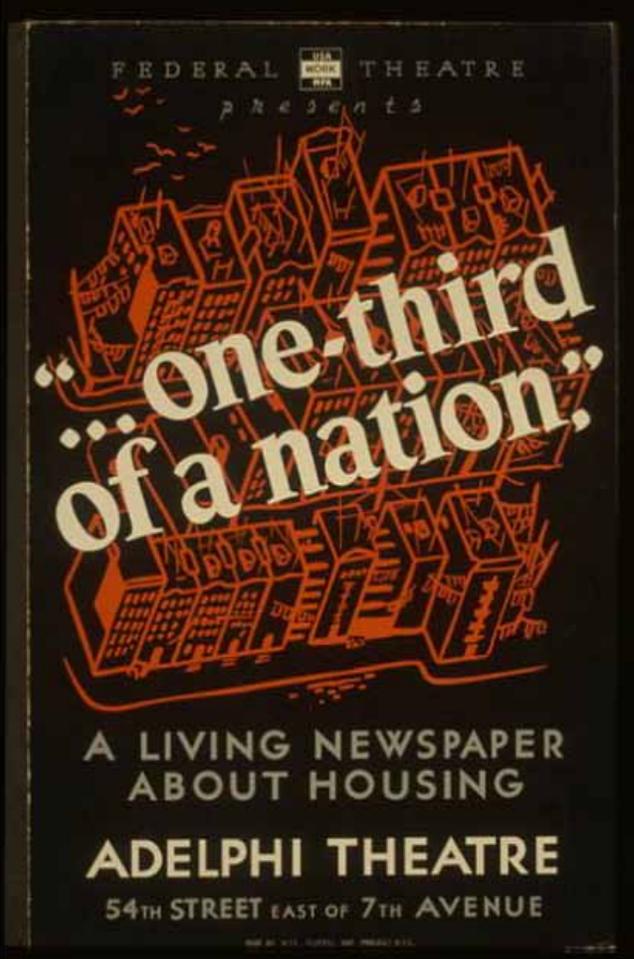


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## THE PARCHMAN HOUR DISCUSSION GUIDE

### A Brief History of American Documentary Theatre

by Jules Odendahl-James

Broadly conceived, documentary theatre is fact-based performance composed using archival materials such as trial transcripts, official or government documents, iconic visual images or video footage, newspaper reporting, historical writing and recorded interviews. Documentary performances often emerge in response to social or political crises; documentary playwrights offer their audiences a theatrical presentation of real events to inspire critical questions about history, memory and justice as well as provoke social action to change the world outside the theater walls.

In twentieth-century America there have been three significant moments of innovation in the form and content of documentary performance. The first is marked by the work produced under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project (1935-1939). Their "Living Newspapers" used a form borrowed from overtly agit-prop (propaganda) and worker's theatre popular in early twentieth century Europe and the Soviet Union to address significant political and economic issues of the day. While their content was based in reality, the forms of these early documentary plays were decidedly modernist, often embracing collage, expressionism and minimalism in their dramaturgy and staging. This tension between factual content and expressionist form remains a hallmark of the documentary theatre genre.

The second moment of development appears during the social upheaval of the late 1960s, where public unrest regarding Civil Rights, the Vietnam War and economic inequities compelled a new generation of playwrights and theatre companies (such as The Living Theatre and the Open Theatre) to employ the documentary form as a way to question dominant media narratives as well as explode the boundaries of expected theatrical form and performance space. At this time, documentary artists built upon the notion of "fact-based" material with the belief that everyday life and individual, personal experiences provided suitable domains and material for documentary performances. Happenings, autobiographical solo performances and multi-media installations are just a few of the innovations from this era.



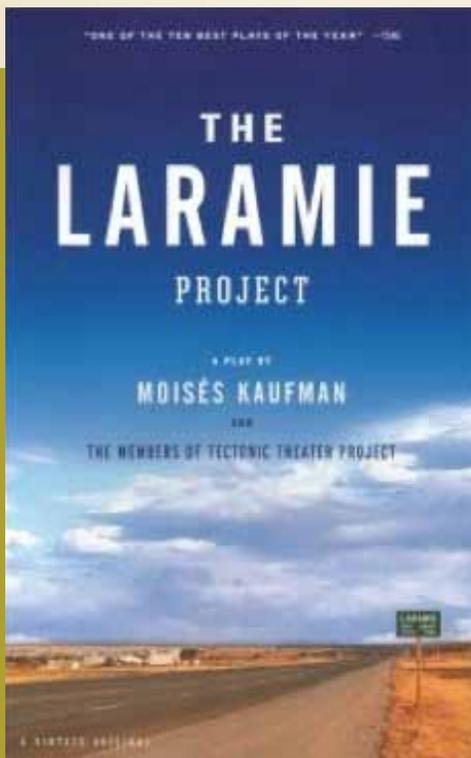
Image of The Open Theatre rehearsing *The Serpent*, a play about the nature of good and evil that included a recreation of the Zapruder film of President Kennedy's assassination (1968).

We are currently enjoying the third renaissance of American documentary theatre. Building upon the ground-breaking solo performances of Anna Deavere Smith in the late 1980s, this recent moment is characterized by collaborative development of the theatre performance among directors, designers, playwrights, actors and their documentary subjects (living and dead). The primacy of written archival documents has dwindled and interview-based materials have become central. These documentary performances continue to blur the boundaries between realism and more argument-based formal structures where juxtaposition, fluidity of time and place and multi-role casting are the norm.

Perhaps the most notable example of the current documentary theatre moment is *The Laramie Project* (2000), a play about the murder of college student Matthew Shepard, created by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theatre Project. In the first eighteen months following the murder, the company traveled from New York to Laramie, WY to interview members of the community about the event, its aftermath, and their attitudes and beliefs regarding homosexuality. The company's interview material became the centerpiece of a collaboratively built play that went through an extensive workshop development. The piece had a successful Off-Broadway run in 2001 and since its debut *The Laramie Project* has been produced by over 300 regional, college and high school theaters in the US and abroad. Colloquially, the piece has been credited with inspiring similar kinds of introspection about gay and lesbian civil rights in each community where it is performed.



The contrasting characters of Anna Deavere Smith, from her 2009 play of *Let Me Down Easy* about health, healthcare, and medicine in the United States. Photo credit: T. Charles Erickson, *The New York Times*.



Book cover for the published edition of *The Laramie Project*.

The success of *The Laramie Project* is part of a wider American interest in “real” stories, including those found on mainstream reality television (e.g., *Survivor*, *The Jersey Shore*, *Project Runway*), in memoirs and creative non-fiction books, on public radio story/interview programs (e.g. *This American Life* and *StoryCorps*), and in an array of documentary filmmakers such as Michael Moore (*Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*), Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me*, *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*), Ken Burns (*The Civil War*, *Baseball*), and Davis Guggenheim (*An Inconvenient Truth*, *Waiting for ‘Superman’*). In the wake of this explosion of forms, there is also greater public scrutiny and critique of documentary artists, particularly the influence they have over the selection, shape and reception of their materials. The basic paradoxes of documentary theatre as both real and representation, representing multiple points of view but with a coherent, direct message, and critical of unified Truth while also offering a believable and compelling story are part of its complex, innovative and enduring history.



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## Academic Resources

*Documentary Theatre In The United States: An Historical Survey And Analysis Of Its Content, Form, And Stagecraft*

by Gary Fisher Dawson

*Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary*

*[British] Documentary Theatre*

by Will Hammond and Dan Steward

*Dramaturgy Of The Real On The World Stage*

edited by Carol Martin

*The New Deal Stage: Selections from the*

*Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)*

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftthome.html>

## Contemporary American Documentary Plays Of Note

- *Aftermath* by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen
- *Columbinus* by Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli
- *Execution of Justice* by Emily Mann
- *The Exonerated* by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen
- *God's Country* by Stephen Dietz
- *Greensboro: A Requiem* by Emily Mann
- *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* by Moises Kaufman
- *I Am My Own Wife* by Douglas Wright
- *9 Parts of Desire* by Heather Raffo
- *No Child* by Nilaja Sun
- *This Beautiful City* by The Civilians
- *Through the Visitor's Glass* by Ashley Lucas
- *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deavere Smith

