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TELLING LIFE STORIES AS A STRATEGY  
OF AUTHENTICATION?  
MERLE KARUSOO'S *OUR BIOGRAPHIES*  
AND *TODAY WE WON'T PLAY*

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This paper focuses on two concepts, put into the context of theatre: **life story** and **authenticity**. At first glance, the two are closely connected: what else could possibly guarantee the authenticity of a theatre performance if not the real-life experiences of real people, as opposed to the artistically constructed stories of characters "living" in fictional worlds? "Authentic," "true," "genuine" and the like are in high esteem in today's theatre criticism and in wide demand among the theatre-going public. Why not meet these expectations by performing autobiographical stories? It is nevertheless obvious that contemporary theatre cannot be properly described through a sharp opposition between the authentic (the real) and the fictional, but rather through their mutual tension, blurring of borders, and intertwining. In this paper, I will examine this relationship in the so-called life story theatre of the Estonian stage director Merle Karusoo (b. 1944), by considering two of her stage productions, both based on a similar staging strategy, yet removed from one another by almost a quarter of a century. The keywords of Karusoo's theatre are life story and history, memory and identity. I will first put these concepts under a closer scrutiny, together with the question of authenticity in life stories and in theatre.

A life story is a retrospective narrative, at the center of which are the personal experiences and feelings of the narrator. Today, we are witnessing increasing interest in life stories both in arts (literature, theatre, film) and in humanities and social sciences (such as oral history, ethnology, anthropology, folkloristics, etc.). Biographical approaches in different research fields share an interest in memory—the ways in which individuals recall and understand the past. A life story is one of the forms for organizing individual memory, and memory is, simultaneously, the

medium of life-telling and life-writing, its most important resource both in its endurance and its ephemeral nature.<sup>1</sup> Individual or autobiographical memory consists of personally experienced events, and is short in duration. It thus needs to be continually "refreshed" and stimulated through contacts with other people sharing similar experiences. Social interaction and oral or written communication can be regarded as "levers" of autobiographical memory.<sup>2</sup> According to the French social scientist Maurice Halbwachs, individuals call recollections to mind by relying on a framework of collective memory,<sup>3</sup> i.e. individual memory is determined, to an extent, by the society or the group.

Autobiographical narratives are accepted in social sciences as documents through which collective memory can be studied. The latter has often been considered as an opposite and alternative to "history proper." Relationships between memory (manifested, first and foremost, in life stories of "ordinary" people) and professional historiography have frequently been treated from the perspective of truth-value. In the earlier, positivist paradigm, memory was regarded as subjective and misleading, with history deemed as objective and neutral. The rise of memory-based research has not infrequently lead to the opposite view: memory came to be regarded as authentic, spontaneous, referring to the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it actually was), while history is derivative, official, analytic. Life stories have been understood as particular sorts of memory reservoirs, in which everything missing from history proper is safely deposited. Thus writing down, telling, and studying life stories would open up an approach to the "true" past, free from ideological distortions and limitations imposed by official, institutionalized interpretations.

Such a clear-cut opposition of (individual and authentic) life stories to (unitary and universal) history is, however, highly questionable. The interference between history and collective memory, as well as between collective and individual memory is considerable. Life story researchers generally concur that a distinction between at least three levels must be made: reality (life as it was lived), experience (how an individual has made that lived life conscious), and representation (narrated life).<sup>4</sup> Life experiences are the resource for all individual biographies, but not all of them become part of these biographies. All individuals structure and

<sup>1</sup> See Kirss, "Introduction," 16.

<sup>2</sup> Köresaar, "Memory, Time, Experience, and the Gaze of a Life Stories Researcher," 38.

<sup>3</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 182.

<sup>4</sup> Bruner, "Experience and Its Expressions," 6.

restructure their past by choosing among meaningful events and details and by arranging their priorities. For the purposes of this paper it should be emphasized that memory is a dynamic process between the past and the present—life experiences are selected and organized from the perspective of present interests and preferences. A person telling their life story could be called "the ideologist of one's own life" according to Pierre Bourdieu, who assumes that an autobiographical narrative is always at least partially motivated by a concern to confer meaning both to the past and to the future.<sup>5</sup> Socially conditioned remembrance and interpretation patterns exert an influence over the ways in which people make conscious their baggage of life experiences. Moreover, in telling or writing life stories, various narrative conventions and competencies are used to shape these experiences. According to psychologist Endel Tulving, individual tracks of memory are subject to continual re-coding, and, as demonstrated by relevant experiments, people's recollections of an event change depending on what they narrate about it.<sup>6</sup> Thus individual remembrances, on which every life story is based, are dependent on the time, situation, purposes and means of their communication.

It is the "synergy" between autobiographical narratives and social structures of collective memory that makes life stories valuable for theatre. A well-known genre in present-day theatre is the autobiographical storytelling in the form of solo performances—by artists such as Spalding Gray, Jevgeni Grishkovets, Rachel Rosenthal, etc. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, one of the purposes of such performances is the construction of the self (*Konstitution eines Selbst*) through the telling of the life-story, a public and performative act. She also argues that in today's theatre, it is hardly possible to narrate a story that the heterogeneous audiences would accept as collective autobiography.<sup>7</sup> She interprets the impact of autobiographical performances as having a destabilizing effect on the audience, instead of working to reaffirm a collective identity.<sup>8</sup> This, however, cannot be extended to cover all life stories-based theatre. Public performances of individual life stories allow the spectators to compare experiences in order to discover both common ground and significant differences. Narrating a life story undoubtedly leads to the construction of a personal identity with its attempt to answer the question "who am I?" Life stories, mediated and enhanced by the theatrical medium, may

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 300.

<sup>6</sup> Tulving, *Mälu*, 101.

<sup>7</sup> Fischer-Lichte, "Inszenierung von Selbst?," 60-1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

participate in shaping group values and identities, especially during collective storytelling, as exemplified by Karusoo's theatre.

Indeed, while it may be commonly accepted that in present-day society, personal identities are unstable, multiple, and fragmented, it does not follow that collective identities are about to disappear. Cultural researchers emphasize that a person's identity has several dimensions or layers. The self-image of persons consists of how they position themselves in the field of social relations, and is constructed through the differences between "I" and the others. Simultaneously, people identify with different groups and communities, and in the process, these identifications come to form a part of their cultural identity—the dimension that includes local, national, generation-based, and other collective identities.<sup>9</sup> We should also keep in mind that the mechanisms of identity creation and the function of collective identities in a person's life is dependent on the social and cultural type. For the present paper, the issue of national identity is relevant. In the totalitarian Soviet society, which is the social context of the first stage production to be analyzed, the self-consciousness of Estonians was primarily based on a sharp opposition of the national to the Soviet. During the 1990s, in Estonia as well as in other newly established post-socialist countries, the old social structures became unstable and traditional identities entered into a crisis. Yet the problematization of collective identities did not cast the concept of national identity into the garbage heap of history as something old-fashioned and superseded in our "global village". Sociologists have suggested that the reconstruction of national identity was one of the most pressing problems in post-socialist countries during the process of the "return to the Western world."<sup>10</sup>

As we can see, social frames influence life experiences, and certain cultural resources and convenient narrative strategies are used to fashion them into a story. A life story is thus not completely "authentic" in the precise meaning of this word. Etymologically, the notion of "authenticity" points to the subject's arbitrariness, of independence from outside influences (*authentēō*—acting arbitrarily). Authentic speech is the self-expression of a free and responsible person. Historically, the word "authentic" has been used to describe texts or knowledge based on original sources, which are thereby deemed reliable—the opposite of "fake," "imitation," or "copy." In a more general sense, "authenticity" refers to genuineness, realness, as opposed to the notions of "illusion," "fiction," and "pretending." Thus the notion of authenticity has at least two different

<sup>9</sup> See Sevänen, "The Study of Cultural Identity," 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Lauristin, "Contexts of Transition," 28.

aspects: the genuineness of the material (texts) and the sincerity of the mode of being. In theatre, the first is mostly associated with the base material for a stage production (e.g. documentary theatre *versus* fictional stores); the other with the mode of acting (self-expression *versus* role-playing). Here the relations between representation (the depiction of something else) and immediate presence seem to serve as a wider framework; in other words, in theatre, the notion of "authenticity" allows us to observe the familiar relationship of **fictional** to the **real** from a new angle. I would like to stress, however, that as long as we are dealing with events framed as a theatrical performance, and repeated on stage from evening to evening, we could neither remove representation completely nor reach absolute authenticity. It would thus be more to the point to speak about making something authentic or producing the effect of authenticity by using various strategies of authentication.

In theatre, making use of real life stories usually refers to an intention to create an effect of authenticity, as opposed to the more traditional strategies of creating fictional worlds. Life stories can be presented in the form of drama, i.e. as plots with a multitude of characters, dialogue and conflict, but the most effective strategy of authentication seems to be a direct narration of the life stories, face-to-face with the audience. Such a situation can be, first, associated with an act of confession, with its presumption of absolute honesty. Second, the narrative construction will be hidden, as there appears to be no instance of staging that would control the story's performance. I, however, would like to introduce a *stage director* of life stories, whose aims and practices are somewhat different.

In the context of contemporary Estonian theatre, Merle Karusoo's theatre is quite unique.<sup>11</sup> In criticism, her stage productions have been called documentary theatre, memory theatre, and theatre of biography. She herself prefers to call it sociological theatre, and to describe it as *Not Belonging to the Mainstream*—which was the title of her MA thesis (1999). Before attending theatre school, Karusoo first gained experience in sociological studies as an assistant in the laboratory of sociology at the University of Tartu (1968-1972). She graduated from theatre school as a stage director in 1976. Her first productions in professional theatre were in the traditional psychological-realist vein. Yet her awareness that existing plays do not truthfully represent acute social problems that she was

<sup>11</sup> Local critics have, however, compared Karusoo's working methods with several internationally known stage directors, such as Sweden's Suzanne Osten and the leader of *Théâtre du Soleil*, Ariane Mnouchkine. A comparative treatment of the theatre of Merle Karusoo and that of Anna Deavere Smith has been published in English (Monaco; Kurvet-Käosaar 2002).

interested in brought along a need for different practices. Karusoo came to the conclusion that she herself must create the then non-existent social dramaturgy. Her general purpose was to discover real social problems to which solutions were badly needed, and to gather material for hypotheses without aiming at “solving” these problems. Karusoo started her projects in sociological dramaturgy and theatre in the early 1980. She focused on risk groups in Estonian society (e.g. teenagers, immigrants, children in orphanages), and produced documentary plays on topics such as drugs, HIV, teenage problems, homicide, etc. In preparing her stage productions, Karusoo uses data from sociological research, and makes use of questionnaires, polls, interviews, school essays, etc.

Over time, Karusoo became convinced that the trouble spots of a society are most clearly revealed through the life experiences of people in risk groups. Life story becomes the central entity of her theatre, while she remains aware of and is influenced by conceptions of life stories derived from the social sciences. A constant theme of life stories theatre developed from the end of the 1980s, closely associated with the life stories collection campaigns started under the auspices of the Estonian Literary Museum during that same period. It is thus no wonder that Karusoo became one of the initiators and founders of the Estonian Life Histories Association in the 1990s. The political situation of the period was the restoration of independence, and the primary purpose of collecting life stories was to use collective memories to fill in the gaps in the nation's history, and to make public the social groups marginalised and silenced during the Soviet period. Alongside restoring true national history (“giving the Estonians back their history” in popular rhetoric), hidden personal biographies were re-discovered—“giving the people back their life stories” in the words of Karusoo.<sup>12</sup> Thus Karusoo staged life stories of those who, in 1944, failed in their attempts to escape to the West (*Fall 1944*), people deported to Siberia (*The Report*) and those who assisted the deporters (*The Deportation Men*), conscripts of the Soviet army who fought in Afghanistan (*The Missionaries*), etc. Karusoo emphasizes that everyone has a right to their life story, and believes that revealing “hidden” life stories has a therapeutic impact, helping to cure individual and national traumas.

Unlike Karusoo's usual practice of making actors narrate life stories of different people (often collected by the actors themselves), her first life stories based production required the performers to make their own personal life experiences public. The possessive pronoun in the title, *Our*

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lauristin, “Contexts of Transition,” 38.

*Biographies* (1982), refers to the participating actors and actresses themselves. It was a graduation production in the theatre school, involving sixteen students, performed under the auspices of the Youth Theatre of the Estonian SSR. As it was a school production, its stage run was short: 22 performances were given to a total audience of 12 600.<sup>13</sup> Its starting point was a question that posed itself to Karusoo when she was working as a teacher in theatre school: what are the most acute problems of today's younger generation? Instead of collecting material from high-schools, as originally planned, Karusoo decided to use the personal recollections of her own theatre students. There were two goals: to help young actors to become aware of their own life experiences, and to provide a portrait of the generation born during the so-called thaw period (late 1950s, early 1960s). Work commenced with students telling each other about their lives, and these stories were recorded. During this collective storytelling, certain events of recent past surfaced (not without the director pointing them out) as those that had touched most of these youths: the accidental death of the world's first astronaut Yuri Gagarin, the national passion of the Estonian song festival in 1969, the death of great national figures such as the writer Friedebert Tuglas, the singer Georg Ots, and so on. These events began to structure the narratives as a set of “landmarks” for that generation, and for all of Estonians. In addition, everyone told about their entering the first grade, graduating from school, becoming pioneers and later young communists, etc. The stories of the students' parents and other close relatives were told as well, in order to produce a wider historical background to their personal remembrances. Common points of reference were also three “official” and highly ideological texts, presented by all the actors, in unison, and in a completely neutral intonation: the pioneer's oath, the soviet army soldier's oath, and the anthem of the Communist Union of Youth. The historical framework of the recollections was marked by the series of dates printed on the playbill, ranging from 1948 to 1987 (i.e. five years into the future), also fixing the school years of this generation (1965-1975). During the performance, dates were announced through loudspeakers, dividing the performance into temporal cycles. In

<sup>13</sup> The short performance run may have also been one of the reasons why *Our Biographies* was allowed on stage. The way the text was compiled was unusual for theatre practices in Soviet Estonia. It was required that all texts must be officially sanctioned before rehearsals could commence; the text of *Our Biographies* was, however, only completed during rehearsals, as a joint venture by the entire troupe. Its unusual nature is also revealed by the fact that critics found it difficult to define. It was variously called: a night of oration, a composition, a social happening.



this manner, personal life stories were placed into a wider socio-cultural framework, in order to activate collective memory.

During the second phase of preparations, the so-called "headphone monologues" were recorded. The students recorded these on a tape-recorder, alone, in candlelight, while listening to music through headphones; everyone played the same band—Led Zeppelin. This was to bring down psychic barriers and help participants reach a perfectly sincere self-disclosure. Everyone had an option to remove their own tape instead of giving it to others to listen to, and two of the sixteen people did. The students transcribed their monologues as precisely as possible, without attempting to adjust them into a more literary language. The characteristics of oral speech were preserved and were carried on to the staging: interruptions, partially illogical arguments, repetitive phrasing, colloquial lexis, etc. There was an attempt to reach a maximal level of spontaneity and authenticity of speech. The raw material consisted of nearly 30 hours of autobiographical monologues, from which Karusoo compiled the text of a two-part staging. The first part, *Our Biographies*, consisted of young people's stories about their childhood, school years, and choice of profession. The second part, *When the Rooms are Full...*, was about current problems in relationships, and stories of their parents. This second part was completely censored and never reached larger audiences—I will return to that later.

In *Our Biographies* the effect of authenticity was further buttressed by a minimalist aesthetic—the stage production was, in the context of that period's Estonian theatre, unusually static and visually poor. Scenery consisted of school benches, on which the actors sat. A number was attached to every bench: the average grade from their high-school diploma, operating as a numeral indicator of that young person's social value. In addition, the actors were identified by an episode derived from their life-story, the meaning of which was only revealed during the performance. Some examples of the names printed on the playbill would be "the boy who hated his desk-mate," "the girl who wanted to represent Estonian women," "the boy who was born together with his father," etc. The performance itself consisted of monologues, with almost no stage action and without any dialogue between the actors. The one whose turn it was to speak stood up as if answering in a classroom, and some of the longer narratives were performed at the front stage. Actors did listen to each other and reacted (in body language), but the first and primary addressee was the audience. The spectator's position was construed as the position of a confidant, to whom one could disclose the most intimate experiences.

Strategies of authentication operated both on the level of textual creation—personal stories were told by overcoming psychological barriers—and during the performance: all actors spoke as themselves, and the manner of performance was static and nontheatrical. The effect of authenticity was supported by the fact that the narrators were all acting students still unknown to the spectators, and thus unburdened by associations with theatrical roles that would hinder perceiving them as "themselves." The professional identity of the performers remained unthematized in the performance. Nevertheless, we cannot conclude that the actors on stage were "nothing but themselves." One of the actresses admitted in a later interview: "You can't be on stage like in real life. It doesn't matter that you have to play yourself, you are still playing a role."<sup>14</sup> As the stage director, Karusoo admitted that the actors portrayed the person whom she had constructed by choosing among and cutting down everyone's original text.<sup>15</sup> Thus the stage director had a two-pronged role: she both initiated, and because of the trustful and confident relationship with the students, also guaranteed authentic self-expression, while simultaneously manipulating this self-expression to achieve a social impact. Despite the goal of "objective" storytelling, the director inevitably played the role of an ideologist who assembles the life stories into a generation's narrative. Nevertheless, the spectators perceived *Our Biographies* as being extraordinarily genuine. It is my contention that this impression of authenticity was, to a considerable extent, the product of the social and ideological context of the time period.

What was this context like? Estonia was part of the Soviet Union and subjected to a totalitarian political regime. It should be emphasized that Soviet society was deeply hypocritical: there were double moral standards, and there was a wide gap between public discourse and actual everyday life. Public discourse was influenced both by censorship, which forbade certain topics (such as the issue of ethnic nationality), and by self-censorship. This gap is well illustrated by one boy's recollection in *Our Biographies*:

After writing the final paper, I was approached by a secretary of the Communist Union of Youth, a young woman, a mother of one; she told me that you, who will be attending the university, should never write what you

<sup>14</sup> Tuuling, Merle Karusoo lavastuste "Meie elulood" ja "Kui ruumid on täis..." vaatlus, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Karusoo, *Põhisuunda mittekuluv*, 31.

yourself think, write what is expected from you, write about the ideologically correct, the politically correct—this you can do!<sup>16</sup>

During the 1980s, the Soviet regime was stagnating, with a return to Stalinist dogmas and the forceful politics of russification. In 1980, there were youth riots in Tallinn, after which Estonian intellectuals wrote a letter to the government, the so-called “Letter by the Forty,” which expressed grave concern for the future of Estonian culture and language. The letter was followed by repressions targeting its authors.

Ideological concerns of the time shaped and influenced this production from two different directions. On the one side, topics of nationality and social antagonism were brought to the forefront, to which theatre offered a platform. One boy, for example, confessed that he started to forget Estonian words while serving in the Soviet army and forced to communicate only in Russian. One girl expressed her pain and fear for the future of the national language: “It feels very painful when people cannot speak this language and ... cannot write in their mother tongue. Where can this lead to... When language vanishes, culture too will vanish, because we think ... in our mother’s tongue.”<sup>17</sup> As a counter-force, self-censorship also influenced the final result, forcing the storytellers to prune down those episodes they thought most likely to be considered „suspect” by the authorities, and to monitor their means of expression. Even the quote above is an example of self-censorship: initially, the worry was not about the “vanishing”, but of “taking away” of language, in direct reference to the russification policies of the period. In Karusoo’s own words, self-censorship had a remarkable impact on *Our Biographies*, to the extent that official censorship left everything relevant intact, except for the title—originally, it was to be *Children’s Biographies*.<sup>18</sup> Thus the aim of the staging—to express authentic life experiences—was achieved through a compromise with official ideology.

The limit for compromise was reached with the second part of the staging, *When the Rooms are Full...*, which included stories about the actors’ parents. One boy spoke about his father and aunt, who were deported to Siberia in 1949. Censors demanded the complete removal of this story.<sup>19</sup> Karusoo posed the following question to the troupe: do we

<sup>16</sup> Karusoo, *Meie elulood*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Karusoo, *Põhisuunda mittekuluv*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Another episode removed by censorship was a narrative by a girl (“the girl who thought doors were for coming and going”) about the horror she experienced when seeing the Berlin wall—its barriers and tanks at the border of two worlds.

have a right to give up the stories of our lives? The troupe decided that they don’t, the removal was not accepted, and as a consequence the production was only permitted for a few closed performances, with no ordinary spectators allowed. This staging did not just push political, but also moral limits, with its discussions of drinking, domestic violence, parental divorce, etc. At the Artistic Advisory Board discussion<sup>20</sup> even many professional theatre people considered such frankness inadmissible and harmful to the young. The lack of anonymity—the fact that the young actors were speaking about themselves—was found to be upsetting, and Karusoo was blamed for forcing the youngsters to perform a “spiritual striptease”. The attitude of one actress is characteristic:

I left ... before the end of the first act. I felt like crying and screaming. I have been married for fourteen years, and I haven’t even told my husband stuff like that.<sup>21</sup>

Thus *Our Biographies* managed to reach the limelight, although at the cost of certain ideological compromises. Public criticism of *Our Biographies* was twofold: newspaper articles commissioned by the editors after the opening night, and the temporally latter reception in specialized cultural publications. The former, representing official discourse, displayed a certain ideological bias. A couple of the members of the same generation (one high-school student, one university student) spoke up and, while praising the production for its novelty, also reproached the young actors for expressing their discontent without offering anything positive in return. Asked to comment on the production, an academic scientist of pedagogy claimed that *Our Biographies* is definitely not a generalization of the students’ attitudes in Soviet Estonia. He also opined that the production should primarily be watched by teachers and parents instead of young people, who are unable to draw (the “correct”) conclusions.<sup>22</sup> This part of criticism attempted to demonstrate that the stage production is not representative and thus does not proffer the “truth.”

<sup>20</sup> During the Soviet era, every opening night was preceded by a so-called preview, after which the artistic advisory board, whose members included representatives of the ministry of culture, decided whether to allow the production to premiere or not. The minutes of the artistic advisory board for *When the Rooms are Full...* have not survived, but its events are documented in the records of an actress present at the discussion.

<sup>21</sup> Tuuling, *Merle Karusoo lavastuste*, 35-6.

<sup>22</sup> Liimets, “Äravahetatud lapsed.”

The keywords in professional theatre criticism were “honesty” and “sincerity.” The critics adequately expressed the shock experienced by the spectators when the discussion on stage veered towards topics the suppression of which in public discourse was already accepted. The effect of “truth” resulted from an opposition to public and official social representations and an appeal to the then-suppressed collective national memory. It was this ideological context that produced a powerful effect of authenticity. More generally speaking, it was felt to be unbelievable that in Soviet theatre, where the audience was usually addressed through hidden meanings and hints, such a subjective and straightforward discussion of private life was even possible. In the society of the time, bringing personal problems and fears out into the public was deemed unsuitable. One background, *Our Biographies* was perceived as exceptionally sincere. One critic phrased his initial impression thus: “Sincerity. ... an attempt to understand oneself. With honesty. Without shame. Directly. Documentary. An astounding performance.”<sup>23</sup> One of the key figures of Estonian national culture during that period, the poet and actor Juhan Viiding, also highlighted in his review the sincerity of the performers and the trust resulting from this between the stage and the audience. He called the production a “mind-healing meeting.”<sup>24</sup>

In 2006, in a novel political situation of the independent and democratic Estonia, Merle Karusoo produced a stage production using an analogous model. *Today We Won't Play* was a graduation production, just like *Our Biographies* had been twenty-four years earlier. The production was a sort of „calling card” for the young actors, who were graduating from the Moscow Art Theatre School. Russian youths living in Estonia had been studying in Moscow, under a contract concluded between Tallinn and Moscow, and now returned to Estonia, to start working in the Russian Theatre. Eight of the twelve graduates participated in the production. The number of spectators of this intimate stage production, only played in a very small venue, remained considerably smaller than that of *Our Biographies*: the 22 performances were attended by approximately 2100 people. The preparatory process of this production was also different in several relevant aspects. Merle Karusoo was no longer the tutor of the class, but only worked with the students on this particular stage production. There was considerably less time than with *Our Biographies* to get acquainted with one another, and to do rehearsals. The source material comprised documents of two different types. First, there were the

<sup>23</sup> Pii, “Läbinisti ausalt.”

<sup>24</sup> Viiding, “Käisin teatris,” 24.

actors' diaries kept during their first study courses. These so-called “impressions” were supposed to be written down every week and presented to the course supervisor. Thus it amounted to a mandatory self-analysis that was part of the curriculum. Second, there were approximately 200 pages of oral narration of life stories, from which Karusoo used about a quarter for the staging. Here Karusoo made use of her standard working methods—life story interviews guided and structured by certain topics and events which all participants had to talk about. Unlike *Our Biographies*, which only mediated spontaneous oral speech, the style of *Today We Won't Play* was constituted by alternating passages of literary and colloquial language, with the general impression veering towards speech presented in literary language. Similar to *Our Biographies*, the production included an “official” text—the actors sang, in Estonian, the Estonian anthem.

This stage production, too, dealt with the issue of collective identity. The life stories were narrated by Russian-speaking young people, born during the 1980s, the final decade of Soviet power. The local Russian-speaking minority is undoubtedly one of the marginal(ized) and socially “risky” groups in present-day Estonia, since after the restoration of independence they lost their position as the Soviet majority and had to integrate themselves into the newly structured society, dominated by Estonians<sup>25</sup>. Between 1999-2003, Karusoo carried out an integration project called “Who am I?”<sup>26</sup>, with the purpose of making ethnic minorities currently living in Estonia aware of their background and identity, in order to facilitate their integration into the Estonian society. This project involved conducting interviews about life stories with, for example, Russian children in orphanages, with Gypsies, etc. The project was not artistic, although every group, for a few times, told their life stories in public, to an invited audience. The new stage production was expected to take up the issues of identity politics, too.

Thus, *Today We Won't Play* seemed to have all the opportunities of becoming a major political and artistic event. The identity of the Russian community and their relationship with the local inhabitants are some of the most sensitive issues in Estonia today, and a promise of treating these topics in the form of autobiographical theatre generated expectations of finding out “the truth.” Indeed, in addition to remembrances of childhood,

<sup>25</sup> See Lauristin, “Contexts of Transition,” 40.

<sup>26</sup> In 2004, Karusoo produced a staging with young Austrian actors, on the same general topic, for the Wiener Festwochen festival, called *From Vienna to Moscow. Orphanage no.6*. It was based on interviews with Austrian children who in 1934 had ended up in the Soviet Union, in an orphanage in Moscow.

first love, and so on, Karusoo chose as the structuring topics stories of the actors' parents (that is, the question of the roots of the Russian minority), their feelings about the August Coup and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, etc. Despite all of this, however, *Today We Won't Play* did not become an event comparable to *Our Biographies*. Some of the reasons for this can probably be found in the social and cultural shifts that took place in the meantime.

To a certain extent, *Today We Won't Play* did offer information on the situation and attitudes of young Russians in Estonia. For instance, there was the problem of citizenship: why have some youths acquired Estonian and others Russian citizenship, while a third group has the so-called "gray passports," which means that they are without citizenship—even though all were born and grew up in Estonia. Instead of national self-image, however, the focal point turned out to be a cultural conflict: a swaying between their tiny fatherland (Estonia) and Moscow, the large cultural metropolis, the place where these young people had studied. The issue of professional identity—discussions about oneself as a future actor—also held a prominent role, something which was completely absent from *Our Biographies*, and the social resonance of which could not have been particularly strong. Critics also pointed out that whereas the Estonians' life stories in the early 1980s expressed the accumulation of social and national despair, the life of the youths in *Today We Won't Play* seemed to be, for the most part, happy.<sup>27</sup> But "social and national despair" was not, in fact, absent. It piled up, and finally erupted in the spring of 2007, with street riots of Russian-speaking people over the removal of a statue of a Soviet soldier in Tallinn.<sup>28</sup> The passions raging around the so-called bronze soldier revealed a deep national chasm and shook the entire Estonian society. Yet the production, which premiered a year earlier, only provided a superficial presentation of such experiences and emotions. In the life stories of these young actors, the most serious issues of the Russian minority were relegated into the periphery.

Why did the social and sociological potential of the staging remain unused? Unlike *Our Biographies*, it failed to generate a portrait of the generation. The actors did wear similar clothing, manifesting their professional identity—black T-shirts with the logo of the Moscow Art Theatre School—but this remained a mere visual sign, unsupported by

<sup>27</sup> Laasik, "Noored näitlejad pööravad Vene teatrit."

<sup>28</sup> The statue, removed from downtown to a cemetery in the suburbs at the order of the government, had been erected in memory of Soviet soldiers who fell in Tallinn during World War II. The monument is an important national symbol for the Russian community.

psychological solidarity. We may, of course, ask whether in today's fragmented society, divided into a multitude of sub-groups, a "generation" is even an actual social phenomenon that one can identify with. Indeed, the rather radical fragmentation of society was alluded to in the actors' monologues. They testified to their loneliness and spoke of the lack of solidarity among their course-mates. However, the actors in *Our Biographies* also experienced similar emotions—but they overcame their internal barriers and talked themselves into a unitary group. Obviously enough, the same did not happen with *Today We Won't Play*. Presumably, during the rather short preparation period no sufficient atmosphere of trust ever developed, although it was clearly desired, as testified by Sergei: "I want to talk about everything, open-heartedly, and not be afraid of not being understood."<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, sincere self-expression was supposedly hindered by a partially unconscious need to create a *positive* image of oneself, a key to success in today's competitive and individualistic society. Dmitri K. articulated this sort of positive self-image early in the performance: "I think that people are who they feel themselves to be. I feel young, handsome and energetic."<sup>30</sup> (It is needless to add that (eternal) youth, good looks and inexhaustible energy are values constantly (over)propagated by the media today). The fact that the stories narrated by the actors lacked any painful confessions can be explained, for the most part, with the pressure applied by the set of values of an individualistic society, and familiar patterns of "success stories." In 1982, the confessing subject's position was constructed through an opposition to the dominant ideology, which undervalued private experience. In 2006, dominant ideologies rather served as an agreeable framework to align oneself with, and pre-existing strategies for "public confession" were used.

In the aesthetics of *Today We Won't Play*, there are differences with *Our Biographies* as well. First, this staging made use of a wider repertoire of theatrical means: the soundtrack consisted of announcements from the Moscow metro, the performance included short sketches and some dance scenes, the artistic nature of which generated spontaneous applause. (With *Our Biographies*, a tense silence reigned in all of the performances, and the full attention of the audience concentrated on the stories being told.) Occasionally, narrating the story and bodily self-expression were combined to create a theatrical image. For example, Nikolai presented a sparse narration of the tragic end of his first love, and then expressed his feelings with an expressive dance number in red stage lighting. Second,

<sup>29</sup> Karusoo, *Segodnja ne igrajem*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



the actors' performances of their stories also felt theatrical, lacking sincerity and spontaneity. The performative aspect, the display of actors' mastery over their art, was prominent in their acting. Thus the autobiographical stories, "real" in a factual sense, were perceived as constructed rather than authentic, by at least one part of the audience.

At this point I should note a difference in the critical reception of *Today We Won't Play* among the Russian and the Estonian community.<sup>31</sup> One might expect that expressivity and emotionality, characteristic of the Russian school of acting, would, for the Estonian critics, create an impact of a „playful” performance, but the reverse turned out to be true. Estonian criticism reflected on *Today We Won't Play* on the background of Karusoo's previous life-stories-based stage productions, and approached it through the familiar conventions (even stereotypes) of documentary theatre, discussing its sincerity, solemnity and truth-value. It was opined that the staging is apolitical, but in an artistic sense it felt like a “manifesto of non-playing.”<sup>32</sup> The local Russian criticism on the other hand, lacking a similar background, deemed the staging uncommon, and questioned its documentary nature. A theatre pedagogue from Moscow opined that Karusoo is an European stage director, and her “politicized-sentimental-remiscing” production apparently represents European (i.e. „alien”) theatre. Another critic pointed out the decisive role of the director in compiling the text, and called the staging “quasi-documentary.”<sup>33</sup> The general impression of the performance was that even though the narratives were real, their manner of presentation turned them into fictional narratives, to the extent that *Today We Play Again* was suggested by some critics as a more adequate title.

Once again, I perceive the reason for this perception of this stage production to lie in contextual factors. Today's spectator is well acquainted with various practices of self-presentation, provided by celebrity and human-interest journalism, televised talk shows and reality shows, etc. Public “confession” of oneself and one's situation in life has entered common practice, and has, in itself, ceased to work as a marker of authenticity. **Displaying oneself** is a pre-constructed framework into which the spectator embeds the life stories heard from the stage. The actors in *Today We Won't Play* demonstrated ample competence in displaying themselves, yet without any reflection about this on their part.

<sup>31</sup> Here I rely on criticism published in print. There is no data on the ethnic composition of the audiences, but in all probability there were few Estonians among the spectators.

<sup>32</sup> Kolk, “Mittemängu manifest.”

<sup>33</sup> Agranovskaja, “Segodnja ne igrjem’. Potchemu?”

The contemporary theatre unmasks the staged nature of authenticity in social reality using several devices, such as intentional quotation of media formats, “ironic authenticity” or the premeditated “breakdown” of (self-) staging,<sup>34</sup> but nothing of the sort was to be found in *Today We Won't Play*. The actors did display a pretence of authenticity, yet the simple gesture of “I will tell you my story” no longer suffices to create an impression of sincerity. In order to differ from media practices and to create a strong effect of authenticity, today's theatre requires additional markers and/or critical reflection. It appears that a disposition towards self-demonstration and a desire to prove one's capability for future professional career discouraged the youths from expressing embarrassing and difficult experiences, and simultaneously encouraged them to demonstrate their acting skills and their ability to captivate the audience. This disposition, however, undermined the effect of authenticity.

To what extent, and for what reasons, did the audiences perceive Karusoo's stage productions as authentic? Insofar as the purpose of Karusoo's theatre is the activation of collective memories and the creation of group identities, it is targeted at spectators who, to an extent, share in the experiences to be mediated. It should nevertheless be emphasized that in the small and socially relatively homogeneous Estonian society, Karusoo's theatre works to unite, rather than to differentiate the spectators. Naturally enough, both *Our Biographies* and *Today We Won't Play*, as portraits of a generation, brought younger audiences to the theatre, mostly people from the same generation as the actors, but even older spectators could recognize their own life experiences in the stories told.<sup>35</sup> This was further encouraged by the fact that the young actors also narrated the stories of their parents. Authentication was made possible by the jointly experienced events that structured the life stories, as well as by following their patterns of socialization: remembrances of school years, choice of profession, etc. Points of contact between private and social experience were revealed, through which the audience could identify with the stories being told. On the other hand, the stage producer's montage disrupted the coherence of every individual life story, and hindered the appearance of a rhetorical “biographical illusion” (Bourdieu). The stories in *Today We Won't Play* were more individual, dealing in length with the pains and pleasures of studying to become an actor, with which the audience was

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Matzke, “Von echten Menschen und wahren Performern.”

<sup>35</sup> Plenty of testimonies to this can be found in print media. Thus a reviewer of *Our Biographies*, aged 35, acknowledged that he recognized several of his own problems, and a critic of *Today We Won't Play* described a middle-aged woman sitting next to her, who empathised emotionally with the stories from Moscow.

unable to identify. The field of experience provided by *Our Biographies* was wider and the spectators really felt that “people from among us” were up there on stage. “It felt as if at every performance, the young actors gathered behind them an imaginary choir,” one critic noted.<sup>36</sup> This comparison, however, is not particularly apt. Karusoo’s stage productions did not construct monolithic narratives, but clearly revealed differences in experiences within the same general patterns of life. “The right to a life-story” includes the right to experiences that are not generally legitimized. For example, in discussions on joining the Communist Union of Youth in *Our Biographies*—a familiar experience for all soviet generations—some described the resistance of their entire class, and of their teachers’ attempts to force them, others took it as a natural step, and one boy even admitted: “I really wanted to become a young communist, I really did, there was no problem at all.”<sup>37</sup> Frequently, smaller “memory communities” were formed in a manner described in the remark “... when somebody says something that the others agree to, they raise their hands to signal ‘me too!’”<sup>38</sup> This device was not used in *Today We Won’t Play*, although here, too, surfaces of recognition were created for spectators with different life experiences, albeit to a lesser extent. For example, all described the way in which their parents came to live in Estonia (one boy was a descendant of local Russians, the fathers of others had spent their military service in Estonia, or were settled in Estonia as workers), and what sort of citizenship everyone has.

The relationship between actor and spectator was determined in a similar manner in both of these stage productions: actors address their stories straight to the audience, and the spectators acquire the role of a confidant. Thus the theatrical performance turns almost as if into an intimate confession, encouraging the spectator to value the performance’s sincerity and genuineness. This worked very well in *Our Biographies* due to the ideologically controlled society with strong moral taboos in which it was produced. The spectators were willing to overlook all constructions and compromises. *Today We Won’t Play* received a mixed reception: some spectators perceived the actors’ performances as sincere, others as artistic and artificial, instead valuing their professional skills rather than their sincerity.

We may conclude that the effect of “truth” is highly contextual. Karusoo used similar strategies of authentication in both stage productions we have been discussing. Analysis of these stage productions revealed that

<sup>36</sup> Visnap, “Kas tõsimeelsus?,” 83.

<sup>37</sup> Karusoo, *Meie elulood*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the effect of authenticity was produced not so much by staging strategies (which were similar in both cases), but rather by the impact of ideological and artistic context. Both underwent considerable changes during the time separating the two productions. In the closed and controlled Soviet society, autobiographical storytelling had an impact of a shock of sincerity. At the core of the post-communist transition was a shift from a collectivist to an individualist orientation. With it, new attitudes and patterns of behavior took root, valuing the “face” (the public “self”), personal success, and self-expression. The strict distinction between the private and the public sphere disappeared, and as a consequence, individual experiences invaded public discourse. In the artistic context, it is noteworthy that documentary, life stories-based theatre developed from its origin as exceptional experiments into “normal” theatre practice with its own artistic conventions and a system of public expectations. In the spectacular media society of the independent Estonia, the similar performance of autobiographical storytelling turned into a failure of authenticity.

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ROBBIE MCCAULEY'S *SALLY'S RAPE*—  
 "SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE"—  
 THE EXAMPLE OF "MAKING THEATRE  
 FOR SOCIAL REPRESENTATION  
 AND CHANGE..." THROUGH PERFORMANCE  
 AND STORYTELLING

KINGA WITEK,  
 JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY

People look at history here so simply:  
 so there was slavery,  
 and then that's over,  
 and then there was  
 segregation ...  
 and aren't we over  
 that? And now, there's  
 multiculturalism,  
 and can't we all get  
 over it? Is this the irony  
 of all times?<sup>1</sup>  
 (R. McCauley)

...You know, we lived in a neighborhood back then down south that had black people and white people, back when they had signs that said *white* and *colored* to separate bathrooms and stuff. Well, back then there were white people who lived down the street from us because that was where they had to live. And we played together till we were about ten. After ten back then we couldn't speak to each other. Even back then my grandmother taught us that white people were not genetically evil or anything, they were just dumb, and when they learned something, they

<sup>1</sup> R. McCauley's comment in *Conjure Women*, a documentary film by D. Royals, produced by L. Diamond, (VHS), USA 1995.