

ENACTING “REAL PEOPLE’S” EXPERIENCES OF WAR

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Abstract

This article examines the role of autobiographical narratives in documentary theatre about war, focusing on the 2023 production *Exodus* directed by Mikheil Charkviani. *Exodus* is performed by individuals directly affected by war and is situated within the broader context of the *Theatre of the Real*, which foregrounds non-professional actors as both artistic medium and material and pursues an aesthetic of authenticity. The study uses biographical narrative interviews to explore participants’ motivations for sharing their war experiences on stage. It applies a hermeneutic analysis of *Exodus* to examine the work’s formal and aesthetic qualities. In addition, it investigates the connections between participants’ experiences, including the rehearsal process and the context of creation, and the formal and aesthetic elements of the play. The findings show that participants are mainly motivated by a sense of moral responsibility and a wish to raise awareness of the realities of war, which is also reflected in the formal and aesthetic direction of *Exodus*.

Keywords: *staging autobiographical narratives of war, theatre of the real, staging authenticity, misperformance*

Introduction

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, theatre artists from Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries, such as Georgia, Belarus, and Lithuania [Diesselhorst 2023], have become increasingly prominent on German-speaking

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theatre stages. Their guest performances provide diverse perspectives on the ongoing war, highlighting the historical connections to their home countries, especially regarding Russia's imperialistic influence on politics, culture, and society [ibid.]. What stands out in this context is the staging of autobiographical narratives performed by individuals who have personally experienced war. In most cases, they appear on stage for the first time, acting as witnesses, mediums of artistic expression, and the central subjects of the performance [Mumford, Garde 2015: 6]. The lack of professional theatre training among most of these performers can lead to forms of misperformance, such as failing to meet professional standards, which become memorable means of exploring themes such as death, authenticity, and affective labour. [ibid.: 11]. In addition, scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Carol Martin, Stephen Wilmer, and Milija Gluhović showcase 20th- and 21st-century plays that use autobiography to explore these themes, often frame personal and frequently violent experiences as theatrical testimonies within a global historical context [Gluhović, 2013: 131]. Carlson notes that autobiographical approaches are common in theatre addressing social and political issues of marginalised groups [Carlson, 1996: 605]; for instance, feminist theatre has used autobiography since the 1970s to convey the experiences of women and other marginalised individuals. The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration (2023) indicates that autobiographical material is central to contemporary documentary theatre on war, migration, and exile, often performed by non-professionals [Meerzon, Wilmer 2023]. Stephen Wilmer argues that refugees performing their own stories appear more vulnerable and convincing, intensifying the audience's sense of urgency [Wilmer, 2018: 86].

This article discusses and presents preliminary findings from my ongoing research into current plays on German-speaking stages that address the war in Ukraine and draw on these specific theatre practices.¹ My interest in such theatre practices goes beyond its aesthetic and formal aspects; I am also intrigued by the creative process, the experiences of the participants, and the underlying motivations for individuals to engage in such theatre projects: What motivates individuals who are not professional actors to share their war experiences on stage? How were the rehearsals conceived, and what specific working methods did the director apply? To explore these questions, I employ the empirical method of biographical narrative interviews [Rosenthal 2002; Rosenthal 2019] with participants involved in such performances

¹ My current research project, which examines the use of autobiographical narratives in contemporary documentary theater about war, is part of the research project *Ästhetisierung von Kriegsgewalt: Eine künstlerisch-wissenschaftliche Untersuchung des Einsatzes von Dokumenten in zeitgenössischen Theaterinszenierungen und Performances*, a research project led by Priska Gisler and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation [SNSF] from 2023 to 2027, see also <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/208114>.

as well as with the director. According to sociologist Gabriele Rosenthal, this method is particularly effective for addressing sensitive topics such as war, as it enables respondents to narrate their stories in full, free from interruptions imposed by the researcher's agenda. Furthermore, this approach is well-suited for exploring significant life moments within the broader context of biographies [Rosenthal 2001]. Since most respondents are performers appearing on stage for the first time, it can be assumed that this represents a specific moment in their lives. Thus, two significant life experiences are brought together: the experience of war and the experience of performing on stage.

One of the first case studies examined in this research project, which I will discuss and analyse below, is *Exodus* by Georgian director Mikheil Charkviani. The performance was staged during the renowned theatre festival *Wiener Festwochen* in 2023 and ran for three consecutive evenings. Charkviani produced and staged *Exodus* in Tbilisi in 2022 before it was presented in Vienna [Gülseven 2023]. The following analysis is based on my field research in Vienna in 2023, which includes observations of *Exodus* through attendance at the performance and interviews with seven of the 15 participants, as well as the director.² I will first provide an overview of *Exodus* including contextual background, key artistic approaches, and a brief discussion of the differences between the Vienna and Tbilisi versions. I will then focus on the Vienna version of *Exodus* and apply a hermeneutic approach [Martin, Wilmer 1995] to an in-depth interpretation and analysis of the staging of personal experiences of war and displacement on stage. Finally, I will outline my interview methodology and discuss the insights gained from the interviews concerning the main research questions and my preliminary findings. This combination of empirical and hermeneutic approaches allows for a plurality of analytical perspectives on *Exodus*, enabling nuanced connections between participants' experiences, including the rehearsal process and the context of creation, and the production's formal and aesthetic elements.

Creating "real people's" stories of war

Exodus is a documentary theatre project launched in 2022 in Tbilisi to portray the impact of war on individuals. For the Tbilisi production, the director conducted over 100 interviews, each condensed into about 10 minutes and presented across ten chapters per evening [Charkviani 2023]. In Vienna, fifteen interviews were similarly condensed into approximately 15 minutes each, arranged into five chapters per

² I would like to thank my colleague, Diana Rojas-Feile, for her collaboration in developing the interview questions and conducting the interview with Mikhail Charkviani in Vienna 2023.

evening, with the individuals recounting their own stories on stage [ibid.]. Before the idea of *Exodus* occurred, Charkviani was working on *The Persians* by Aychilos [Gülseven 2023; Charkviani 2023]. However, in the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he shifted his focus to collecting real-life war stories rather than using the fiction of ancient Greek tragedy to address the topic of war [ibid.]. He articulates this shift by asking "Why should I stage a theatre classic about war, why should I use fiction when I can use stories of real people?" [ibid.]. His experiences of the wars in Georgia, which affected him as a child and young adult and continue to influence his artistic work.³ The situation in Ukraine had emotionally triggered him to the point that he saw no reason to continue working on *The Persians*, even though he and his team had already been rehearsing for weeks [Charkviani 2023]. Adding that he uses theatre to create a platform to "be somehow useful and helpful in those hard times" [ibid.]. His understanding of theatre closely resembles Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstück* [learning play], which is characterised by its didactic purpose and primarily works with non-professional actors, whose autobiographical material forms the foundation to address urgent political issues [Kittstein 2012: 298]. Like the learning play, *Exodus* allows participants to recognise their societal roles by contributing as co-creators. Their autobiographical narratives are framed within the social and political context of their time, enhancing the subject and highlighting the emancipatory potential of such theatre practices. For the Tbilisi version, Charkviani and his team spoke with former soldiers, doctors, other medical personnel, and civilians. Most of them were internally displaced persons who had fled within Georgia, reenacting their war experiences through so-called verbatim theatre [Charkviani 2023]. In addition, they used personal effects such as photographs or old drawings to create an individual and artistic framework for each story [ibid.]. In Vienna, he followed the same method; however, the primary distinction was that, in this case, individuals from various countries who had sought refuge in Vienna performed their personal stories of war and escape. Cyrielle Garson outlines verbatim theatre as a form of "Documentary Realism – a historical aesthetic exponent that unproblematically draws the audience into the reality of a particular situation, topic, event or narrative being dramatised and authenticated through verbatim sources" [Garson 2021: 33]. Carol Martin describes such documentary theatre practices as *Theatre of the Real*, a term that encompasses various methods of recycling reality – personal, social, political, or historical – through quoting, simulating, and evoking the world outside the theatre [Martin 2013: 5]. This includes the use of "verbatim

³ In an Interview with us Charkviani mentioned four wars in Georgia in the last 30 years. In an interview with Yaşam Özlem Gülseven he mentioned the Georgian Civil War [1991–1993], the War in Abkhazia [1992–1993], the South Ossetia War [1991–1992] and the Russo-Georgian War [2008]. See Gülseven, Y. Ö. [2023].

text, archival photos, film, audio recordings, and real clothing” [ibid.], as well as non-professional theatre performers portraying their own lives on stage [ibid.:80]. A key aspect of such theatre is “the practice of using self-representing people as both the artistic medium and material of a theatre event” [Mumford, Garde 2015: 6]. This kind of performer may appear in diverse genres like community-based theatre, documentary theatre, and verbatim theatre [ibid.]. Clare Bishop defines artworks such as *Exodus* involving non-professional performers representing their socio-economic categories as “delegated performances” [Bishop 2012: 5]. Specifically, she means “the act of hiring nonprofessionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his or her instructions” [ibid.: 91]. In her evaluation, she identifies several motivations for using individuals as performance material: challenging conventional artistic criteria by transforming everyday actions into performative acts, enhancing the visibility and complexity of social groups, incorporating chance and risk as aesthetic effects, and blurring the boundaries between live and mediated, spontaneous and staged, and authentic and fake performances [ibid.: 238–239]. Furthermore, Bishop assumes that these practices also explore the construction of collective identity and how individuals often transgress these categories [ibid.]. In *Exodus*, collective identities emerge from individual but shared experiences of war. This process can foster important social dynamics of recognition and empathy among ensemble members during rehearsals [Sepinuck 2013] and can also activate change in the thinking and actions of the performers, thus reflecting one of the core principles of Brecht’s learning-play [Kittstein 2012: 299]. Along with the positive effects for the performers, the blending of real and fictional elements, as well as the distinction between seemingly authentic and scripted representations, can be accentuated by the non-professional status of the actors, who may exhibit forms of misperformance. This underscores significant concerns about authenticity and the director’s role in shaping the perceived authenticity of war narratives. Furthermore, Bishop’s argument contends that artistic practices where performers act under the name and direction of the artist require critical scrutiny – particularly regarding the potential for instrumentalisation and the ethical implications of exploiting others’ suffering for artistic purposes. Before delving into this, it is crucial to first examine the formal and aesthetic characteristics of *Exodus*, with the following analysis focusing on the Vienna version.

Viennese edition: A multi-perspective approach to war and displacement

In the Vienna version of *Exodus*, the participants came from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, including a Viennese Holocaust

survivor, as well as individuals connected to the war through family or profession. Vienna is particularly well-suited to Chakrapani's theatre project, which engages with war from multiple perspectives, because of its complex historical and cultural context shaped by the intertwined histories of empire, conflict, and displacement. Vienna has long been a centre of immigration, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, owing to industrialisation, urbanisation, and lenient settlement laws [John 1996]. The rise of National Socialism led to the expulsion of Vienna's Jewish population in 1939 [ibid.] and subsequent migration, including labour migration (1963–1973) [Mijić 2022: 1074], the Yugoslavian Wars of Succession (1991–1995) [ibid.: 1075], asylum seekers since 2015 [Kubaczek 2016: 209], and refugees from Ukraine since 2022, have all affected the city's demographics.

The opening of the three consecutive performances of *Exodus* is marked by the 85-year-old Holocaust survivor Ludwig, who reads letters from his parents, who had to flee Austria following the 1938 so-called *Anschluss*. In addition to excerpts from the letters, photos from his family album are projected onto a screen, making them visible to the audience and enhancing his narrative with visual effects. These letters convey both anxiety about survival and hope for a return to Vienna and the possibility of a better future. Ludwig's performance is accompanied by Helal on the dambura, a traditional Afghan musical instrument. Helal, a young Afghan who fled to Vienna in 2011, tells his story in *Exodus* together with his close friend Ebrahim, with whom he shared a long and dangerous journey to Vienna that resulted in a deep friendship and a lasting musical collaboration. In contrast to Ludwig's earlier appearance, their portrayal does not draw on personal objects or focus on experiences of anxiety and loss. Instead, they appear visibly cheerful, standing arm in arm as they recount their perilous flight to Vienna and the strength of their friendship. Their segment takes the form of a reflection on friendship, culminating in a hopeful resolution to their escape story. Another performer, Dražen, recounts his escape from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s, when he fled following the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars and sought refuge in Vienna. Similar to Ludwig's appearance, photographs from Dražen's family album are projected onto the screen, with text and images interwoven in a cohesive manner that enhances the credibility of his narrative [Lock 2020: 428]. He not only narrates the story of his flight but also creates a photo collage during his performance, composed of layered images that chronologically trace his childhood in socialist Yugoslavia and lead up to the outbreak of the war. According to Milija Gluhović, it is easy to see how the photography used here can serve as a metaphor for memory: "the process of remembering and the subsequent inscription of the memory, both essential to the autobiographical act, find a perfect image in the photograph" [Gluhović 2013: 132]. Despite the scripted nature of his performance, Dražen's somewhat

unprofessional behaviour on stage, underscored by his visible nervousness, draws attention to the performance's emotional impact. As Mumford and Garde note, this kind of misperformance comes into play as an effective tool for engaging with topics such as flight, grief, and emotional labour [Mumford, Garde 2015: 11]. Furthermore, the act of reception is heightened by the performance's intermedial elements. Ludwig and Dražen draw on "the spatial three-dimensionality of a theatre stage, the two-dimensionality of a film screen, and the spatio-temporal dimensions [Meerzon 2012: 30] of their bodies, which they use as an autobiographical canvas" [ibid.]. By combining these various dimensions, Ludwig and Dražen create a complex, multi-layered self-performance that integrates physical presence, visual media, and autobiographical narratives. This approach enables them to explore and express their autobiographical content in a rich, immersive manner that engages the audience on multiple sensory and conceptual levels.

While all the episodes described here are performed in German, Halyna's performance stands out as it is delivered in Ukrainian, with a German translation projected on the screen. This emphasises the established migratory aesthetic in *Exodus*. As Janine Hauthal notes, the migratory aesthetic is not primarily concerned with performers' origins or migration histories, but rather with factors such as multilingualism [Hauthal 2023: 740]. The use of the first language plays a central role in this aesthetic, serving as a key to self-actualisation and as a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human [ibid.]. Halyna's performance also differs from the others in that she performs without props or additional participants. Reading from her manuscript, she recounts two stories of flight: the first in 2014, following the Euromaidan in Ukraine, and the second in 2022, after Russia's full-scale invasion. Her appearance on stage, combined with her restrained facial expressions and gestures, directs the focus to her spoken word: her testimony of war. The sensory perception of the scene is mainly conveyed through her voice, which, as Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests, acts as a connecting medium between the stage and the audience, making the shared theatrical moment particularly vivid for all involved [Lehmann 2004: 43]. This unique form of testimony reception is supported by the stage design, which resembles a white cube and creates an atmosphere that is simultaneously neutral and intense, pure and timeless, thereby directing the audience to focus entirely on the enactment of the war biographies. On the right wall, data on daily birth and death rates are projected, adding a fact-based layer to *Exodus* while invoking a metaphysical dimension by comparing life's basics: birth and death. This setup suggests a meta-level view of life and death in war, aligning with Edmund Husserl's notion that human life is tied to death and history, encompassing humanity's future and its cultural world [Husserl 2014: 101]. It underscores the significance of human life and mutual responsibility, resonating

with Emmanuel Lévinas's idea of recognising the 'Other' [Lévinas 1992: 78], which translates into acknowledging the performers' unique war experiences that reflect our shared ontology with the world, particularly regarding the fragility of our lives. Another striking stage element features children with headphones playing in a sandbox at the back of the stage, building and then destroying a city of sand before, as the final scene in *Exodus*, singing Rossini's *La Passeggiata*, a children's song of peace and joy. This closing scene highlights the themes of innocence, destruction, and hope. The children, representing future generations, illustrate the cycle of creation and destruction through the construction and demolition of the sand city. *La Passeggiata*, with its cheerful melody, underscores the contrast between peace and war and prompts reflection on hope and innocence in a world fraught with conflict, leaving a profound emotional impact.

Creating "Theatre of the Real": Artistic methods in *exodus*

During the interview with Charkviani, I learned more about his approach to *Exodus* and the challenges he encountered in realising his concept in Vienna. He explained that he begins by conducting interviews without using a recording device. This method enables him to focus on extracting key elements from each war story, collaborating with participants to create a realistic and cohesive narrative through a collective working process. It focuses on empathy and responsiveness to the narratives, requiring active and attentive listening [Hornung 2010: 136] to 'authentically' reconstruct the individual stories in the subsequent stages of the process. The narrative elements are then selected collaboratively with the participants and connected to personal mementoes to artistically highlight their unique experiences of war and displacement, which, as Charkviani emphasises, are presented as testimonies on stage only once [Charkviani 2023]. Despite scripted narratives, he places greater significance on spontaneous reactions, stating that this spontaneity is key to the overall creative process of *Exodus*. With this method, he seeks to portray the participants as unique personalities rather than mere archetypes or victims [ibid.]. The approach of eliciting spontaneous reactions, rather than adhering to a strict script, carries greater risks of misperformance while also producing aesthetic effects rooted in chance and unpredictability [Bishop, 2012: 238]. It underscores their inexperience on stage and, thus, their seemingly authentic presence. This technique reinforces the assumption of staged authenticity, which captivates the audience's sense of credibility and strengthens the belief that the performers are authentic, original speakers, allowing the audience to identify with them [Mumford, Garde 2015: 13]. Daniel Schulze argues that "authenticity arises as an ascription that is attached to the truth-value of the performance" [Schulze 2018: 228], suggesting that it is not inherent in the performance itself

but rather a quality ascribed by audiences: “Authenticity may then be conceived of as an audience’s strategy of making sense of a work” [ibid. 42]. In this process, the director deliberately steps back as a playwright, allowing the chosen verbatim texts to replace his voice [Martin 2010: 3]. This approach aligns with the strategies of the “Theatre of the Real”, which Martin regards as postmodern [Martin 2010: 3], particularly in its assertion that truth is contextual, multifaceted, and open to manipulation; that language shapes perception; that art can strive for objectivity [ibid.]; and in its aim to authentically represent reality on stage by integrating diverse perspectives, everyday life, and the simultaneity of past, present, and future [ibid.]. Rather than relying on a traditional playwright’s script, “Theatre of the Real” frequently emerges from collective texts. As Martin points out that, despite its experimental methods, the significance of the performance remains perceptible [ibid.].

In *Exodus*, the centrality of each individual experience of war and flight makes recognising these stories both essential and challenging for the audience. Through the presence of untrained performers and their “poetics of immediacy” [De Waal 2015: 17]—an approach that seeks to create a heightened sense of directness, vividness, and real-time experience [Magee 2022: 2], grounded in the direct transmission of testimony through witnessing—a distinctive form of authenticity emerges that emotionally resonates with the audience. This, in turn, fosters an immediate connection to the events and experiences depicted on stage.

Empirical approach to the study and evaluation of interviews

Gabriele Rosenthal notes that the biographical narrative interview method is particularly effective for capturing vivid and dramatic war stories, as it centres the respondent’s narratives, fostering a natural, conversational flow that enhances both self-understanding and listener insight [Rosenthal 2002: 9]. By starting with a broad question, interviewees can recount freely. This approach is especially suited for exploring specific life events within broader histories, thus negating the need for a rigid interview guide [Rosenthal 2002: 133–134]. In this study, interviews were structured around questions such as: “(0) Could you please tell me a little about yourself and share your experiences with ‘Exodus’? (1) What motivated you to join ‘Exodus’? (2) How would you describe your collaboration with the director (including any thoughts on potential instrumentalisation)? (3) How has performing on stage affected you?” [Davidović 2023]. Using Heiner Legewie’s interpretative method, narratives were evaluated for credibility, coherence, and completeness, like narrative validation in everyday communication [Legewie 1987: 145]. The interpretative approach was applied to analyse responses, guided by a consensus-based framework rooted in Habermas’s theory of communicative action. This approach aims at

achieving rational, domination-free understanding. By meeting validity claims such as comprehensibility, truth, or correctness and assuming an ideal speech situation, it seeks to foster consensus through argumentation and discourse, where the "better argument" should prevail [Habermas, 1984]. When asked about their reasons for joining *Exodus*, five of the seven interviewees expressed a desire to raise awareness of the realities of war through their personal stories. Four also cited a moral responsibility to act due to ongoing conflicts in their home countries, including two Ukrainians who arrived in Vienna in 2022 and two Syrians who fled to Vienna in 2015 and 2016. Additionally, two participants who initially hesitated were encouraged by friends, while a psychotherapist hoped to highlight both the suffering of refugees and her professional work. For many, the festival *Wiener Festwochen* was seen as a meaningful platform for advancing these goals. Regarding collaboration with the director, interviewees first described their general experiences without specifically mentioning instrumentalisation. They all reported appreciation, empathy, and support from Charkviani, later clarifying that they did not feel exploited, which can largely be attributed to his focus on active listening and empathetic communication. The only drawback mentioned by some participants was the limited rehearsal time, which left them feeling insufficiently prepared for the stage. However, this limitation can be understood as a strategic decision by the director to provoke forms of misperformance, such as nervousness or hesitation in staging the participants' stories, that deliberately depart from professional performance standards. This approach aimed to create a perceived authenticity, portraying the performers as real people rather than fictional characters. Finally, six of the seven participants reported that performing in *Exodus* significantly influenced their self-understanding, providing new perspectives on their war experiences. Two Ukrainians were inspired to deepen their involvement in similar projects. One of them mentioned at the end of the interview that she was planning to write a book. Similarly, one of the Syrian participants was inspired by his participation in *Exodus* to write an essay about his war experiences, a creative process he now wishes to continue. This suggests that involvement in the theatre project fostered a sustained engagement with writing and self-expression.

Exodus as a platform for advocating peace

Drawing on Carol Martin's concept of the "Theatre of the Real", *Exodus* demonstrates how the realities of war and displacement can be brought to the stage through verbatim texts, personal artefacts, and the participation of non-professional performers who share their personal stories. This approach complicates the distinction between performance and lived experience, questioning conventional ideas of theatrical representation.

Charkviani's artistic approach aligns with postmodern strategies of documentary theatre that seek to render reality on stage with authenticity, to offer multiple perspectives on war and displacement, and to explore the coexistence of past, present, and future. The risk of mistakes, caused by spontaneity and limited rehearsals, appears to be a central strategy for evoking an aesthetic of authenticity and thereby promoting a deeper emotional response. This form of manipulation, described by Wilmer as an inherent aspect of documentary theatre as a manipulative art form [Wilmer 2018: 94], is harnessed by Charkviani to make a powerful artistic statement in times of war. This approach, reminiscent of Brecht's concept of learning-play, enables participants to recognise their societal roles and contribute as co-creators, underscoring the emancipatory potential of such artistic practices. The study also reveals that the participants are primarily motivated by a sense of moral responsibility and a desire to raise awareness of the realities of war. This aligns with the historical use of autobiographical approaches in theatre, which have often addressed social and political issues faced by marginalised groups.

Charkviani's working method, grounded in empathy, active listening, and collaborative storytelling, helps to alleviate concerns that the performers' experiences might be instrumentalised. Instead, it fosters a sense of agency among the participants and echoes Bishop's observations on the construction of collective identity in delegated performances. Many participants reported that their involvement in *Exodus* significantly influenced their self-perception and inspired further creative engagement with their war experiences. In summary, *Exodus* exemplifies how documentary theatre can serve as a medium for reflecting on the realities of war and fostering critical awareness among audiences. The specific staged aesthetics of the real evoke deep emotional responses, inspiring social change and fostering a more profound understanding of the human cost of conflict.

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