

Introduction

Exposing Reality

In 2003 two university students in Mexico City joined forces to create something that was uniquely theirs. Today Luisa Pardo and Gabino Rodríguez, founding members of the theater collective Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol (Lizards Lounging in the Sun), continue to make theatrical art that transcends generic and national boundaries. The collective has grown to include many more members, including actors, videographers, graphic artists, and lighting and sound experts, and is now one of the leading sources for homegrown, unique theater in Mexico. Its work has a strong connection to reality, staging national history and autobiography, testimonies and family stories. Lagartijas is still based in Mexico City, though it performs its work all over the world.

Another Kind of Justice

This book focuses on Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol and how it engages with the genre of theater of the real. Theater of the real is defined by theater scholar Carol Martin as “a wide range of theater practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical” (*Theatre of the Real* 5). Lagartijas’s work is a shining example of theater of the real, as it persistently stages reality, in the forms of intimate personal stories, the histories of social movements and national politics, and inherited family stories. This study addresses this relationship between stage representation and political and private life. In this book, the work of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol is a case study that illustrates how the theater offers a forum to present alternatives to official histories and rewrite the traditions of family and personal histories in the Mexican context. The theater’s claims to veracity are often in opposition to those versions of history that erase or pardon state violence. In a sociopolitical moment in which facts are under fire, the theatrical space has positioned itself as a source of and repository for the real. I look at three levels of

history—personal, family, and national—and analyze how theater of the real engages each of them to create a sense of reality that goes beyond the documentary to invoke a bodily truth. This book shows how the contemporary stage serves as a site for re-creating, questioning, and subverting traditional discourses of the real, such as history, journalism, and official governmental sources.

Lagartijas joins a long tradition of documentary theater in Mexico. Very soon after Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* was produced in East and West Germany, Latin American theater practitioners found his verbatim form to be a useful one for representing history and current events, especially in political situations in which more traditional sources for such news were controlled by oppressive authorities or censored. In classical documentary plays, the playtext is made up of or based on the verbatim text of source materials, such as court transcripts. Documentary theater emerged onto the Mexican scene in 1968 with *Pueblo rechazado* (A rejected people), Vicente Leñero's theatrical portrayal of a monk's use of psychoanalysis at a monastery in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and his consequent excommunication from the Catholic Church. It premiered October 15, 1968, in the Teatro Xola in Mexico City, only thirteen days after the massacre of student protestors by military and police in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco district of the city. The furor of the student movement, its violent repression, and the intensity of the Olympic Games and its international witnesses combined to create a critical moment for the foundation of Latin American documentary theater. Hugo Salcedo attributes Leñero's pioneering move toward the documentary to the writer's vocation and passion for journalism.¹ Though *Pueblo rechazado's* ties to the documentary are at times tenuous, its influence on later practitioners—who would study Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, and Weiss more closely and focus on testimony as their primary source—is unquestionable. Leñero would continue in the documentary genre throughout his career as a playwright, with works such as *Compañero* (Comrade, 1970), a biography of Che Guevara; *El juicio* (The trial, 1972), based on the trial of León Toral and "La madre Conchita," two Cristeros found guilty of assassinating President Álvaro Obregón; *Los hijos de Sánchez* (The children of Sanchez, 1972) based on the ethnographic work of the same name by Oscar Lewis; and several more. Leñero's influence on contemporary Mexican theater is undeniably vital; his numerous disciples include Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, and fellow northerner Humberto Robles. Rascón Banda assumed the mantle of documentary dramaturgy with plays like *Los ilegales* (The illegals, 1979), *La fiera del Ajusco* (The beast of the Ajusco, 1985) and *Homicidio calificado* (Murder in the first degree, 1994);² he examines national myth in historical plays like *La Malinche* (1998); explores testimonial theater with *Sazón de mujer* (Taste of a woman, 2001); and participates in the documentary mode with, for example, *La mujer que cayó del cielo* (The woman who fell from the sky, 1999). Salcedo (102) and Armando Partida

Tayzan (82) note Rascón Banda's innovative use of the theater as an agent for social change that implicates the spectator. Important contributions to documentary theater in Mexico also come from the playwright and author Sabina Berman, whose plays *Rompecabezas* (*The puzzle*, 1981) and *Herejía* (*Heresy*, 1983) portray national historical events in a humorous light. As Stuart Day points out, "Berman combines the power of humor with the strong tradition of Mexican documentary theater, eschewing the misguided fear of many practitioners of this subgenre that laughter diminishes social commitment. . . . Yet the unique combination of documentary theater and humor (irony, parody) is one of Berman's most significant contributions to Mexican art" (*Outside Theater* 132). Indeed, the playfulness of Berman's work can be seen in Lagartijas's documentary pieces as well.

Other Latin American roots for contemporary theater of the real include August Boal's *Teatro Jornal*, founded in 1971 in São Paulo, Brazil, which attempted to demystify the supposed objectivity of journalism, make the theater more popular, and demonstrate that theater can be practiced by nonartists (Boal 58). It is Boal's first objective that is of interest for this study; by staging the real, many of the plays I examine subvert the idea of reality and the possibility of ever representing the "real." The possibility of defining or narrating reality, however, has been rendered risible by postmodernity, which, as Jean-François Lyotard defines it in *The Postmodern Condition*, is a crisis of narratives, and incredulity toward metanarratives that explain the world. In other parts of the region, while the document may not have had the primacy it finds in traditional documentary theater, the real continued to be a source of dramatic inspiration. Boal's work resonated with practitioners Enrique Buenaventura and his Teatro Experimental de Cali, in Colombia; Alan Bolt's Nixtayolero, in Nicaragua, and Cuba's Teatro Escambray, which attempted to effect social change through theater (Versényi 159–73). Companies like Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, for example, in Peru and Mapa Teatro in Colombia participated throughout the latter part of the twentieth century in the tendency to stage reality. In the second half of the twentieth century, leading into the twenty-first, Ana María Vallejo de la Ossa points out, theater in Latin America has privileged the place of the body and renounced fiction, features that in turn have changed the way that theatrical texts are generated (53–54). In late twentieth-century theater, Mexican performance practitioners like the Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes and Jesusa Rodríguez, along with many other Latin American collectives, preferred a devised theater method that also puts the performer's body at the forefront.³ Twenty-first century theater practitioners—like Humberto Robles, Lagartijas, Teatro Línea de Sombra, and Teatro Ojo—draw on the strong tradition of performance in Mexico, with its emphasis on the body and the political, to experiment with the representation of reality, revealing the problems with asking audiences to both believe and disbelieve.

Methodology

My approach to Lagartijas's work has been shaped by pragmatic limitations as well as theoretical influences. I first came across its work in 2010, when I saw *El rumor del incendio* (The rumor of the fire) at the national university in Mexico City. The play mixes autobiography, biography, family history, and national history in a documentary drama that follows Pardo's mother through the latter half of the twentieth century, citing important international and national events throughout. I included the play on my doctoral exam on autobiographical discourse in Latin America, and discovered that the idea of playing one's parent onstage was gaining in popularity in the region, in plays like Lola Arias's *Mi vida después* (My life after, 2008). I wrote my doctoral dissertation on auto/biographical theater in Latin America, and now take this opportunity to zoom in on the trajectory of Lagartijas. Its work has evolved over the past seven years, and its influence in Mexico and internationally has grown as well.

While I was able to attend *El rumor del incendio* and other plays while living in Mexico City, the ephemeral nature of theatrical performance makes it impossible in some cases to access documentation of performances that I was not able to attend personally. In those cases, especially for the earliest plays in Lagartijas's repertoire (*Noviembre* [November], *Pía*, *Esta es la historia de un niño que creció y todavía se acuerda de algunas cosas* [This is the story of a boy who grew up and still remembers some things], and *En el mismo barco* [In the same boat]), I have relied on the company's generosity and its own documentation of its work. For the four plays mentioned here, I have had access to the playtext, photographs, and sometimes video clips of performances. Additionally, I have interviewed the company with regard to these early plays, though it is more reticent about the incipient works that predate its more characteristic productions. In these cases my work must be categorized as largely literary analysis, reading the dramatic text and analyzing its relationship to other texts and its sociohistorical context. I also rely heavily on reviews in the popular press, where available. Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to attend productions of several of Lagartijas's plays since discovering them in 2010, both in Mexico City and in forums in the United States (*El rumor del incendio*, *Asalto al agua transparente* [Assault on clear water], *Montserrat*, *Se rompen las olas* [The waves break], *Tijuana*, *Santiago Amoukalli*, *Este cuerpo mío* [This body of mine], and *Elisa*). In these cases, photographs, my notes and impressions, access to the playtext, and interviews have been my primary sources for research. In addition, the ability to see more than one presentation of a given play has allowed me to gauge audience responses.

Finally, for some plays I have only had access to video recordings of productions (*Está escrita en sus campos* [It is written in the fields], *Veracruz, nos estamos deforestando o cómo extrañar Xalapa* [Veracruz, we are deforesting ourselves or

how to miss Xalapa]). As time goes on, the company has begun documenting its work and archiving it, making my work as a researcher much easier. This has also enabled me to go back and review plays I attended in person, or see how a given play has evolved over time. The various formats in which the plays and information about them exist, then, include:

playtexts,
video recordings,
live performances,
performer interviews,
critical reviews,
scholarly articles,
audio recordings;
photographs; and
extratheatrical publications, including books published by
the company to accompany its plays.

All these formats enrich our understanding of Lagartijas's trajectory and its relationship to other theater troupes in Mexico, Latin America, and the world. It is important, however, to keep track of what the object of study is in any given case when drawing conclusions about Lagartijas's work. For this reason, throughout this study I have, where possible, referred to the playtext when reproducing dialogue, while I may refer to live performances or video recordings to discuss the other legible signs of the theater such as lighting, blocking, gesture, makeup, costumes, or sound effects.

The significance of these other elements cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, in this book I argue that it is the unique aspects of the theater that make it an apt space for re-creating, communicating, and storing knowledge about reality. The requirement of the simultaneous presence of bodies sets theater apart from film and television, narrative, or graphic arts. It is only in the moment of performance that real meaning-making occurs, and that is precisely why the theater is so powerfully positioned, in the digital age, to challenge hegemonic discourses and traditional notions of what is real. For this reason, my analysis always focuses on the performance of the text, even though I use the text to reproduce quotations here, for the sake of consistency and clarity.

Overview of Chapters

This book is organized in chronological order, to show the development of several of the most significant characteristics of Lagartijas's theater: auto/biography, family, and nation. Chapter 1, "Enacting the Collective," traces Lagartijas's creative

process to the devised theater or collective creation that became especially popular in Latin America in the 1960s. It shows how the personal, intimate biographies presented in plays are reflective of collective processes, such as national history and family relationships. I examine the play *Asalto al agua transparente* (and, briefly, the early plays *Esta es la historia de un niño que creció y todavía se acuerda de algunas cosas*, *Catalina*, and *En el mismo barco*), linking its development through collective creation and its emphasis on collectivity as a subject matter, as well as the auto/biographical impulse that begins to emerge with these plays.

In chapter 2, “Unfolding Genealogy,” I analyze the cycle *La invención de nuestros padres* (The invention of our parents), which was created retroactively to encompass three independent plays, all produced by Lagartijas: *El rumor del incendio*, *Montserrat* (by Gabino Rodríguez), and *Se rompen las olas* (by Mariana Villegas). These three plays exemplify the aesthetic and political preoccupations that most readily define Lagartijas’s work. They are documentary dramas that emphasize the display of “proof” in the form of legal documents and personal effects, privilege the interaction between corporal performance and digital technology as a means for theatrical communication, and focus on the relationships and breaches between generations with an eye to national events.

Chapter 3, “Falling Out of History,” looks at the play *Derretiré con un cerillo la nieve de un volcán* (I shall melt a volcano’s snowcap with a match) alongside the cycle *La democracia en México* (Democracy in Mexico), which began with the return of the Mexican Partido de la Revolución Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party; PRI) to the presidency in Mexico after a twelve-year hiatus. While the company retains its focus on personal stories and family relationships, the national becomes an urgent question as it seeks to use the theater to understand political processes in Mexico. The project is not only dramatic; it is investigative. This shift toward theater as research supports my observation that the theater, not only in the hands of Lagartijas but throughout Latin America, is being promoted and used as a source for discourses of reality.

Finally, chapter 4, “Loosening the Bounds of Theater” follows the company as its various members venture separately into the world, always linked to the collective through the loose confederation of Lagartijas. The company’s most recent works are often unipersonal monologues mixed with video and digital sound effects and demonstrate a heightened urgency when it comes to Mexican political realities. Whereas its earlier works were characterized as theater or scenic documentaries, it has begun to label certain creations as lectures, emphasizing the real nature of the subject matter. In this chapter I also situate Lagartijas within the constellation of Latin American theater of the real, to show that it is not an exception but rather an exemplary figure among a growing trend toward representing reality onstage in Latin America.

With this book, my desire is to make visible the important contributions that artists like Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol are making to the world theater scene. Additionally, I propose, by shining a light on their work, that looking to the arts, especially the art of presence, the theater, will provide comfort and truth in times when facts and reality seem to be under fire. The title of this book, *A Shared Truth*, refers to this promise of solace. Theater implies a communion, the ritual sharing between actor and spectator, that can only exist through the simultaneous gathering of bodies and souls.

Presenting Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol

Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, a theater company from Mexico City founded by Luisa Pardo and Gabino Rodríguez in 2003, is at the forefront of twenty-first-century documentary theater in Mexico.⁴ Its plays—like *Asalto al agua transparente* (2006), which stages a history of water in the Valley of Mexico, or *Catalina* (2009), which documents a past love affair of Rodríguez—display an affinity for staging the real. In *El rumor del incendio* (2010), the personal and collective come together, as Pardo’s mother’s biography is intertwined with national history. While its plays dance on the line between fiction and nonfiction, including fantastic elements alongside historical evidence, its inclusion in the documentary genre is questionable. Some critics have come to call this kind of production “theater of the real,” an umbrella term that encompasses any theatrical performance that attempts to portray reality, in some form or other. The term is useful for understanding the work of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol as well as many other Latin American theater practitioners, who push the boundaries of the documentary genre, testing the limits of what theater can do. By inserting reality into the theatrical, the genre allows the stage to become a space for resisting official discourse, offering alternative versions of history, and cocreating, with the audience, new understandings of what is real.

Studies such as Carol Martin’s *Theatre of the Real* (2013) or the 2006 special issue of *TDR/The Drama Review* devoted to theater of the real aim to define the genre as well as to theorize the relationship between theater and reality. While theater of the real has seen a surge in popularity throughout the world, with an increasing number of examples over the past two decades, critics have consistently overlooked Latin American productions.⁵ Aside from Martin’s inclusion of a fragment of Argentine dramatist Vivi Tellas’s staging of her mother and her aunt (*Mi mamá y mi tía*) in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, theater scholars in the North, who are not specifically Latin Americanists, have virtually ignored the region’s vibrant production of drama. As far as critical attention to Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol goes, the bulk of documentation has taken place in student theses (including my own doctoral dissertation), indicating that the scholarly dialogue

about Lagartijas forms part of the newest wave of theater criticism.⁶ This book, focusing entirely on Lagartijas's theatrical production, is my contribution toward a greater understanding of contemporary Mexican theater and how it fits into theatrical traditions in Latin America, the Americas, and the world. As the company takes its place in the contemporary canon, studies like this one will be useful for students, teachers, and enthusiasts who want to learn about Lagartijas's history and theater of the real.

The publication of this book signals the seriousness with which Lagartijas's work is received. Indeed, the group is invited to festivals all over the world, often winning festival prizes,⁷ and scholars have begun to turn their attention to its unique blend of theatricality and documentary that challenges traditional notions of what the theater is supposed to do. *El rumor del incendio*, its 2010 play focusing on the guerrillas in mid-twentieth-century Mexico and actor/director Pardo's mother's biography, has received the bulk of critical attention. My own article and accompanying interview in *Latin American Theatre Today* (see Appendix B for the translation of the interview into English), along with an article that situates Lagartijas's 2013 play *Montserrat*, published in *Theatre Journal* in 2017, joins studies by Tim Compton (2006, 2013), Lina J. Morales Chacana, Antonio Prieto Stambaugh and Martha Toriz Proenza, Paulina Sabugal Paz (2017), and Hugo Salcedo.⁸

This study documents the work of Lagartijas in order to situate its contributions to the dramatic field within the larger context of Mexican, Latin American, and global theatrical traditions. I offer a complete vision of the company's oeuvre, from the earliest productions of its founders as theater students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) Centro Universitario de Teatro (University Theater Center, CUT) to its more recent contributions to international theater. The purpose of this study is to hold up Lagartijas's work as an example of how theater of the real transforms the stage into a site for making meaning of reality. Though the book's conclusions apply to Latin American theater of the real in general, I limit my analysis to Lagartijas's work as a case study. This focus allows me to engage with a body of work in its entirety; the plays work together as a system that supports each work's claims of reality. The company's construction of a style, and its insistence on reality throughout its trajectory, is also a characteristic of other examples of theater of the real that tend to appear in series or cycles.⁹ By limiting this study to Lagartijas, both general trends of theater of the real and particularities of contemporary Mexican experience come to light. In the final chapter, however, I examine how the specific relates to the general, with a discussion of how Lagartijas's star fits into the constellation of Latin American theater of the real. In this chapter I will focus on how the individual, the family, and the nation are all implicated in the representation of the real, and how the theater itself reveals the limits of its own representational capacity.

The Political and the Personal

One of Lagartijas's innovations to documentary theater is its documentation of the extremely personal and its use of autobiographical performance, tying the actors to the characters they play. Whereas previous works—like Rascón Banda's aforementioned *La Malinche*, Wilberto Cantón's *Nocturno a Rosario* (Nocturne for Rosario, 1957), or Sabina Berman's *Rompecabezas* (1981)—include psychological portraits of historical figures of international importance, Lagartijas focuses on autobiography in its works, shortening the distance between the staged and the subject. At the same time, it elevates the ordinary individual to the level of national poets and political leaders. In early works this autobiographical tendency appears as intertextuality; the scripts are based on literary texts that provide a summary of the artist's education: a staged, autobiographical *Künstlerroman*. References to high and popular culture combine with fictionalized and real accounts of the actors' lives to form the bud of what will later flower into full-fledged autobiographical and documentary theater. For example, its first production as a company, *Esta es la historia de un niño que creció y todavía se acuerda de algunas cosas* (2003), draws on texts by authors like Charles Bukowski, John Kennedy Toole, Paul Auster, Fabio Morábito, and Larry Tremblay to examine how we remember childhood. *Pía* (2005), characterized as an in memoriam by the company, also compiles texts by various authors to construct a play about human intimacy that memorializes a late friend of Rodríguez. *Noviembre* (2005) portrays a sixteen-year-old protagonist whose mother has just died, and draws on Pardo's biographical experience of her mother's death as well as texts by other authors, directors, and Pardo's own brother. These earliest texts were produced when Pardo and Rodríguez were students at the UNAM.

On leaving the confines of the university, frustrated by the institutional structure, Lagartijas set out to create documentary theater that addressed Mexican realities created through collective coproduction rather than relying on single-authored texts. Debra A. Castillo points out that while Latin American devised theater or *creación colectiva* “recognize[s] a heritage that includes inspiration in and dialogue with projects like the US-based Bread and Puppets (1963), Living Theater (1947), and Teatro Campesino (1965), it would not be difficult to argue that in the Southern Hemisphere this kind of work took on a prominence it never achieved in the North” (63). Though the hemispheric division proposed by Castillo would separate Mexico from South America, the linguistic and cultural separations create analogous divisions between the United States and Mexico. Devised theater in Mexico is also prominent and, until recently, has gone largely unnoticed by Anglophone critics in the north. Lagartijas is no exception; beginning with *Asalto al agua transparente*, its commitment to collective creation and an emphasis on historical documentation comes to the fore. The focus on family relationships

that began in *Noviembre* continues throughout the company's trajectory, including its next play, *En el mismo barco* (2007), which takes a generational perspective to explore the political ideals and individual desires of a group of young people.¹⁰ *En el mismo barco* serves as a bridge between the parallel emphases on the collective and the generational in Lagartijas's works.¹¹

Other important preoccupations present throughout the company's trajectory include the representation of reality through the documentary mode as well as through staging intimate, auto/biographical dramas.¹² This focus on the intimate is particularly present in *Catalina*, the reenactment of a romantic breakup and its aftermath. The play provides evidence such as music, photographs, text messages, e-mails, and video to reenact the end of a relationship, applying documentary methodology to the intimate realm. In *El rumor del incendio* (2010), the personal and collective combine to create an auto/biographical family drama, with twentieth-century Mexican history as its backdrop. This play forms a trilogy called *La invención de nuestros padres* along with *Se rompen las olas* (2012) and *Montserrat* (2012). The former is a re-creation of the protagonist's conception, tied to the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City; the latter is a false documentary that effectively revives the protagonist's late mother through the power of desire and fiction. This last play tests the limits of the documentary mode, turning it against itself and creating a falsehood. The playful gesture is a serious theoretical proposal, and continues in *Derretiré con un cerillo la nieve de un volcán* (2013), a history of the PRI. The group's most recent project, *La democracia en México* is an ambitious series of plays, with one planned production per Mexican state. So far there are four: *Tijuana*, *Veracruz*, *Santiago Amoukalli*, and *Distrito Federal*, each named for a location. Every play in the series portrays an aspect of democracy in contemporary Mexico, fifty years after the publication of Pablo González Casanova's sociological study *La democracia en México* (1965). Lagartijas uses the stage to portray the most intimate details of personal lives, to re-create family bonds, and to make sense of the nation.

Lagartijas, from the beginning, has been concerned with resisting the tendency toward imported, translated theater. As Rodríguez said in an interview in 2010, "There's something a little impersonal about the idea of playing Hamlet. In some ways it could be me, it could be another actor, and we liked the idea of doing plays that could only be cast with those people. That couldn't be other people."¹³ Pardo added, "To think that we are indispensable, that it's really something of our own. In contemporary culture, a topic I've been thinking about, everything is disposable and everything is alien and everything is temporary. . . . We aren't bureaucrats of the theater, we aren't theater *maquiladoras*, but rather we are very conscious of the personal aspect of theater" (Ward, "Entrevista" 141–42).¹⁴ For Lagartijas, then, the personal is a way to resist the commodification of theater and art in general. National theaters in Latin America only broke from Spanish influence in the early

twentieth century, beginning to use local accents and dialects and portray issues of national import on the stage; Lagartijas shows the intensification of this impulse a century later. It rejects imported plays and translated texts to the extent of only staging plays it has devised itself. These plays may be highly intertextual, lifting passages from novels, essays, and poems, but they are given new meaning when remixed into the world of a Lagartijas play. Beyond the push for including local content onstage, here that content is localized down to the person, so that Lagartijas's plays resist any adaptation whatsoever.¹⁵

While Lagartijas is inspired by diverse artists from all over the world and tends to remix its heroes' work in its playtexts, the result is always original and personal. Its unwavering preoccupation with staging real life relies on its dedication to the crafts of writing, directing, and acting; its do-it-yourself aesthetic is supported by its attention to the technical details of the theater. The success of Lagartijas's trajectory is, in my view, a result of its making meaning of reality through theatricality.

My reading of these plays draws on performance studies's critical efforts to parse theater of the real and properly situate the text vis-à-vis performance. In their introduction to the concept of *theatricality* in performance theory, Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait trace society's mistrust of the theater, from ancient Greece to the present, citing condemnations of its "illusory, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected" (4) character. Marvin Carlson, meanwhile, notes how the field of performance studies itself has seen theatricality as suspect, associating the term "primarily with formal, traditional and formally structured operations, potentially or actually opposed to the unrestricted and more authentic impulses of life itself" ("Resistance" 242). This tension between authenticity and structure hearkens back to Elinor Fuchs's essay on the importance of the text within theatrical performances of the 1980s, "Presence and the Revenge of Writing." What she calls "a new kind of textuality" (165) challenges the theater's "enterprise of spontaneous speech with its logocentric claims to origination, authority, authenticity—in short, Presence" (172). Twenty-first-century discussions of theater of the real parallel the twentieth-century debate over the authenticity of spontaneous speech and the unreliability of edited writing. Liz Tomlin aptly points out that "there is a tension at the heart of twenty-first century verbatim practice and reception that is the result of seemingly irreconcilable conflict between, on the one hand, the drive for political change that necessitates both a relationship with the 'real' world and an ideological commitment to a particular political discourse, and, on the other, a philosophical skepticism of the 'real' world, and a consequent discrediting of truth claims or ethical imperatives that seek to distinguish any one narrative as authoritative" (120).

In a more recent contribution to the discussion, Carlson reminds us of the question of mimesis in theater: "What challenges to representation and to mimesis arise from the fact that the dramatic artist, unlike the painter, utilizes material

from the real world to create his art?" (*Shattering Hamlet's Mirror* 5). Because audiences know better than to trust even so-called reality, documentary plays become treatises on the nature of documentary theater. Indeed, the theater has recently focused on representing the real, even in the face of antitheatrical prejudice (although critics like Carlson argue that using real material "has been a defining characteristic of theatre from its very beginnings" [17]). The tension between reality and theatricality is like the tension between speech and writing that Fuchs examines. As reality itself is recognized as theatrical, the ritual presence that theater offers can be considered a more reliable source for facts than other discourses more traditionally associated with reality, as the next section elaborates.

The Real on Stage

The question of how to categorize Lagartijas's theater is one that comes up almost immediately on discussion of their work. Is it documentary theater? Much of its work relies on documentary evidence and includes re-creating histories that have long gone unreported. These stories may be personal, such as Rodríguez's reconstruction of a breakup in *Catalina*, or national, such as the aftermath of the massacre at Tlatelolco in *El rumor del incendio*.¹⁶ At the same time, though, its later work has stretched the documentary genre to its limits, by using falsified evidence or claiming that real evidence was falsified. Perhaps auto/biographical theater is a better term, then? The *unipersonal* movement in postdictatorial Argentina is an example of a parallel genre,¹⁷ and Lagartijas's works, especially those whose titles are proper names like *Catalina* and *Montserrat*, seem to fit within this framework. Its documentary projects, however, like *Asalto al agua transparente*, *El rumor del incendio*, and the *Democracia en México* series, escape the bounds of the auto/biographical through the company's ambitious attempts at documenting national history. Politics and social movements are always linked to the quotidian in the plays, because they are enacted by real people with real lives, but loom larger than they would in a traditional auto/biographical focus. The works, then, are both auto/biographical and documentary, but the sum is greater than the parts.

Carol Martin's theater of the real is an apt term for categorizing Lagartijas's work because it is broad enough to include the company's various approaches. With origins in the documentary theater of the 1960s, Martin has characterized the international, post-9/11 dramatic phenomenon, which insists on its own relationship to reality, as "theater of the real." Though some might argue that this definition is so broad that it loses usefulness, I find it to be a worthwhile category, particularly because the plays I examine here insist, in various ways, on the reality of the events they portray. Martin defines the genre as including those types of theater that "claim a relationship to reality" (*Theatre of the Real* 5). The broad reach of

Martin's terminology allows for encompassing the work of Lagartijas, which defies more specific definitions. It indeed lifts verbatim from legal texts, works of fiction, interviews, and diaries, and reenacts historical events, combining this content with its autobiographical experiences and the biographies of its family members to create truly innovative, moving works of theater.

Martin summarizes the questions that theater of the real poses: "What does it mean to be an instrument of memory and of history? In what ways is performance embodied kinesthetic historiography, and what end does this serve? What is the relationship between individual stories and the grand narrative of history? Is using the imagination an assault on historical accuracy?" (*Theatre of the Real* 11). Indeed, Lagartijas's productions grapple with these issues. The company's members explicitly ask about the responsibilities of a generation to uphold the revolutionary values of the ones that came before; they not only invoke but represent and embody their late parents onstage; they painstakingly force the viewer to see the workings of history played out, in and on the bodies of real individuals; and they use documentary evidence to spin lies in the service of greater truths.

Many spectators accustomed to the documentary mode not only expect a faithful representation of reality onstage but also know how to look for the cracks in the facade, those moments where the work reveals its own mechanisms and therefore inspires a questioning of the very possibility of rendering the real in the theater. Lagartijas plays directly into these expectations, regularly mixing fantasy and reality, complete with documentary evidence supporting the fiction. Audiences that have not been exposed, however, to this kind of work in the theater might expect a more direct relationship between what is staged and "what really happened." Indeed, many audience members and even festival promoters have sincerely taken Lagartijas's works at face value, never imagining that what is presented as documentary might be completely falsified, as is often the case. In a special online issue of the journal *Foundations of Science*, editors Frederik Le Roy and Robrecht Vanderbeeken ponder documentary aesthetics and touch on this very problem. They write, "Too many people still see the production of documentary as a self-evident aesthetic strategy, premised on the belief that, with the help of indexical media such as film or photography, a simple depiction of facts is all it takes to access the real world that surrounds us" (2). They attribute this state of affairs to the lack of a clear definition of documentary and argue that "the documentary opens up an intermediary space between fiction and reality" (2), likening the documentarian's craft to Hayden White's account of historians' creation of literary narratives. Documentary, then, is not the opposite of fiction. Rather, it is the aesthetic construction of a representation of reality. Jenn Stephenson provides a helpful explanation for what theater of the real is doing, if not representing reality: "Emphasis placed on the material real in this genre operates not to stake claims to the absolute authenticity of original experience, but

rather draw attention to these real-world foundations so as to interrogate the processes of ‘creating’ reality” (“Winning” 215). Undoing the opposition fiction/documentary is essential to approaching Lagartijas’s works, as well as that of many other of its contemporaries in Latin America. Determining which details are factual and which are fabricated might keep a person busy; it is in examining the reality that is constructed onstage, however, and analyzing how it creates meaning that the real contribution of contemporary Latin American artists will be illuminated.

Lagartijas’s earliest works flirt with the real, relying heavily on the devised theater or collaborative creation model and source texts that are more artistic than informative. As it moves into more autobiographical works like *Catalina* and *Noviembre* the collective nature is not lost, but its romance with the real is made official, a constant element of its theatrical production. With *Asalto al agua transparente* and *El rumor del incendio*, national history and historiography take center stage; *Montserrat* and *Derretiré con un cerillo la nieve de un volcán* question the possibility of ever representing the real, while proposing that theater can transmit realities that documents alone cannot reveal. Lagartijas is not alone among Mexican theater practitioners in its obsession with staging the specific and the real—indeed, Teatro Ojo, Teatro Línea de Sombra, Pendiente Teatro, Compañía Opcional, and Gabriel Yépez, among others, practice what Yépez calls the collective creation of relationships (81). These artists point out the strong relationships between reality and the theater, and question the expectations of spectators to create new relationships with what is presented onstage.

While the aforementioned companies will be fruitful sources for future investigations into Mexican theater of the real, this book focuses entirely on the works of Lagartijas *Tiradas al Sol* because of its particular relationships to the self, the family, and the national, as well as its strong connection to the traditional stage. Its shows are all scripted and rehearsed, and take place in more or less traditional theatrical spaces. Audiences are under no illusions about the fact that what they are seeing is drama. While it incorporates elements of improvisation, such as changing between characters and scenes fluidly without warning, and cinema, by playing film reels and providing soundtracks to its plays, it generally does not create site-specific plays or spontaneous performances. It is an excellent case study for interpreting the role of the theater, with its combination of text and body, repetition and simultaneity, in the construction of self, family, and nation in Latin America.

Family Documentary

The notion of staging the real, is of course, not a new one. Besides the obvious long tradition of history plays, the documentary genre is concerned with not only providing a theatrical version of real events but also documenting them with evidence

given onstage in the form of photographs, official or legal documents, and a link between the script and verbatim transcripts or interviews. Beginning in the 1960s, with Augusto Boal's *Teatro Jornal* (Newspaper theater) and Vicente Leñero's 1968 documentary play *Pueblo rechazado*, political reality entered the theater as the dramatic representation of real events in Latin America. In the latter half of the twentieth century, theater of the real made up an important contingent of Latin American drama, most notably in the form of documentary and testimonial theater.

In the twenty-first century, political reality combines with personal history in plays that explore the relationship between the individual and society, personal versus national trauma, and the (im)possibilities of artistically representing the real. The newest representations of this reality-based theater in Latin America are still tied to a text, as in documentary theater. I consider Lagartijas's plays, examined in this volume, as going beyond the text, however, and therefore beyond the term "documentary," because they offer up the body alongside the document as evidence. In fact, the plays' meaning-making possibilities rest upon the audience's understanding that what is presented is not fiction. Whether via photographic and documentary evidence displayed on the stage, references to historical events, or through paratextual means, such as newspaper reports and reviews, and information in the program, the plays insist on their realness. In particular, the autobiographical representation of all the performers I examine is a gesture against dramatic adaptation, the reproduction of a play script, and rather an insistence on the unique and wholly real nature of their lives. By playing themselves and their parents, contemporary actors reinforce and surpass the text as currency of the real. Jose Antonio Sánchez points out that recent interest in the real in scenic practice intends not to demonstrate the possibility of presenting the real, without any construction, but rather to show that incorporating formal composition or fiction does not necessarily obscure the real (Sánchez 16).

Several scholars have taken up the question of representing the real in Latin American cultural production, and I draw on their work to describe Lagartijas's plays. Performance studies scholar Ileana Diéguez cites the inclusion of research as a primary function of the artistic creation in contemporary performance practices, observing that the "artists become documentarians and witness-bearers to the pain of others" (*artistas devienen documentadores y testimoniantes del dolor de los demás*) ("La práctica artística" 77). Indeed, the works of Lagartijas bear witness to the pain of a generation, and its own pain, by documenting it and, I would add, re-creating it onstage. Meanwhile, in the collection *Corporalidades escénicas*, edited by Elka Fediuk and Antonio Prieto Stambaugh, several authors comment on the representation of violence on the contemporary Latin American stage. Óscar Armando García writes that the character's staged corporality is the source of solutions for how to represent violence theatrically. The violated body onstage results in the

complicity of the audience as well as the blurring of the lines between spectacle and spectator (García 175–76). Prieto Stambaugh himself describes how memory is embodied (*corporizada*) in testimonial and confessional theater and performance. Prieto Stambaugh notes that explicit embodiment is not a guarantee of being in the presence of “the truth.”¹⁸ He writes that what is actually demonstrated is that the body is traversed by discourses and ideologies, that the personal is always collective, that the reality of our bodies, of our personal histories, and of official history depend on interpretation, as well as on the re-presentation given to them (207). These ideas are essential to understanding Lagartijas’s proposal, as it plays with the truth, with memory, with embodiment and, of course, with various versions of history. In this book, I focus not only on the testimonial and auto/biographical quality of the representation of memory, but also on how, in Latin American theater and in Lagartijas’s work in particular, the idea of family, and the insertion of the self into a generational network, emerges as a way of understanding the nation.

In reference to this performance of archival research, Carol Martin states, “Adherence to an archive makes documentary theater appear closer to actuality than fiction. The archive is concrete, historically situated, and relatively permanent; it is material and lasting while theatrical representation is intangible and ephemeral” (“Bodies of Evidence” 19). While Martin refers principally to English-language plays, the works I study show less adherence to or reverence for the archive as signifier for reality. This trend might be rooted in the inherent distrust in the archive from a postcolonial standpoint; indeed, in Mexico and several other Latin American countries the archive is a technology inherited from the colonial period, its disciplinary uses reapplied by twentieth-century authoritarian governments. Lagartijas veers away from the documentary genre in this sense; rather than adhering to an archive, it performs it. In her seminal work *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor advocates for the reexamination of “expressive, embodied culture, . . . shifting the focus from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performatic” (16). She argues that the rift between practices of knowledge after the colonization of the Americas is “between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports ritual)” (19). In many of Lagartijas’s plays the archive is physically present, often in the form of stacks of paper, official certifications, or video footage, but the actors are clearly mediating its contents. On the stage the actors take control of the archive; while the documents they present may seem to be unchanging, the very nature of the theater as a representational art questions the archive’s permanence and, therefore, its authority. It is precisely the visible manipulation of the concrete archive in Lagartijas’s plays that gives weight to the ephemeral theatrical performance.

In this way, Lagartijas performs dramatic magic. By bringing the archive into

live theater, the company “decenters the historic role of writing introduced by the Conquest” as Taylor suggests that “performance, as an embodied praxis and episteme” (*Archive* 17), can do. Performance, in combination with the archive, is a way of knowing, a way of remembering. Lagartijas performs the words of the archive, reading aloud the documents that make up national, family, and personal history onstage. The actors perform genealogy, playing their parents or re-creating their lives; they play themselves explicitly as the children of real human beings. The lives of their parents are reconstructed through the manipulation of the archive. *El rumor del incendio*, for example, relies heavily on archival research and interviews, with the character at the center of the play being reconstructed as though she were an unknown historical figure and not, as she is in reality, the mother of the actor playing her. At the same time, through their copresence with the audience, the actors conjure up the dead, allowing their beloved family members and political enemies alike to inhabit their bodies for the moment of the play. In so doing, they transcend the truth of verifiable fact and can communicate and re-create a reality even deeper than the documentary. Through its special brand of family documentary, Lagartijas personalizes the national and collectivizes the individual.

Magic Acts

Lagartijas uses a series of techniques to transform the theater into a space of ritual in which it conjures up the spirits of ancestors and rewrites national history. Its use of documentary evidence, projection of audiovisual materials, and embodiment of real people onstage is like alchemy: these ordinary elements mix together to create a new element, much more valuable than the sum of its parts. The materials Lagartijas finds in the archives are the bureaucratic leftovers of officialdom such as arrest reports, laws, and interview transcripts. They are what one would expect when approaching history from the archival angle: so many stacks of paper. In the same way, the audiovisual footage it uses is sometimes original, archival footage; other times it is video it has contrived itself. Either way, without context, the footage is lifeless. The philosopher’s stone, in this case, that which brings the paper and film to life, is Presence. Taylor’s repertoire, which also “requires presence,”¹⁹ is a source of information; an embodied means for passing down knowledge and adding to it.

The auto/biographical nature of Lagartijas’s plays adds the capital P to presence—thus not only transmitting cultural memory, but claiming, by the very act of being *here*, to be the one who experienced the events portrayed. In the inaugural edition of the *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença* (Brazilian review of studies on presence), Gilberto Icle defines Studies on Presence as the self-referential study of performative practices, and moves on to the more difficult question of defin-

ing presence itself. Icle acknowledges that the term “presence” is often used in the theater to define a certain *je ne sais quoi* in reference to a quality of acting that escapes language (16). Finally, Icle arrives at a definition of Studies on Presence as “a specific form of analysis [that] attempts to emphasize the dimension of presentness, of tangibility and of *materiality* that such practices possess, insofar as they are corporeal practices par excellence. Therefore, Studies on Presence are articulated . . . around the objective of avoiding interpretation as the only and exclusive access to the truth and to knowledge”²⁰ (Icle 19). While I am analyzing the work of others, not my own performance work as Icle’s self-referentiality indicates, the principle of Presence as a way of knowing is significant for this study. In Lagartijas’s work, the actor’s body becomes an archive; the actor is simultaneously witness and protagonist. I capitalize the term Presence here to emphasize its almost sacred, magical power within Lagartijas’s particular brand of documentary theater. It is the co-Presence of spectator and actor that gives the documentary evidence—stacks of paper and projected footage—meaning.

This is not to say that Presence belongs exclusively to Lagartijas. On the contrary, documentary theater has long depended on the intimacy of the dramatic space and the interaction between the various participants to create meaning. In his theorization of the earliest examples of what we now call documentary theater (which he termed “epic”), Bertolt Brecht rails against what he calls the “old (magic) way” (188) of representation, where the audience goes into a trance and identifies completely with the simulation onstage. Rather, the actor “no longer has to persuade the audience that it is the author’s character and not himself that is standing on the stage, so also he need not pretend that the events taking place on the stage have never been rehearsed” (194). The interaction that Brecht proposes, and that Lagartijas exemplifies, is not the magic of the spell or the trance—it is the magic of communion. In epic theater, spectators are invited to partake of the real along with the actor. They are permitted behind the veils and curtains that separate the magic of the theater—the body—from the ordinary. And the magic is that the ordinary is what is special. Flesh, blood, bone, voice: it is humanity and shared time and space that make the theater capable of creating something out of nothing.

As Martin concludes in “Bodies of Evidence,” bodily presence transcends questions of reality and truth: “What is real and what is true are not necessarily the same. A text can be fictional yet true. A text can be nonfictional yet untrue. Documentary theater is an imperfect answer that needs our obsessive analytical attention especially since, in ways unlike any other form of theater, it claims to have bodies of evidence” (24). In Lagartijas’s works, the bodies onstage are often the ones that have lived through the events being portrayed, or have inherited the memories from their close relatives, embodied in the plays. The archive comes to life with the help of the philosopher’s stone: the body that lived through it.

The magicians also constantly assert their own power in their theatrical concoctions. They keep audiences on the edge of knowledge, unsure what is real and what is contrived. Jenn Stephenson, examining recent Canadian autobiographical drama, points out that “for audience members, who are phenomenological witnesses to the live performance, so much is given to apprehension, but an equal, if not greater amount is withheld. Every detail, multiplying to infinity, begs a veridical confirmation, which will always be beyond my reach. The striving audience of nonfiction is mired in doubt” (“Winning” 217). Indeed, this withholding of confirmation and resulting doubt is part of what brings the audience into interaction with the play and actors. By mixing the “real” archival materials with materials they have edited or created from scratch, Lagartijas asks spectators to participate actively in parsing what they are seeing. Brecht’s directive to shake audiences out of their trance so that they might judge and therefore change the injustices that have come to seem normal in society is present at the core of Lagartijas’s plays. By presenting evidence that could be created by the theater group alongside evidence that most Mexican spectators will recognize, like the national constitution or footage of famous presidential addresses, the troupe asks audiences to ponder what is real, what we mean when we deem something trustworthy, and how best to communicate that reality.

This magic matters because it represents a new possibility for engaging with reality in a world that can seem overwhelmingly predetermined. As sovereign power and disciplinary measures impose norms that are so ingrained as to seem inevitable, the theater opens up as a space for reclaiming lived experience as a reliable source of truth. When Lagartijas revives a long-dead family member as a character onstage to connect its own experiences with the past and its individual lives with national history, spectators must decide what to believe. They must look critically at the evidence presented onstage and decipher the supposed veracity of documents and evidence, recognizing all the while that these pieces all form part of a constructed play. As the documentary evidence, imposing in piles of papers and unassailable film reels and legalese, is shown to be, if not untrustworthy, then at least worthy of questioning, the alternative and complementary source of reality presented is that of lived experience, transmitted through the copresence of bodies in a single time and space.