



Left to right: Alfredo Tzveibel, Leonardo Sacco, and Eduardo Osswald in *Three Mustached Philosophers* (2004). This photograph is from the 2008 re-staging at the Teatro Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Project Archivos: Documentary Theatre According to Vivi Tellas

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1.

“In a disposable world, what are our lives, our experiences, our time worth?”¹ This question used to appear in a short text included in the playbills of *Biodrama*, a project created and curated by Argentine director Vivi Tellas, which hosted a series of performances at the Sarmiento Theatre in Buenos Aires between 2002 and 2008. Tellas was at the time the artistic director of that municipal theatre, which became—under her direction—a space devoted to research in the performing arts. The instructions for participation in *Biodrama* consisted of only one basic direction: to work on the life of a living person. Each of the invited directors and playwrights took a unique approach to the task and the diversity of works generated by the project is an excellent sample of the infinite forms that biographical intent can take in theatre.

Despite the simplicity of the assignment, *Biodrama's* aesthetic, ethic, and political quest was—and is still today—profound and complex. Conceived in a global context of

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spectacularization and mediatization of experience and in a local context impacted by Argentina's social, economic, and cultural crisis of 2001, *Biodrama* sought to use theatre and its power to bring people together as the means for an inquiry into the lives of human beings: into their stories, their ways of existing, and their *arts de faire*—in the words of Michel de Certeau (1980). The project *Archivos*, which I will focus on in this essay, followed this same purpose.

At the same time as she was inviting other artists to participate in *Biodrama*, Tellas was also beginning her most personal project in her private studio: a series of pieces she chose to think of as *archives* in which she brings non-professional performers to the stage and builds with them a meticulous dramaturgy based on their biographies and daily lives. Tellas explicitly defines this project as “documentary theatre.” The series *Archivos* has staged seven works at the time of this writing (January 2012): *Mi mamá y mi tía* (My Mother and My Aunt, 2003), *Tres filósofos con bigotes* (Three Mustached Philosophers, 2004), *Cozarinsky y su médico* (Cozarinsky and his Doctor, 2005), *Escuela de conducción* (Driving School, 2006), *Disc Jockey* (2008), *Mujeres Guía* (Woman Guides, 2008/re-staged in 2011), and *Rabbi Rabino* (2011, New York). An eighth play, which focuses on mediums, is currently in process.

Born from the same intention, Tellas's two projects materialized their confluence in 2008, when four pieces from *Archivos* (two already existed and another two were prepared for the occasion) were presented at the Sarmiento Theatre as a part of *Biodrama*. Although it wasn't initially planned in this way, this event also marked the close of the *Biodrama* series. By that time, the term *biodrama* (now without capital letters) had already become Tellas's trademark—her work of conceptual art.² Since then, Tellas has chosen to use this term to refer to all her work: from *Archivos* to the workshops, conferences, and performances she does in Argentina and beyond. “Biodrama” is, then, Vivi Tellas's aesthetic program of the last decade. It is a macro-project based on a double movement: to find theatricality outside of the theatre (this is the expression she herself uses) and to fill the theatre with non-theatricality. It is within this framework that we must understand *Archivos*.

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Graciela and Luisa Ninio in *My Mother and my Aunt* (2003) in the director's studio, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Photo: Nicolás Goldberg

Who are the subjects of these *Archivos*? The titles of the pieces are quite descriptive but the topics bear brief elaboration: the first two subjects were Tellas's mother and aunt, two women of Sephardic origin in their seventies. Then came three university philosophy professors who participated in a study group the director attended; a common feature of these three men was that they wore mustaches, just like so many other philosophers before them. In all of the piece in the *Archivos* series, the starting point is an encounter between Tellas and a group of people or a universe in which she spots a level of theatricality. The fact that she began by working with her own family is the clearest example of this direct contact. The level of theatricality may reside in the way certain anecdotes are told, in the frequent repetition of certain conducts, or in the high degrees of *mise en scene* required by certain professions. The detection of these theatrical “cells” spread around in the everyday world is the cornerstone of the process by which each play is built: the idea, the invitation, the endless conversations, the rehearsals, the performances.

In the *Archivos* series, the Argentine writer and filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky and Alejo Florín, his doctor and friend, followed the philosophers. Then came two instructors and a secretary from the driving school of the Argentine Automobile Club. Later, two renowned disc jockeys of the Buenos Aires scene, Carla Tintoré and Cristian Trincado, who were accompanied in the performances by a VJ who edited images and music live during the show. *Disc Jockey* was staged for the presentation of *Archivos* at the Sarmiento Theatre at the same time as *Mujeres guía*, which brought on stage a tour guide who specializes in international visitors, a guide from the Botanical Garden, and another from the Ethnographic Museum (in 2011, the play reopened for a season at that museum with some staging changes). Finally, the performers of the latest piece in the series were two rabbis, Moses Birnbaum and Hyman Levine.³

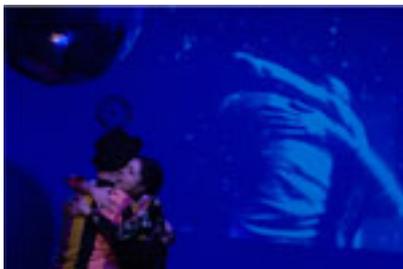
Going back to the initial question of who are (or who can be) the subjects of these theatrical archives, the answer that emerges is *anybody*. We all act, sometimes; we all have funny or tragic stories to share; we all could —with the appropriate

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guidance—go onstage and *do* theatre. As Tellas herself states: “my premise is that each person has, and is, an archive: a reserve of experiences, knowledge, texts, and images” (Pauls 2010, 247). Only some of those persons have actually made a theatre piece with the director, but the subtext the project conveys is that, given the right circumstances, we could all draw on our own theatrical archive. Or, in other words, we could perform on stage some of the archive that we ourselves are.

3.

All the pieces in *Archivos* have some common traits in their structure. First, when the audience enters the room, the performers are always already onstage doing something: discussing a topic, playing cards, playing music, practicing archery, singing. The space has only a few significant objects, which will be used throughout the performance. Differently positioned in each piece, but always present, is a big table that holds the documents, those fragments of life that will be eventually shown to the audience (photographs, gifts, clothing, any kind of objects). On the wall, there is often a working clock that indicates the time, like an active piece of the outside world embedded inside the theatre. As for the general dynamics of the performance, it usually consists of a succession of rather independent scenes, generally separated by musical interludes that articulate the personal stories (always short), the reflections on various subjects, the re-creations of events in some of the performers' lives, interludes for dancing, and so on. Lastly, each of the performances in the *Archivos* series ends with an invitation to the audience to inhabit the performance space by dancing and sharing a meal that is always connected to the theme of the piece (a philosophical banquet, a kosher snack, etc.). During this part of the event, the (former) audience can talk with the performers, with the production team, or amongst themselves. The performance becomes a get-together of almost-friends, of accomplices, materializing the feeling of community that was likely sparked in the attendants while listening to their peers—fellow human beings—talking about their lives, showing their *souvenirs*, showing themselves.



Cristian Trincado and Carla Tintoré in *Disc Jockey* (2008) at the Teatro Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Photo: Nicolás Goldberg

Regarding this *revelation of the self*—the opening of the stage to common people, to their stories, and their “material,” is one of the main characteristics of Vivi Tellas’s documentary

theatre. In other documentary varieties, playwrights carry out a research process, do interviews, and gather documents, but then they write a text based on that material that is later brought to stage by actors. Not in this case. Here, the protagonists of these true stories are invited to give their testimony in person. This presence is central in terms of the ethical and aesthetic implications of Tellas's project. The performers appear in front of the audience as "witnesses of themselves"—to recall an expression coined by the Spanish scholar Óscar Cornago to refer to actors, trying to re-locate some of Giorgio Agamben's (1998) ideas on the witness in a theatrical context. As Cornago explains: "the witness is in the first place a confession-body. What interests us is its pure presence, the life story written in his body, the marks that past has left in it."⁴ He uses this definition to think about all the things the actor communicates through his body simply by being present in front of the audience. Beyond the character they are playing or the action they are doing, their bodies *confess* who they are. This is why Cornago sees them as witnesses of themselves. This becomes even more literal and radical in the case of a project such as *Archivos*. For example, in *Mi mamá y mi tía*, there is no need for Tellas's aunt to tell us that she is the aunt, she is of a certain age, she talks in certain manner—her presence in conjunction with the title of the piece is enough. It is the same with all the other performers in the series: besides what they tell us with their words and their objects (which are also silent witnesses to the realities of which they are a part), the presence of the performers in front of the spectators tells us a lot of who they are, without the need for speech.

4.

I will outline here, briefly, some of the more interesting aspects of the *Archivos* project. The first of these is the somewhat paradoxical way in which its search for theatricality outside the theatre leads to a peculiar re-discovery of theatricality inside the theatre. I refer here to the fact that, in spite of its emphatic interest in delving into the real (understanding this term in all its complexity), Vivi Tellas's artwork is anything but un-theatrical. In fact, in her performances, the theatre is always pointing to itself. This is due, in large part, to its contrast with everything that is not theatre. The performers, who have been "kidnapped" from the flow of everyday reality, now suddenly find themselves speaking to a theatre audience, narrating episodes, showing photographs, dancing, going from here to there following a clearly rehearsed script, provoking laughter and emotions—in sum, acting. But they are not acting like an actor, who wears the theatre as his habitual garment. They are acting like a person who unexpectedly finds herself wearing someone else's clothes, which are too small, colorful, old-fashioned, childish, or long. It is a costume at which, because of the way it is worn, we cannot help but stare. All of a sudden one realizes: "right, theatre is that too-colorful dress." Without a doubt, the theatre itself is at the core of Tellas's research.

Another note-worthy aspect of *Archivos* is the productive tension between biography and

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autobiography that runs through the series. Performers speak of their own lives and in their own names, but they do so according to another person's selection and ordering. This tension propels something we could provisionally call the “staging of a gaze.” What is brought onstage is what the artist has seen and has considered worth showing. This is probably one of the most powerful political gestures of this experience (and of all documentary practices): bringing attention to the things around us, to the people around us, to the people like us, and, above all, to the very action of looking. What underlies all of the pieces in *Archivos*, what appears constantly as the force that pulls the threads, is the power of the director's gaze and her artistic intervention in reality, through which she builds, together with the performers, this artifact of human-contact-theatre.

In her distinctive personal dramaturgical style, Tellas manages to weave situations and dialogs with firm indications that, however, do not tie the performers to a rigid script nor suffocate their spontaneity. This strategy of weaving can be seen, for example, in the lines of thematic resonance that cross each pieces in the series. Links can be made between the stories of different performers and also between the different elements on stage. There are many examples: in *Mujeres guía* the subject of maternity recurs in several of the monologues; in *Disc Jockey*, there are repeated allusions to hypnosis; in *Escuela de conducción*, Italy appears as a place of origin, in songs, and in the comments and actions of the three performers. The operations that Tellas makes on the performers' materials reflect the operations made on all archives, theatrical or otherwise: what they say to us is actually what we make them say. Of course they have a story to tell, but this story is always also the result of the interventions of the historian, the journalist, or the documentarian who build a narrative with the materials of the archive.



Silvana Bondanza, María Irma Cavanna, and Micaela Pereira en *Woman Guides* (2008) at the Teatro Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Photograph: Nicolás Goldberg

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The staged biographies in the *Archivos* project also connect the individual with the social by articulating personal, familial, and historical references. All of the pieces dedicate a moment to inscribing at least one of the performers in an ancestral line. We learn of the Paraguayan grandparents of one of the philosophers and of the children they had after settling in Buenos Aires. We even get to hear the music all of them enjoyed together. Or we find out that one of the Rabbis' most precious possessions is a Bible given to him by his mother, who was his first Hebrew teacher, and that it had been sent to him by his aunt in Jerusalem. From the nearest to the most distant positions in the family tree, multiple characters and traditions are invoked and invited to parade on stage. Along with these, by association, come the corresponding genealogical trees of the spectator, as the audience identifies with the simple fact of having come from somewhere. Here we encounter a paradox, which I see unfolding in each of these plays: the most personal anecdotes also provide the most direct path to universalization. Although I (the audience member) did not go through the same thing as that other person (the speaker), I somehow see myself reflected in that person's way of preserving a memory, of narrating it, of feeling it. Because he or she is just a common person, like me, who has experiences and customs and a particular language, like me. It may sound like an exaggeration, but it strikes that culture itself is embodied in these moments. Further, this connection between the individual and social dimensions works similarly to allow the embodiment of history. The beginning of an anecdote is enough to start one on a journey of recollection: the rabbi praying in a concentration camp; the philosopher as a youth on a public bus, carrying a bag filled with Molotov cocktails for an attack to be carried out by his Maoist comrades; the museum guide finding a clandestine record hidden during the dictatorship by her parents, who belonged to the Peronist Left; the Jewish ancestors of Tellas's mother and aunt leaving Spain to resettle in Turkey. All of these build bridges that move us along our journey through history.

As a final observation, we should mark the deeply playful character of the experience of watching the pieces in *Archivos*. The atmosphere is far from solemn—a sense of fun and a subtle humor pervades every piece. The performers seem to be “playing theatre.” Here the theatrical performance resembles a game: the speakers role-play, recreate situations, tell jokes, and sing even if they can't sing. Some of the pieces in the series even include a *mise en abyme* of this idea by restaging some fragment of a theatrical play as if they were playing (although, in that moment, they take the game very seriously). The rabbis, for example, do a scene from the work of Cyrano de Bergerac, one of them wearing a pair of joke glasses—empty frames attached to a funny nose. The women guides, for their part, accomplish one of the moments of most theatrical intensity in *Archivos* in their re-staging of the episode in which Medea murders her children using objects and costume props (a rabbit suit, an Evita wig, a Greek laurel crown) that were previously a part of the performance of their personal stories.

5.

After the shared intimacy of story-telling and theatrical play, the time comes for a little dancing and the meal I described earlier. In this sort of epilogue to the experience, I see another *mise en abyme*, this time providing an explicit image of the invitation to get together that *Archivos* represents. In his text on relational aesthetics, Nicolas Bourriaud writes: “the artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum” (Bourriaud 2002, 22). With this final moment, these plays open the possibility for spectators to ask the performers questions and for the performers to talk to them without a script, *Archivos* completes its outline of a way of thinking about the shared world and the relations that unfold within it. In that world, there is an appreciation of the action of looking around, an identification with the others as members of the same community, a need to get together.

A final thought: what model of archive does Vivi Tellas's *Archivos* project propose with its theatrical experience? For me, it is an archive that is open, always in process, collective, that looks to the past as much as the present, and that is, above all, alive.

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Notes

¹ The original text in Spanish reads: “En un mundo descartable, ¿qué valor tienen nuestras vidas, nuestras experiencias, nuestro tiempo?”

² In an interview made to her by Meret Kiderlen (2007), Tellas mentions that she thought of *biodrama* as such a sort of artwork: a concept she had come up with and that now everybody was using.

³ *Rabbi Rabino* was staged in New York as a part of the Coil Festival, held at PS122.

⁴ The original text in Spanish is: “el testigo es en primer lugar un cuerpo-confesión, lo que nos interesa es su pura presencia, el relato de vida escrito en su cuerpo, las marcas que ese pasado dejó en él” (Cornago 2011, 3).

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