## 1 Introduction

In the first scene of Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018), commissioned by the Almeida Theatre in London, a young woman communicates her exasperation with contemporary theatre's stale repertoires to a theatre director. 'With Trump in, with the monstrosities going down, the world is cracking open', and yet all one finds on stage are 'famous people doing boring things badly' and '[r]eal-life babies. Like that's the only pulse we can find' (Hickson, 2018: 14–15). Discussing her involvement in the adaptation of Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, produced in 2017 by Berlin's Schaubühne, the Manchester International Festival, Manchester's HOME, and Paris's Théâtre de la Ville, actor Nina Hoss explains the reasons behind her choice of a sociological memoir as dictated by similar considerations. Hoss recounts having turned down artistic director Thomas Ostermeier's initial proposal to adapt a monologue by Jean Cocteau: 'It interested me – I hadn't done a monologue – but after my experience in New York, and the aftermath of Trump's election, I thought, For now, I can't do this' (Zarin, 2018).

Both women use the then president of the United States Donald Trump as shorthand for the crises of our times, which are offered up, on and off stage, as proof of the insufficiency of made-up stories. And indeed, despite their high degree of fictionality, both plays are rooted explicitly in the real. Reaching beyond what writer Rachel Cusk has described as the 'fake and embarrassing' conventions of fiction – 'the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together' (Kellaway, 2014) – they engage in a search for forms that feel better suited to facing rather than evading reality today.

Neither production, however, is straightforwardly autobiographical. Rather, they tap into the autofictional: a mode that, despite being considered by many 'the hottest literary trend of the last decade' (Folarin, 2020), is yet to be systematically documented in the theatre. With its playful relationship to truth, its oscillatory movements between lived experience and fictionalisation, and its radically subjective stance, autofiction is – to speak with the fictional director in Hickson's play (21) – 'zeitgeisty' in more ways than one.

This Element explores the presence of the autofictional in contemporary theatre, offering a pragmatically oriented investigation of this mode and its political affordances on stage since the 2010s. In a 'post-truth' communication economy, in which the personal is relegated to echo chambers, mobilised in culture wars, or exploited – to quote Hickson's fictional director again – to 'get bums on seats' (21), frameworks that illuminate the aesthetics and politics of how lived experience is capitalised on, fictionalised, and performed in the public arena gain new and heightened resonance.

## 1.1 Autofiction from Page to Stage

From Karl-Ove Knausgaard to Annie Ernaux via Ben Lerner and Rachel Cusk, many of today's most successful writers have, to borrow a *Guardian* headline, 'stopped making things up' (Clark, 2018) – or rather, stopped making them up entirely. Revivifying the much-debated label first used by French writer Serge Doubrovsky on the back cover of his novel *Fils* (1977), they have instead been trading increasingly in 'fiction, of facts and events strictly real' (Doubrovsky, 2013: 1). Spurring this kind of experimentation is the intention to transcend the sedimented conventions of novel-writing, seen as inadequate to our times – residues of a dated, bourgeois, and/or androcentric worldview – and cease to dissimulate fiction's roots in the self and in the real.

Autofiction's origin story begins in France and, despite competition from Scandinavia and genealogical hunts for proto-autofiction throughout literary history (see Effe & Lawlor, 2022), the category has not entirely shed its French connotations, particularly in the Anglophone world. The term is often dismissed as 'more commonly used in French-language studies of autobiographical works' (Stephenson, 2013: 174) and, as Hywel Dix (2018: 7) bemoans, 'the number of Anglophone writers to have been explicitly identified as practitioners of the genre is comparably low'. While I am convinced these statements do not reflect the actual presence or popularity of autofictional work in Anglophone cultural markets, not least when looking beyond the printed page, they speak to a certain recalcitrance in acknowledging and thinking with the term beyond a small selection of novels.

There is little scholarship in general, and almost no Anglophone scholarship, on autofiction in the theatre,[1] aside from the occasional mention of the term or article defining a specific work or body of works as autofictional (e.g., Angel-Perez, 2013, 2016). In her study of Canadian drama, *Performing Autobiography*, Jennifer Stephenson (2013: 8) acknowledges that one of her case studies should be considered '"autofiction" rather than autobiography, recognizing the clearly fictional treatment of real-life situations and events in the playwright's life', then proceeds to dismiss the term's 'French' specificity. Deirdre Heddon does something similar in *Autobiography and Performance* (Heddon, 2008: 13), while also registering a broader tendency to mix fact and fiction in several of the works discussed (47, 50) or to foreground 'the gap between the self that is being narrated and the self that is performing' (46). In line with many autobiography scholars who dismiss the category of autofiction tout court, considering it inseparable from the autobiographical (e.g., Smith & Watson, 2001: 186), Heddon ultimately

[1] Transmedial autofiction scholarship tends to focus on film, self-portrait, photography, etc. (e.g., Dix, 2018; Wagner- Egelhaaf, 2019; Effe & Lawlor, 2022).

includes these possibilities within the latter's remit, and autofictional performance is given no specific attention. A French-language edited collection (Fix and Toudoire-Surlapierre, 2011) chooses to tackle the issue of autofictionality in contemporary theatre – among a range of other types of so-called 'autofiguration' – through a broad selection of case studies from Tadeusz Kantor to Sarah Kane, focusing on theoretical debates and textual analysis of what are identified as the mode's intrinsic properties. Finally, early steps towards initiating a conversation on theatre and autofiction in the Anglophone world are made in my own previous writing on the topic (Mark, 2023). This Element is written in the hope of further filling this lacuna.

Turning from scholarship to the theatre industry, the difference in the currency of the term 'autofiction' in the UK compared to continental Europe gains sharp relief. In Europe, it is deployed with increasing frequency in marketing and critical reception: without explanations, it is used and received as indicating the staged equivalent of literary autofiction. Berlin's Schaubühne and Maxim Gorki Theater, for instance, describe a range of productions as 'autofictional' on their websites: not only the adaptations of literary works of autofiction by Annie Ernaux and Édouard Louis, but also plays by Falk Richter and Angélica Liddell – the success of the former type facilitating the latter's proliferation. In the British theatre industry, on the other hand, the term is effectively absent. Perhaps signalling an incipient change, a notable exception is British playwright Alexander Zeldin's *The Confessions* (2023), based on his mother's life, which was, however, co-produced by eleven international institutions[2] and is touring Europe at the time of writing. In an interview for the *Guardian*, Zeldin describes the play as an attempt to 'do' autofictional theatre, inspired by Ernaux and Cusk: 'I wanted to try to write something that I didn't have a model for in theatre, but was there in their novels. [ . . . ] I feel the novel has found a way for the writing of that self that the theatre hasn't in the same way' (Crompton, 2023).

While autofiction on stage exists, then – even simply on account of the term's industry circulation, and of the incremental adaptations of literary works labelled as such – it defies straightforward definition, perhaps even more than on the page. Given the mode's hybrid conceptualisation (part autobiography, part fiction), and its context-dependent, interactive qualities that are only augmented in the theatre, micro-definitory efforts in the abstract have obvious limitations, as illustrated by the 'Autofiction' entry in Patrice Pavis's *Routledge Dictionary of Performance and Contemporary Theatre* (Pavis, 2016: 22–24). Pavis distinguishes between

[2] Wiener Festwochen, Comédie de Genève, Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe, Centro Cultural de Belém, Théâtre de Liège, Festival d'Avignon, Festival d'Automne à Paris, Athens Epidaurus Festival, Piccolo Teatro di Milano – Teatro d'Europa, Adelaide Festival, and Centre Dramatique National de Normandie-Rouen.

'theatrical autofiction' and 'autoperformance',[3] justifying the former's rareness with the unexplained requirements of 'dramatization, transposition and the reprise of autobiographical elements from the author's life, elements reconstituted in their unprocessed form into stage actions' (23). Without addressing the issue of how anything on stage might be 'unprocessed', the rationale behind the listed requirements, nor the 'huge demands on the time and patience of the audience' he claims they would make, Pavis concludes that 'every autoperformance is just an autofiction' (23), collapsing the previously staked distinctions and leaving little to work with for analytic purposes.

Adding to the challenge of defining autofiction is the mode's significant overlap with the autobiographical,[4] which is further heightened on stage. There are many reasons for this overlap. Most obviously, the illusion of 'objective telling' is even less attainable in the iterative, embodied medium of theatre, not least due to the presence of an actor/performer[5] pretending. Indeed, as every play involves some degree of fictionality, most instances of autobiographical performance fit within the framework of autofiction (see Leroux, 2004: 75). That said, while most autobiographical performances[6] could be considered (somewhat) autofictional, many plays that work autofictionally are – as we shall see – clearly not autobiographical. The two categories, then, overlap but do not correspond, with the autofictional comprising a set of practices that complicate and push back against the tendency to engage with the autobiographical in a 'treasure hunt for the "real"' (Clark, 2018).

Without the ambition of providing its own definition of autofictional theatre in absolute terms nor staking a claim to the mode's radical novelty, this Element attends to a recent, international upsurge in plays that work autofictionally. By this I mean dramatic works based on a script with (a) clearly identifiable author(s) – either written for the stage or adapted from literary works – that draw explicitly on the lived experience of the author(s) and, crucially, are marketed as (somewhat) authentic. Alongside real source material, they highlight their own fictionalisation,

[3] 'When what is said of the self is simultaneously embodied or shown by an actor (a performer), we call it 'self-performance' (*autoperformance*). In this case, actors can become performers. Performers claim that they are just being themselves, that they are not representing a character but speaking directly of their own lives: they have exchanged representation for the presentation of self' (Pavis, 2016: 21).

[4] Since Doubrovsky (2013: 3) qualified autofiction as a 'postmodern version of autobiography', much ink has been spilled on whether, how, and to what extent it differs from kindred modes or genres including autobiography, memoir, life writing, and autotheory.

[5] See footnote 3.

[6] And indeed, a great deal of performance art, in which many of the features I identify in the following chapters are well established (see, e.g., the work of Spalding Gray). This Element, however, explores these features from the vantage point of text-based theatre, establishing their currency in a different tradition to performance/body/live art and in association with the questions and struggles of transmedial autofiction.

often by including the narration or enactment of experiences that cannot be or do not come across as real. In line with literary autofiction, they also feature moments of meta-narrative and/or metatheatrical reflection, foregrounding 'the process of invention in self-narration, or the discursive construction of the self' (Srikanth, 2019: 348; see also Weigel, 2011: 26). Finally, their displayed interest in the role of narrative in constructing individual and social identities tends to be harnessed to social justice struggles, making manifest some form of political engagement.

While acknowledging significant overlaps with autobiographical performance, then, it is my belief that the currency of the autofictional in the cultural marketplace, the runaway popularity of stage adaptations of literary autofiction, and the frequency of the characteristics listed in the previous paragraph featuring together in theatre productions since the mid-2010s warrant a discussion of how theatre might function autofictionally; what it can contribute to the conversation on autofiction; and what the lens of autofictionality on stage might make visible within the realm of autobiographical performance and of self-storytelling practices at large. This approach circumvents the problem, outlined by Heddon (2008: 9–10), of establishing whether a production that draws on (what appears to be) autobiographical material, but does not declare itself as such, is effectively autobiographical. Indeed, regardless of what the play or performance *is*, it can be seen, given certain conditions, to *function* autofictionally.[7] Vice versa, the autofictional can be understood as 'an intrinsic mode within the autobiographical that can be performed in various ways and with changing intensity' (Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2022: 24). By considering these ways and intensities, this Element aims in no way to write against autobiography scholarship. Rather, to borrow Heddon's phrase, it hopes to stage another possible 'encounter with a broader practice' (Heddon, 2008: 12), from a different perspective and embedded in different contexts.

In demarcating this Element's object of study, I extend a pragmatic understanding of the term 'autofiction' across media, in the hope that the insights gained will not only justify but also feed back into the porous identification criteria provided. Crucially, I hope to encourage the acknowledgement of a broader and more diverse range of theatrical works *as* autofictional or as *working* autofictionally, attending to what they share across cultural contexts and to the political affordances of the mode's deployment on stage. As Arianne Zwartjes (2019) points out, gathering works under a label – without losing sight of the fluid and somewhat arbitrary nature thereof – 'allows us to think about and probe the edges of that category, its functions and its politics, what new things it might offer us', as well as 'to *find*' a work in the first place, 'and to examine it alongside other conceptually-similar work' (emphasis original).

[7] See footnote 32.

The act itself of 'finding' a work of autofiction has particularly high stakes when it comes to cultural politics as it substantially alters the value systems into which a work is received. As writer Tope Folarin puts it, '[a]utofiction is at the cutting edge of literary innovation; autobiographical fiction is as old as time. When a critic invokes the phrase "autofiction" they are essentially arguing that a writer is helping to create a new kind of literature. The phrase "autobiographical fiction," on the other hand, denotes a book that could very well be artful but is drawing on a tradition that isn't new at all'. This maps onto the homogeneity of the autofictional canon, populated largely by the work of white, bourgeois writers from the Global North credited with refracting universal aspects of contemporary subjectivity through experimental manipulation of narrative form. Conversely, marginalised writers fictionalising aspects of their own experience are often relegated to the sphere of autobiographical fiction, their lives seen not merely as informing but as taking precedence over their art (see Folarin, 2020). Their art is thus often reduced, in reception, to a documentation of lived experiences of marginalisation, with the purpose of conveying – as novelist Brandon Taylor (2021) ironically documents, in the context of 'black art' – 'what it means to contend *blackly* with the *black* imponderables and the unruly *black* quandaries of *black* life' (emphasis original), where 'black' can be replaced by whichever form of marginalisation applies.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that among the plays in the corpus only those by white playwrights (e.g., *The Confessions*, *The Silence*) are explicitly referred to as autofictional. Undergirding this is a broader industry dynamic whereby marginalised artists are often 'given voice' – as the awkward expression has it – on condition that they speak from within and about their experiences of marginalisation, to the point that 'authenticity' and 'diversity' have become de facto synonyms in the industry (see Goodling & Mark, 2022).

In this context, importing the framework of autofictionality from literary studies can elicit a recognition of authorial agency and critical potential – whether delivered upon or not – within and beyond the fetishisation of the author/performer's 'authentic voice' (Beswick, 2014). It can foreground the aesthetic and meta-narrative qualities of the work, which, though far from a prerogative of autofiction, can easily be dethroned in criticism and reception of material received as authentic in favour of 'a prurient, limiting conflation' of the story told with the writer's life (Satin & Jerome, 1999: 12). In short, it can encourage the spectator/reader to look beyond 'the inevitable prevalence of the self' and focus, instead, 'on the particularities of self-construction' in the narration of lived experience (Gibbons, 2017: 117).

This Element's approach is shaped by these considerations, understanding the autofictional not as an intrinsic property of a work but as a mode of reading or receiving (aspects of) it.[8] Stories can thus gain or shed autofictionality as they travel across media and locales, depending on the ever-changing relationship between the text (in the broadest sense), its (marketing and editorial) paratexts,[9] and its (material and discursive) contexts, just as a book's genre today depends on editorial metadata, on what is written on the cover, on which display table it is placed on in a bookstore, and on what is made public about the author and how. In doing so, I follow a recent scholarly move away from autofiction as a genre towards 'the autofictional' as a 'mode, moment, and strategy that can appear in a variety of texts across time' (Effe & Lawlor, 2022: 4): 'an inherent dimension of autobiographical writing'; 'a latent force that can be activated in different ways and to different degrees'; and – crucially for theatre – a 'conceptual matrix with scalable and interactive dimensions' (Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2022: 23–26). It is an understanding of the autofictional as local, relational, and context-dependent that this Element's title aims to emphasise, in highlighting not autofictional plays as a dramatic genre but specific, time-limited, localisable *theatres of autofiction*.

While the following sections will delve into the institutional and cultural contexts of individual productions, significant shifts in mediatised communication and cultural market dynamics undergird this Element's corpus as a whole, shaped in turn by a range of structural changes to our economic system. Indeed, as our systems of production and distribution strive to 'cut out the middleman', making all interactions and transactions as unmediated and continuous as possible, they have engendered a culture style based on immediacy, transparency, and authenticity (see Kornbluh, 2023), but also – I would add – in its more critical manifestations, increasingly preoccupied with the questioning of these ubiquitous qualities. Far from constituting a sealed-off arena of social critique, the aesthetics, narrative structures, and dramaturgies of the autofictional are thus part and parcel of a broader turn to apparently intimate self-storytelling that blends authentic lived experience with standardised scripts; draws attention to the person behind the product; and participates in a post-truth enchantment with the affective power of fictionalisation, as the next section explores.

[8] See Effe & Lawlor, 2022: 4; Ferreira-Meyers, 2018: 41.

[9] By 'paratext' I mean the content designed to present and comment on the play (including interviews, promotional materials, etc.), whereas 'contexts' include any material conditions and discursive formations that inform or interact with but are not designed for the play. For Gérard Genette (1997: 1–2), a paratext is a 'threshold' or, 'as Philippe Lejeune put it, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text." Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public'. In today's cultural marketplace, paratextual commentary is rarely 'authorial' and more often curated by others.

## 1.2 Everybody Has a Story

Recent years have seen spectacular successes for self-narration under various guises. First Annie Ernaux, widely known as the 'grande dame of autofiction', was awarded the 2022 Nobel Prize, followed by Norwegian autofiction writer Jon Fosse in 2023; then *Spare* (2023) – Prince Harry's ostensible attempt to 'own [his] story' (Lawless, 2023) – broke first-day sale records as the most successful nonfiction book ever published by the world's largest publisher Penguin Random House (see Alter & Harris, 2023). Ernaux and Prince Harry are not the kind of writers whose work tends to lie side by side on a bookstore display table. Yet their twinned successes have something to say about the broader context in which autofictional works are received and consumed, at a time when, as Heddon (2008: 7) argues, the personal is increasingly valued as 'a popular and cheaply manufactured commodity'.

The 'cheap manufacturing' of the personal identified by Heddon plays a role in several interconnected spheres; I will touch briefly on the four most relevant to autofiction. First, the advent of the internet with its social-mediatised[10] discourse has created an unprecedented range of platforms for direct and apparently intimate self-storytelling, in which truth becomes a radically subjective matter, to be vouched for through media-specific, authenticity-simulating conventions (see Georgakopoulou, 2022). This rebranding of truth as 'personal' has percolated into political debate, increasingly relegated to the sphere of symbolic posturing, and capitalised on by online platforms as an aggression-fuelled, addictive hook serving to maximise user engagement. Incidentally, the extent and effect of these changes are encapsulated in two semantic drifts: 'engagement' today evokes not Sartrian political commitment but a measure of audience interaction with content; while a 'call to action' (CTA) is not principally an incitement to activist politics but a way of interactively fostering user engagement online (see Georgakopoulou, 2022). A mode harnessing lived experience to political struggles by performing authenticity and playing with forms of truth beyond the merely factual thus has evident timeliness, but also risks reproducing the empty gestures of online positioning. Fittingly, many scholars and cultural critics see autofiction as one of the 'dominant narrative forms of the selfie-generation' (Iversen, 2020: 560; see also Worthen, 2021). In Stefan Iversen's words, the mode's 'radical individualisation, its focus on affects, the actualization of trans- and intermedial storytelling practices, the revelatory nature of extreme confessions – all these factors render autofiction ideally suited for a post-social media landscape' (Iversen, 2020: 560).

[10] Unlike 'mediation', the term 'mediatisation' indicates processes that reflexively link communication to commoditization (see Jaffe, 2011).