Programme Kafka's Dick.*

Manchester Library Theatre. 2004. *Programme Vincent in Brixton.*

National Theatre. 2003. *Programme Democracy.*

National Theatre. 2002. *Programme Vincent in Brixton.*

National Theatre. 2000. *Programme Albert Speer.*

National Theatre. 1998. *Programme Copenhagen.*

National Theatre. 1997. *Programme The Invention of Love.*

National Theatre. 1996. *Programme Stanley.*

National Theatre. 1993. *Programme Arcadia.*

National Theatre. 1991. *Programme The Madness of George III.*

National Theatre. 1986. *Programme Futurists.*

National Theatre. 1983. *Programme Tales from Hollywood.*

National Theatre. 1979. *Programme Amadeus.*

Royal Shakespeare Company. 1996. *Programme The General from America.*

Royal Shakespeare Company. 1993. *Programme Travesties.*

Royal Shakespeare Company. 1992. *Programme Columbus and the Discovery of Japan.*

Royal Shakespeare Company. 1990. *Programme Moscow Gold.*

Sheffield Lyceum. 2005. *Programme Insignificance.*

University of Sheffield, School of English. 2005. *Programme Letters Home.*

Index

288