
DOCUMENTARY OBJECTS,
TEXTUAL MATERIALS,
AND PERFORMATIVE TESTIMONY
IN MEMORY RECONSTRUCTION
- **MI VIDA DESPUÉS (2009)**
BY LOLA ARIAS

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Abstract: *Mi vida después* by Lola Arias premiered in 2009 in Buenos Aires, as a stage proposal about people who reconstruct their childhood experiences and the life stories of their parents, some of them disappeared because of the repressive State that organized and executed the most atrocious dictatorship in Argentine history between 1976-1983. In this paper, we inquire about the use of documentary materials on stage, the figure of the witness, and the value given to testimony. We postulate that this stage experience develops procedures that give shape to a *dramaturgy of the living* based on *performative testimony* that allows new approaches to the memories presented in the public sphere as proof of truth. The documents and testimonies emerge from the representational gap that opens up between the generation of the parents who suffered censorship and repression and the generation of the young performers who can give an account of their childhood memories. From their stories, one can see the lack, the absence, the emptiness, and the difficulties in speaking. These forms of expression function as dual discursive devices that express both subjective experience and the reflection of a political and social dimension.

Keywords: documentary theater, performative testimony, memoirs, *Mi vida después*, Lola Arias.

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Introduction

The experimentation with archives in Lola Arias productions dates back to the premiere of her first trilogy, *El amor es un francotirador*, three plays in which the real (Sánchez, 2007; Martín, 2010, 2013; Brownell, 2021) was made present on stage, among other things, from archives and biographical testimonies provided by the performers. In 2009, this interest was further enhanced with the premiere in Buenos Aires of *Mi vida después* (MVD)¹. Although this proposal originated within the framework of the Biodrama cycle, Tellas' initiative ended in 2008, and Arias' work premiered the following year, outside the cycle, as part of the general programming of the Teatro Sarmiento. As noted by Brownell (2021), the Biodrama Project functions as a productive matrix for the theatrical creation and research of projects like Arias' that direct their attention to people's lives. However, the singularity of this proposal regarding the treatment of Argentina's

1 After a few years, this proposal becomes part of the second trilogy created by Arias – *Mi vida después* (2009), *El año en que nací* (2012), and *Melancolía y manifestaciones* (2012)-, in this case about children who reconstruct their childhood experiences and the lives of their parents during the dictatorship. Although the idea of a trilogy has not been present in these works since their gestation, as it was the case of the first trilogy, Arias conceives them in this way from the publication of the texts. See "Doble de riesgo. Textos y documentos de *Mi vida después*, *El año en que nací* y *Melancolía y manifestaciones*," in Arias, 2016, p. 9.

recent past through procedures linked to the intersection between theater and performance, inaugurates an area of renewal in terms of the use of archives and autobiographical testimonies for the stage.

MVD performed for more than ten consecutive years, with several seasons in both the official and independent circuits of Buenos Aires, as well as touring different theaters and festivals around the world. This proposal quickly became an indisputable reference for the new Argentine documentary theater, thanks to the dedicated study in numerous works (Brownell, 2009; Blejmar, 2010; Verzero, 2011 and 2012; Longoni and Verzero, 2012; Hernández, 2011; Perez, 2013; Pinta, 2013b; Graham-Jones, 2013).

Arias was the last director invited by Tellas for the Biodrama cycle, so her proposal responds to the premise of that project. Arias invites performing arts workers (actors, actresses, musicians, dancers) born between 1976 and 1983, thus focusing on biographies of people who, like her, were born during the years of the last Argentine civil-military dictatorship. Once the pre-selection was completed, she scheduled individual interviews to be filmed. The applicants had to bring objects that belonged to their parents, talk about their life stories, and/or describe those objects. From these meetings and the audiovisual material collected, the performers for the play were selected: Liza Casullo, Carla Crespo, Pablo Lugones, Vanina Falco, Blas Arrese Igor, Mariano Speratti, and Moreno Speratti, Mariano's son. During the creative process, the group investigates what it was like to be born and live under the dictatorship, taking as a central question: what did my parents do during those years?

We consider that the work can be thought of as a living archive or anarchiving (Tello, 2018), container of documents and testimonies, or bodies of evidence (Martin, 2010), that can be distinguished into three classes:

- Biographical-documentary objects – photos, letters, videos, audios, files – that serve as evidence of the facts dealt with, as they contain archival material or allude to them directly, linked to the biography in question.
- Textual materials and testimony, i.e., the form adopted by the discourse in order to describe the objects and account for biographical facts, setting a public precedent, proof or evidence that can have a direct impact on reality.
- The body and the performance-documentary, based on the figure of the actor/actress-documentary.

After having conducted a detailed analysis in a previous work on the body and the performative in the documentary performance arising from MVD

(Cobello, 2021), we are interested in presenting here some reflections on the theoretical construction of the other two elements that compose the work: the biographical-documentary objects and the textual materials, including the testimony, understood as a deposit text (Danan, 2013), from which scenes of the past emerge, which challenge the dominant narratives, creating a critical action that articulates the subjective and private experience with the possibility to share it, to put it into words (Wieviorka, 1998).

Research methods

This study is presented as a specific research in the field of history and theory of the arts in dialogue with literary theories linked to the notion of witness and testimony. Its objective is to examine, through a scenic-performative work, the enunciative devices, procedures and discourses that it conveys, taking into account its context of production.

We propose to examine the scenic phenomenon through contemporary conceptualizations of archive and document to describe and characterize their modes of operation and their relationship with memory and theatricality in the contemporary scene. For the realization of this study, we relied on reference materials such as the publication of the analyzed work in a book that gathers it alongside two other textual productions and defines it as a trilogy. It is also essential to have been able to rely on primary and secondary sources such as interviews, classes or lectures given by Arias on different occasions, as well as other research works on the subject, from which we were able to put our study into perspective and build bridges that link the different theoretical reflections on her work.

Biographical-documentary objects

The staging of biographical-documentary objects and testimonies is eclectic and fragmented. Although they intertwine to compose a period collage, we will begin by characterizing the space in which the objects are presented in order to deal with their materiality, their symbolic value and their function in the work.

The space is proposed from its literalness as a theatrical space, the room of an Italian-style theater configured, independently of the needs of this proposal, as a “black box” (Bishop, 2021). On the back wall, a balcony that occupies the length of the stage serves as an elevated space from which objects or performers emerge and then fall or are thrown onto the stage. Below the balcony, a drum kit and above it, marking a line that crosses the back wall below the balcony, six theatrical luminaires can be seen facing the audience, projecting their light towards the stalls. In front of the balcony space, two black columns located on the sides of the stage reduce the

space and create the frame that will contain the screen that unrolls between the two and rolls up again to be able to project images or open the space and reveal what is happening in the background. Between the proscenium and the columns, on the right side of the stage, is the technical table. This rectangular table is reminiscent of the set designed by Leandro Tartaglia for *El amor es un francotirado*. It is located to the right of the stage, in the same lateral position towards the audience and frontal towards the scene since, as a technical space, it is the place from where the performers themselves carry out tasks of projection, intervention, and editing. On the stage, there is a camera with a tripod, a small lighted lamp and other objects used for the construction of the scenes, such as photos, letters, miniature cars, a black saint, markers, cassettes, megaphone. On the left side of the stage, there is a row of chairs of different styles and periods arranged in a line, a folding wooden ladder, and a small table. A little more towards the center, in the proscenium, a microphone placed on a stand facing the stalls.

The performance begins with a rain of clothes falling from the balcony onto the stage, covering the background of the space. One of the actresses emerges from the scattered pants, sweaters, and T-shirts, approaches the audience, and, in front of a microphone, begins her story. Behind her, the shower of clothes continues. The program specifies that these are “used clothing”, clothes that belonged to other people in the past.

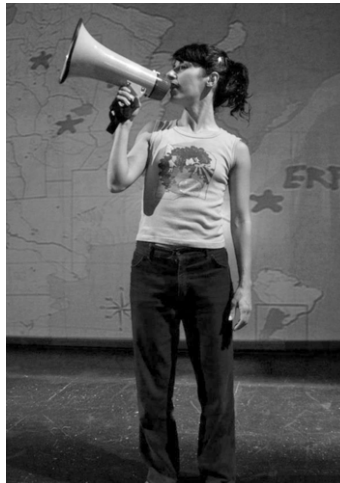
The light is turned on, and the rest of the performers approach the proscenium in the same manner. One of them writes on the floor with chalk some significant dates of Argentine history since the 70s. Then they introduce themselves and offer a brief biographical account that alludes to the day they were born. Thus begins the exhibition of their life stories. One by one, they take the microphone to describe photos and objects from their childhood. These documents are manipulated from the technical table by other performers and projected on a giant screen located in the middle of the stage that acts as a backdrop. In the context of this playful proposal, the objects become new challenges: firstly, they are subjected to a curious manipulation, between irreverent and ironic, and the stories that emerge from them function, in many cases, as the constructive principle of the scene.

The interpreters progressively exchange the place of the narrator and continue their narratives until exposing all their biographical-documentary objects. Mexican researcher Shaday Larios (2018) argues that the problematization of documentary objects, conceived as bodies of evidence, “becomes the main source of the archive, and everything in it will be to enhance its own vitality” (p. 258). Questioning the postulates of Carol Martin (2010), who argues that bodies of evidence are used as the constructive basis of the testimonial account, Larios

proposes that “subjects serve as a pretext for objects to testify” (p. 259). Following this approach, we believe that in MVD, objects function as territories of memories that treasure traces of the interpreters’ lives. An affective charge that, when reactivated and exhibited, enhances their political value (Barría, 2019). That is to say that the meaning is not in them a priori but is constructed from the mechanisms and relationships through which they become present (Chaneton, 2009).

In MVD, biographical-documentary objects are exhibited and questioned through discourse but also through action. Sometimes, they are enlarged on the screen, as, for example, some sound supports, toys, books. Other times, they collaborate from the scene in the reconstruction of situations. The staging is conceived around the technique of collage or montage, so each presentation of objects interacts with stories, actions, or music that they themselves produce on stage, with a gesturality and affectivity that seeks to go against any form of identification and assume a critical distance.

The use of technological devices such as cameras, screens, players, or amplifiers allows the appearance of multimedia objects such as photos, audio, or video files. These are, in turn, intervened with a marker on transparent paper on the same overhead projector; shadows on the screen, folded images, or superimposed projections. Thus, the treatment of documentary objects in their transition to the stage from the dialogue with other artistic disciplines, particularly film, dance, and music, constructs an intermedial scenic device (Pinta and Sala, 2020) through which these documentary objects circulate and, as we will see below, also testimonies and other textual forms.



Mi vida después (2009), Dir: Lola Arias – Photo: Lorena Fernández
Source: <https://lolaarias.com>

Textual materials and modalities of testimonial expression

One of the particularities of the use of text in MVD lies in the fact that it does not respond to a logocentrism that situates it as an element from which the scene is constructed. Its use does not aim at uncovering the meaning given by the authors to a perfectly constructed text but rather to experiment with its potential as a material. This diverse textual matter is brought into relation with other materials that configure the scene, so that the status it acquires in the work can vary according to the proposal.

Next, we will analyze the textual materials used in MVD by characterizing them according to their origin:

Texts from pre-existing sources for the performance

The integral text of the work includes quotes from texts of various natures.

- The family tree of Pablo Lugones built by his family. From the first Lugones, a Spanish conquistador who arrived in Argentina in 1580, to the interpreter himself, they give shape to this lineage of generals, landowners, poets, and policemen.
- The texts originating from audio archives, such as those presented by Liza through *cassette-letters*² that her parents sent to their family in Buenos Aires while they were in exile, or the one that Mariano presents in his father's voice. In this scene, the performer is accompanied by his son, Moreno. Together, they listen to an audio from the 1970s in which Mariano's father calls him and tries to make him speak to record his first words. Forty years later, the situation seems to be reproduced on stage, this time father and son bringing the voice of Speratti's grandfather to the present.³

² "The *cassette-letter* mode was an invention that had its heyday in the seventies, when blank tapes that could be recorded at home appeared, and many people discovered the charm of sending spoken letters, a cheaper and more poetic alternative to long-distance calls" (Arias, 2016, p. 140).

³ Starting with *Mi vida después*, Mariano Speratti develops his artistic work around the work with sound archives. Years later, he returns to work in collaboration with Lola Arias in the project Cadena Nacional, within the exhibition *Doble de riesgo* (2016) based on public sound archives, and, later, he makes a project of his own presented just like Cadena Nacional at the Parque de la Memoria, titled *Habeas Sonus* (2018). A video-installation created from four sound archives that integrates the section "Rescues of the Memory Office" based on oral testimonies of people who lived their childhood, adolescence, or youth during the last civil-military dictatorship in Argentina. The work works "sound as an inescapable testimony, connecting with the sensitivity of auditory memory and sound universes that leave marks in time" (Parque de la Memoria, 2018). The video installation was part of *The Future of Memory*, a project conceived by the Goethe-Institut through its branches in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay, with the aim of encouraging regional dialogue between sites of memory and reflection on the approach to political memory from an artistic perspective. In 2018, Parque de la Memoria hosted the Argentine chapter of the project and participated in its conceptual development together with the Museo Sitio de la Memoria ESMA.

- The last letter Carla's father wrote to her mother before he was murdered in Monte Chingolo. During the scene, Carla reads the letter.
- The folder with the documents of Vanina's father's legal proceedings, which, at the time of the premiere, was still in progress. With the help of her scene partners, Vanina reads some fragments that make up the file detailing the accusations made against Luis Falco, her biological father, for the theft of babies during the dictatorship.

As we have seen so far, we find references to family documents, but also more or less well-known quotations from books that the actors read on stage: Marx's *Capital*, Le Duan's *Vietnamese Revolution*, Ernesto Guevara's *Guerrilla War*, or Lenin's *Socialism and War*. Towards the end of the play, Liza recites loudly, like a dystopian revolutionary manifesto, an excerpt from a book by her father, *Para hacer el amor en los parques* (1970).

Most of the texts have been written by the director in collaboration with the performers, so the dramaturgy appears as a form of collective creation ordered in a final montage of non-dramatic texts by Arias. Unlike classical forms, guided by a logic of causal action, this elliptical dramaturgy advances by creating intervals that prevent the audience's illusion. The writing performs (Taylor and Fuentes, 2011) its own staging and shows the process, an ongoing practice that weaves together fragments of texts from various sources, text-materials (Danan, 2016) freely treated in view of the passage to the stage. An authorial work close to the ready-made by which Arias and the performers revisit objects and testimonies, to create a collage created from a living writing, "composed of gestures, attitudes, and signs that are invented as they are thought and performed directly on stage" (Lorente Bilbao, 2013, p. 135).

For a more detailed description of his work, we will take the notion of "rhapsode" used by Jean-Pierre Sarrazac (2011) to define the figure of the author. Sarrazac states that "dramatic writing is decided in a double movement that consists, on the one hand, in digging, deconstructing, problematizing old forms and, on the other hand, in forging new ones [...] A writer-rhapsode, then (in Greek, rhapsodein means 'to sew'), who assembles what he has previously torn apart and who, immediately, unbinds what he has just joined together." However, his study concentrates solely on defining, through this notion, dramaturgical work. For our part, we are not interested in expanding this notion by observing rhapsodic procedures in Arias' work as director and performer. There, she allows herself to explore and dismantle materials of diverse nature, heterogeneous elements between textual, visual, and musical, creating detours that avoid the composition of a fable. In this way it is possible to select certain elements that are cut out of

their original environment to give them other possibilities of existence within the framework of a particular scenic project. The text produced from the perspective of the montage is composed of a plurality of texts strung together from a rhapsodic gesture, like a scenic writing that emerges from a present time, that of the stage.

Texts produced by Arias in collaboration with the performers

These texts emerge from the biographical testimony of the performers. During the initial meetings, an interview with the performers is recorded, which not only revolves around their childhood stories but also explores their present lives and their future projections. In this sense, Carla Crespo explains:

[...] there was a first very intense interview that Lola did with Alejo Moguillansky, who was in charge of the images at that time. It was an individual interview with each one of us. [...] She, as the only premise, told me to gather objects of my dad's. I gathered some of his toys. I gathered some of his toys, a couple of letters, which are some of the few things I have, and some photographs. Then, with the camera on, Lola asked me questions about those objects. (Carla Crespo, personal communication, November 2, 2013)

Arias collects those stories recorded during the interview and composes with them a collage of different scenes. In this composition, it is possible to notice the fragmentation of the narrative, the displacement of the subject of enunciation (a polyphonic locus of enunciation appears), the closure of the character as an entity, the passage from the real to fiction and from fiction to the real, the contextualization through metonymy, and the renunciation of the linearity of the story. For example, texts that refer to the present, such as: “2009. World economic crisis. I sprain my foot in a rehearsal and I still can't jump from there down”; coexist with texts that allude to the past: “1976. The military coup is declared and a month later, I am born”; and with others that refer to a possible future: “I die on January 13, 2038 of an overdose in the middle of a concert with my rock band” (Arias, 2016, p. 24). This is an epochal mosaic constructed from the relationship between the different diaries/family albums of the performers.

The testimonies reworked dramaturgically by Arias are returned to the performers, who put them to the test in scenes created based on proposals by the performers or the director. The textual material is then discussed, questioned, and rethought as a whole. In relation to this work, Carla Crespo reveals:

With the texts, each one did a personal work with Lola. I had a lot of influence on what she was going to say, word for word. In fact, it was a theme that also ran through the play. The theme of the discussion of authorship in relation to the texts. And we reached different agreements according to the moment. But I, at no time I let myself say, I even discussed specific words with Lola. (Carla Crespo, personal communication, November 2, 2013)

As rehearsals progressed, and later during the performances, the biographical texts kept the same malleable spirit, open to modifications. At different times, they had to be updated as it became necessary to incorporate significant events in the performers' lives into the work. The cases described below illustrate this phenomenon well:

- During the early performances of the play, Carla Crespo explains her situation while waiting for the results of a DNA study to find out where her father had been buried. Months later, this text is modified, since she obtains the results and can affirm that the remains are in a common grave in the Avellaneda Cemetery.
- Liza Casullo loses her father during the rehearsals of the play. The play preserves the traces of this paradox, in which, while his daughter was trying to trace a map of her vital, militant past, her father fell ill and died. During the first performances, Liza reads the list of books her father had written before his death, and, since 2011, she adds a posthumous book to the list.
- Blas Arrese Igor alludes to his boyfriend during the first performances and, a few months later, changes that text to “my husband” after getting married thanks to the approval of the same-sex marriage law.⁴
- Vanina Falco, at the time of the premiere of the play, in the scene about her father's judicial process, claims that she cannot testify because she is a direct relative. However, as the play goes on and the text is modified, the actress affirms that she was able to testify against her father and that one of the proofs used to obtain this permission was this play.⁵

⁴ The Equal Marriage Law was enacted in Argentina on July 15, 2010.

⁵ In 2011, Vanina Falco was invited to the television program *678*, where she declared: “When the trial began in 2004, it seemed important to the lawyers of the Grandmothers that I could testify in the case, but at that time the law prevented it, precisely because of the blood relationship. We tried anyway, but in front of the magistrate who was taking my statement, anything I said other than ‘daddy changed my diapers’ was null and void (...) But despite the refusal, the team of lawyers of Abuelas continued working and looking for a way out and a turning point in relation to that was when we released *Mi vida después* (...). There, when

- Pablo Lugones and Carla Crespo start a love relationship and have a son. This brought about a change in the family tree of the Lugones family, since during the performances that Carla performed while pregnant, her belly was shown, and once Simon, the baby, was born, his ID card was projected on the screen at the end of the scene.

These last examples illustrate a living dramaturgy built on the performativity of testimony (Kusch, 2002). Thus, the update of the text is not only about the reality of the performers modifying the work but also about the testimony offered within the framework of a theatrical performance that comes to circulate in the public sphere and to influence life outside the stage. In this sense, Arias describes MVD as a living organism, since what is presented on stage is not something finished but a fragment of the present in process, loaded with flashes of the past; an experience that affects the lives of the performers while these transformations also modify the work. The testimony seeks to recreate a personal experience, a subjective process that is made public in a theatrical framework. Performativity is possible because when the testimony is exposed, it becomes a new experience, a present act that performs an action and provokes an effect in its audience, an act charged with transformative potential for the future.

Even scenes with a more descriptive nature, such as the scene entitled “Los libros de mi padre” (Arias, 2016), where information about the intellectual production of Liza’s father is offered, become performative because of the power of the testimony that seeks, perhaps not directly but somehow, to perform an act of public defense. As Tellería states, “testimonial theater asks spectators to watch as they listen: here and now, the audience attests to the power and responsibility of (re)constructing reality or life as it is lived” (2021, p. 211).

In the case of the less documentary texts, such as the scene entitled “Dreams with my father” (Arias, 2016), in which the performers sit in a row of chairs facing the audience and narrate in a multi-voice story about possible dreams in which they meet their respective fathers; or the last scene of the work entitled “The day of my death”, in which the six performers, also seated in a row but this time standing, offer a fragment of text each, facing the audience, about

the play was premiered, one of the first to come to see it was the team of lawyers and they said ‘we are going to use this as a new argument’. We prepared a brief, because I was giving a public testimony both here and, in the world, because with the play we traveled everywhere, and we presented it at the end of 2009. A month later, we had the Chamber’s ruling authorizing my statement” (Falco, May 17, 2011). On April 20, 2010, Vanina Falco was able to testify in court against her biological father. “It is a historic ruling: it sets the precedent that a daughter can testify against her father and that would enable other family members to do so as well.” (Falco in Alejandro Cruz, August 14, 2010) Furthermore, she underlines the incidence of theater in reality.

imaginaries of the moment of their death. We know that these texts come from a work of improvisation developed during rehearsals.

In the case of the remakes of their “ma-parents’ past”, this procedure, also explored during the essays, drives the production of texts that hybridize between the testimonial and the purely fictional. In all cases, these scenes sustain a functioning that we could think of as autofictional, understanding this category as a fantastic scriptural search from “memoiristic and subjective folds” (Tossi, 2020, p. 109). These, like other passages of the work, show a collaborative work in which Arias writes from improvisations and other exercises that later return to the performers and are defined in dialogue with them.



Mi vida después (2009), Dir: Lola Arias – Photo: Lorena Fernández
Source: <https://lolaarias.com>

Performative testimony and the construction of memories

The reflection on the work with archives and testimonies brings into tension the enunciative mark problematized already from the title of the work. To whom do the bodies of evidence presented belong? To whom does the possessive “my” refer? What are the implications of this deictic game in the construction of memories about the common past?

In the field of memory studies and within postmemorial approaches, Marianne Hirsch (2008) distinguishes two forms of postmemory – familial and affiliative – to account for the difference between an intergenerational, vertical

identification between parents and children that takes place in the intimacy of the home; and an intragenerational, horizontal identification, capable of making the position of the children more accessible to their contemporaries.

Affiliative post-memory would thus be the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available, and indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission. (Hirsch, 2008, p. 115)

Mariana Eva Perez (2013) argues that MVD can be read not only from post-memory since, in addition to the inherited traumatic memories, stories, and images that were transmitted in the framework of socialization processes within the family (Saporosi, 2018) that connect the “second generation” with the past of their ma-parents, the work presents testimonial accounts that account for the present of those lives. Therefore, we agree with Perez that a better analysis of this work would require a conceptual shift.

While the notion of postmemory can be useful to emphasize the “imaginative investment, projection and creation” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107) involved in the performers’ connection to the past, it risks veiling or overlooking their various first-hand experiences: orphanhood in the case of Carla and Mariano, uprootedness in the case of Liza, and, in the case of Vanina, the mysterious discovery of her father and brother’s true identity. In this sense, the work can be considered as offering testimonies about the consequences of state terror, not as it was in the past, but as it appears in the present, in their later lives. (Perez, 2013, p. 14)

This connection with the present is given by what we will call “the performative testimony”. To define and characterize this category, it is necessary to revisit conceptualizations around the figure of the witness. In this regard, Barona and Blanco (1999)⁶ refer to various theories such as Michel Foucault’s from the tragedy of Oedipus, Paul Ricoeur’s (1996) from the Bible and Christian iconography, or Jacques Derrida’s from the lecture form, “an act of speech that commits the speaker to say what he believes to be true, before an audience that

⁶ It is worth mentioning that Amelia Barona, one of the authors of this article, is Arias’ mother and a university professor at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires. Her biography was documentary input for the creation of *Melancolía y Manifestaciones* (2012), the work that closes Arias’ second trilogy (see footnote 1).

believes him” (p. 21). From this last theory, it follows that the meaning of the term testimony is linked to the etymological sense of the Latin word *testamentum*, testament of the survivor. Therefore, the testimony of the witness is a privileged account. That witness “is the third (*tertium*), the one who has not died but has seen, heard and perhaps suffered” (p. 21). And testimony is an act that involves both the word and the body.⁷

Analysing differences in the perspective and treatment adapted in these theories, but also certain recurrences, Barona and Blanco (1999) propose the following hypothesis:

[...] the theoretical problematic of witness and testimony is articulated around the repositioning of the category of subject, the relationship between the singular and the absolute (or the particular and the universal-general), an experience in the field of the interiority of the subject and the conditions of possibility of externalization in narrative, the problem of knowledge, the way of constituting and constructing truth, the question of interpretation, relations with power and the re-actualization, in a transforming instance, of hermeneutics. (p. 9)

Thus, the place of the experience back discourse is what defines the witness; while the testimony is the retrospective account of the experience based on knowledge. The witness is able to see and know.

In the case of the interpreters of Arias’ work – children of the disappeared or of survivors of the last dictatorship –, although they testify about themselves and about their childhoods under the dictatorship, not all of them can testify, strictly speaking, about events in their parents’ lives that they have seen or heard directly, so it could be said that they are not witnesses. However, are they not all witnesses to the many forms of state violence suffered during the years of state terrorism? Those who did not suffer in the flesh the dire consequences of the dictatorship, such as forced exile, childhood in hiding, or the death and disappearance of their parents, suffered them in another way, through the norms, discourses, and daily practices imposed also effects of the dictatorship. As Perez states:

⁷ Barona and Blanco (1999) start from the etymological relationship of the word testimony with *testicle* (*testiculum*) and *head* (*testis*) and refer to the proof of truth, which in the case of martyrdom is blood and in the case of the tribunal, the raised hand. However, they consider that, although the testimony compromises something of the body that does not have the right to speak, it is still a moment of telling that appeals to the memory.

In the specific case of the group of victims collectively referred to as “children of the disappeared”, several sets of problems emerge and intersect in their experiences: torture and abuse perpetrated by state agents on their own bodies (including the change of their identities); the “unthinkable knowledge” of these traumas; the orphanhood caused by enforced disappearance or murder; the impossibility or at least the difficulty of mourning; as well as the “transgenerational transmission of trauma”. This last term is more appropriate than postmemory to incorporate, for example, the particular experience of being raised by grandparents or other relatives also affected by the disappearance of parents. It is not a matter of one or the other, first-hand experience versus inherited memories. It is not about bearing witness to their stories versus testifying to their missing parents or the impossibility of accounting for their death. It is both at the same time. (Perez, 2013, p. 14)

The so-called “second generation” or “generation 1.5”, according to Rubin Suleiman (2002), is composed of the children of the survivors, those who “did not live through the traumatic event but remember it through the accounts of previous generations or the photographic images available” (Peller, 2018, p. 422). However, what we want to prove from the analysis of this work is that these children are also survivors, they are direct witnesses to a systematic plan that was not only intended to torture, murder, and disappear 30,000 people but to indoctrinate and leave a mark on the entire population. Therefore, the notions of witness and testimony, in addition to giving an account of first-hand experience, refer to inherited memories, accounts of others, and multiple discourses that witnesses use to tell their story. The “transgenerational transmission of trauma” (Perez, 2013, p. 14), i.e. the experiences of these children transformed into performative testimony, gives an account of the State’s repressive machinery in its complexity and its social projection. It takes the focus off the direct victims and sheds light on the consequences of state terrorism on the entire population.

Likewise, the performativity of testimonies allows new approaches to memories (Verzero, 2012, 2017; de la Puente, 2015) since they are presented in the cultural public sphere as documentary evidence, putting in tension their place within the realm of law.⁸ Bearing witness is a gesture that fully engages the

8 We rely mainly on Verzero (2012; 2017) and de la Puente (2015), who propose to think *Mi vida después* as a play that produces a break in the tradition of theater that works on memory thanks to the use of performative procedures. De la Puente’s contribution to the concept of “performative memories” will allow us, throughout this work, to approach memory in its relationship with the past and history in a performative way, that is, through the present reactivation of gestures and meanings that allow it to operate as a vital act of knowledge transmission.

one who performs it. Their gestures, their tone of voice, their emotion, appear as contingent behaviors resulting from the situation of exposure. The witness involves his person in the gesture of giving testimony, and this makes him pure instant, pure chance (he does not know what is going to happen to him at the moment of his exposure). It is the immediate presence of humanity that comes to share its experience. Unlike the witness as he appeared in the model of historical documentary theater, that of Piscator and Weiss, in contemporary theater there is a greater intervention of the witness in the creation, even prior to the show.⁹

As Perez (2013) and Surendra Singh Negi (2020) point out, the link of these witnesses with the past can be understood in the light of the concept of intergenerational postmemory, as first thought by Hirsch (2001), but also from the idea of intragenerational or affiliative postmemory (Hirsch, 2008). Hence, we can think that the possessive “my” in the title refers to each of the witnesses on stage (more or less directly), and expands in a performative gesture to the author and to society as a whole. It appeals to a certain identification that, as we anticipated, is not achieved through mimesis but through the recognition of the stories presented as part of a social framework in which the consequences of the dictatorship reverberate. This gesture can be seen in Carla Crespo’s scene about the death of her father. Each of the possible deaths represents the account of a direct or indirect witness, that is, the reconstruction of the past as a collective task of collecting and joining fragments to reach “partial truths, successive, that reconstruct the facts, that interpret them from different angles” (Calveiro, 2005, p. 18).

This play, an exemplary reference to the new forms of documentary theater, opens up the experience and invites the audience to also assume their responsibility in relation to the events narrated. Not only to those who already had a certain awareness of what was happening during those years, but also to those who can awaken questions such as: where was I? what was I doing? what did I know, what didn’t I know? what did I say? why did I keep silent? Likewise, for those of us who grew up surrounded by the stories of previous generations that we had to process, try to understand and place somewhere in our personal and collective history. It is this experiential force of the work that allows it to function as “a collective act of memory and mourning” (Perez, 2013, p. 15), as a ritual or a performative action that transforms the relationship with time, shaping new maps. It is there, in the performativity of the testimony, where past, present, and future converge, thanks to the “lacunar effect” (Blanco, 2013) that always leaves a remainder that does not close, a real that insists and claims its interpretation,

⁹ This close relationship with the witness and his place in the work can be thought of in dialogue with Brecht’s work in exile or Augusto Boal’s theater of the oppressed.

making transformations emerge. Following Gerbaudo's (2018) reflections on the problematics around the notion of archive, we consider that the escape from all certainty every time someone gives testimony, far from proving a truth and crystallising it, seeks to open new senses in each presentation, invites us to think of a democracy under construction, in a constant to-be. In this sense, the "after" that makes up the title of the work represents "a goal that allows us not to rest in the 'good conscience of the duty accomplished' in order to attend to what is missing" (p. 57). Thus, far from any kind of immobile archive that prevents blinking (Derrida, 1983), the work seeks to make room, hospitably, for the unpredictable. Thus, it opens clues about the future of the democratic system, despite the fact that in Argentina, forty years after its uninterrupted return, we are still facing times of setbacks and impunity that try to undermine what has been agreed upon. This allows us to understand that it is crucial not only to defend democracy, but also, and above all, to promote the democratising spirit of the social relations that are fostered within it.



Mi vida después (2009), Dir: Lola Arias – Photo: Lorena Fernández
Source: <https://lolaarias.com>

Conclusions

Throughout this work, we were able to delve into issues arising from the uses and functions of the archive and the testimony on the stage. As we have been able to demonstrate, testimony emerges from the articulation between a social imperative that becomes present and an inner need of the witness to put into words, in that context, his or her life experience. Arias recognizes a collective framework that allows a certain social cohesion in terms of human rights linked to the issue of testimony that had a first point of irruption with the Trial of the Juntas and the appearance of *Nunca Más* (CONADEP, [1984] 2013) at the end of the twentieth century and that intensifies with the trials against humanity reopened since 2003 and chooses to intervene in those debates and social processes through a biographical-documentary stage practice. MVD's experience of creation thus finds in the bodies of the children a territory from which to think about the constructions of memory, the traces of the past, the marks of personal experiences, and the discourses that traversed them. In this way, by acting on the past in the present tense, the traumatic matrix is softened, allowing new interpretations. As Mariana Eva Perez states, "child victims" (2022, p. 150), as privileged witnesses, offer the possibility of reconstruction and reparation, that is, they become a transforming potential that resignifies the value of the struggles for memory, truth, and justice.

The witness on stage in MVD provokes an aesthetic-political tension. Both its materiality and its function put in crisis the idea of truth linked to the notion of power, which allows us to think about the voices or facts silenced in hegemonic narratives. As Foucault ([1978] 1996) shows, already in the oldest and most deeply rooted literary tradition of the West, power was embodied by a character like Oedipus, a king who, although he knew his history from the very beginning thanks to the prophecy of the oracle, ignored it out of pride, tyranny, and ambition in order to keep his throne. Indeed, it is the witness who confirms the truth to Oedipus and puts an end to the protagonist's blindness. Dismantling this logic of knowledge-power, MVD seeks to link the voice of Arias as author with that of the witnesses, who, as actor-document (Cobello, 2021), produce new meanings by acting out their own testimony. The dramaturgy is constructed collectively, through a collaborative work that is enriched by the associations and accumulations given in the field of acting. This work, produced both in rehearsals and in the presentations of the play, allows us to give new meanings to the texts and to temporarily redefine the play, which, by affecting and being affected by the transformations in the lives of the performers, is continually in process and mutation. In this interrelation of authorial voices, the work expresses not only an

intragenerational post-memorial transmission given from the family history of the performers involved, but performatively exposes and witnesses the reverberations and ramifications of a personal history that is also collective. The result of this collage of voices is a palimpsestic writing that gives an account of the traces of what was questioned, of what pre-exists and persists.

Arias' work thus proposes to intervene in the canon of recent Argentine history from the material experience of the encounter by reopening and recreating archives in an anarchivistic gesture. The past, made up of family/personal stories and documents, enters the present, against the flow of history, like a flash, a lightning bolt, or radiance that bursts in and dialectically interrogates it (Benjamin, 2008).

The unavoidable impact that MVD had both locally and internationally is mainly explained by the performative force of a proposal for the reconstruction of identity, both individual and collective, which is presented both as a contingent phenomenon of the social or political action that drives the work and as a motive or basis for new actions. Its processual character does not prevent it from accounting for the collective consensus reached and sustained after the last dictatorship, in the face of the negationist discourses that are always lurking. In this way, the work produces a state of equality in the distribution of the sensible between artists and spectators (Rancière, 2010; 2019) that is not presented as a premise but as an end to be achieved. The scene thus shows a consensual version of the dictatorship through an epistemological apparatus that allows the development of a critical message based mainly on the recreation of memories from a past that bursts into the present to interrogate it by illuminating tensions, contradictions, and complexities. Unarchived truths that are re-made and historicised from present subjectivities.

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