

# **The multiple lenses of the documentarian on stage**

***Uncovering principles of Arkadi Zaidés' documentary choreography***

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## CONTENTS

|                                                            |   |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Introduction.....                                          | 1 |
| 1. An embodied, biographical relation to the subjects..... | 2 |
| 2. Exposing the process and construction of the work.....  | 4 |
| 3. Appearance as a political act.....                      | 6 |
| Conclusion.....                                            | 7 |
| References.....                                            | 8 |

## Introduction

The choreographer Arkadi Zaidés has introduced the term "documentary choreography" explicitly into his practice. Through this concept, Zaidés proposes choreography as a tool of investigation to examine and confront socio-political realities by working with factual documents and merging them with embodied practices in his performances (Zaidés 2024a, 2).<sup>1</sup>

Documentary theatre, as it is understood today, originated in the 1960s (Schulze 2017, 190). Daniel Schulze identifies a growth in recent decades in the number of theatre and performance works that deal with reality, as expression of an interest or demand for authenticity (Schulze 2017, 189-190). Frédéric Pouillade also identifies a documentary trend in contemporary dance as a new and recent development which shifts from "self-reflexive work" (where the subject documented remains within the dance field) and towards the investigation of "extra-choreographic realities" (Pouillade 2016, 80-81).

Documentary theory has addressed the issues of representation of reality and authenticity, as well as its ethics and ideology. Stella Bruzzi describes, looking backwards at documentary theory in film, how two notions have simultaneously recurred: "the idealised notion (...) of the pure documentary", which aspires to a direct and objective representation, and the "impossibility of this aspiration" (Bruzzi 2000, 3). In contrast, Bruzzi sees a documentary as "(...) a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation, and bias on the other", and she states that a documentary "will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational"(4). Schulze also acknowledges how, nowadays, both academics and theatre makers have become "suspicious of the pure value of documents as unadulterated facts". (Schulze 2017, 191). Considering these remarks from the field of documentary theory, it seems relevant to explore how Zaidés' approach to documentary practice relates to these concerns around the representation of realities, and the ethics and politicality present in his work.

There is an interweaving fact across Zaidés' documentary choreography work, which is that he is performing in all of them. Many contemporary choreographers perform in their own work; however, considering that Zaidés is present also in his role as researcher-documentarian, and not only as performer-choreographer, the question "why is Arkadi Zaidés on stage?" carries a different weight. What principles of his approach to documentary practice does Zaidés' presence on stage reveal? In this article, by examining what Zaidés' participation as a performer *does* to the work and our perception of it, I will

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<sup>1</sup> Arkadi Zaidés is carrying out a PhD research project titled "Towards Documentary Choreography - Intermedial Approaches when Working with Extra-Aesthetic Materials", which runs from 2021 to 2025 (Arkadi Zaidés n.d.c).

identify three overarching principles: first, a connection between the subjects of investigation and the author's personal biography; second, a transparency in exposing the elements of process and construction; and lastly, the political implication of physical presence, which turns the performances into a form of activism.

My research will draw evidence from two of Zaides' works: *Archive* (2014) and *The Cloud* (2024).<sup>2</sup> I will base my analysis on my viewing of the performances, and support it through comments from other authors and Zaides himself.

## **1. An embodied, biographical relation to the subjects**

Zaides has created four stage works within the conceptual frame of documentary choreography. In all four, a connection between the choreographer's personal biography and the subjects investigated is present:

Zaides was born in 1979 in Belarus, the former USSR, 140km from the nuclear station of Chernobyl (Arkadi Zaides, n.d.a). The performance *The Cloud* (2024) connects the Chernobyl nuclear disaster with the recent developments in artificial intelligence. In this work, personal and historical facts are narrated and captured through an AI system, which in turn generates a blurred interpretation of that input. A few years after the disaster, in 1990, Zaides migrated to Israel (Zaides, 2024). In *Archive* (2014), he deals with the violence and the human rights violations taking place in the West Bank, by working with video material recorded by Palestinians through the NGO B'Tselem's "Camera Project". *Talos* (2017) and *Necropolis* (2021) were both created after Zaides' own migration to Europe in 2015, and they deal, respectively, with an EU-funded border control research project and with refugee deaths in Europe. (Arkadi Zaides, n.d.b)

Zaides seeks to investigate different types of factual documents through embodied practices, and these attempts manifest through various strategies across the works. In the case of *Archive*, he learns and mirrors the gestures of the videos on stage, in what Pouillade calls a "*gestuatim*", a "transposition" of the documentary theatre tradition of *verbatim* "to the sphere of movement and choreography" (Pouillade 2016, 89). As Abeliovich remarks, this physical reproduction "animates" the document of the screen and brings it into the "realm of bodily knowledge" (Abeliovich 2016, 167). Arkadi's embodiment of the gestures allows the audience to see them closer, alive, and potentially more real. The physical presence fosters a stronger connection of empathy and relation to

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<sup>2</sup> While Zaides began to think through the notion of documentary choreography in 2019, he considers *Archive* (2014) to be the first work to enter this umbrella. (Arkadi Zaides, email to author, August 19, 2025).

what is revealed, making it both more real and human. The reality and humanity of the subject gain more weight because Zaides transparently exposes his identity and biographical connection to the issue.

*Archive* starts with Arkadi frontally and austere stating: “My name is Arkadi Zaides. I am a choreographer. I am Israeli. (...) All the people you will see in these clips are Israeli, like me. (...)” (Zaides, 2015). *The Cloud* begins similarly: “(...) My name is Arkadi. (...) [this work] attempts to follow a radioactive cloud to which I am attached through my personal history” (Zaides, 2024).

Zaides is not present on stage as a replaceable performer; he is present as a human who has a personal connection to the stories. As Pouillade notes, the presentation informs the audience that Zaides will not embody a character or symbolic “part” and prevents any “theatrical make-believe” (Pouillade 2016, 83). The upfront declarations of identity and role also set a transparent communication with the audience, and the idea that whatever will be communicated next will also be within the realm of reality.<sup>3</sup> In varying proximities, Zaides brings up a real, personal connection to the subjects in his works, which grants him the quality of a *witness* on stage: he is aware of the facts and issues because he has, in one way or another, lived them. Schulze writes that “[t]he persona of the witness is endowed with the unique ability of producing effects of authenticity. The witness has a special claim to having been there and to having first-hand experience, which can be shared with the spectators” (Schulze 2017, 196). The fact that Zaides is personally implicated in his subjects through his biography allows the audience to perceive the issues as more real. By having him physically close, we are closer to the subjects he aims to tackle.

There is an ethical dimension to Zaides' bringing his personal and social identity into the documentary practice. Speaking about his work, Zaides acknowledges: “Through these projects, I also examine my own privilege. (...) I see myself implicated in these structures, just as I want to challenge the audience's role as onlookers to these realities.” (Zaides, quoted after Le Roy 2025, 10). On the one hand, this personal connection gives him legitimacy to tackle the subjects, as he is not an outsider, he is implicated in them. In *Archive*, as seen above, Zaides clearly states how he will show the images of the group he shares national identity with: “All the people you will see in these clips are Israeli, like me”

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Cloud*, it is relevant to mention the presence of a second performer, Misha Demoustier, whose involvement, by focusing on Zaides' role, I have not included in my analysis. In contrast to Zaides' frontal introduction, Demoustier appears midway through the work without prior verbal presentation. This fact gives a quality of mystery to his identity; what or who he embodies on stage remains more open to interpretation: it might be the voice of the AI, the liquidators of Chernobyl, Zaides' figure, the effects of radiation... Demoustier seems to move in a realm other than that of factual reality, and therefore fulfills a role and function different from Zaides'.

(Zaides 2014). The videos depict Israeli settlers and Israeli army members. Although Zaides is neither of those, he stresses that he is focusing on the violence of a group with whom he shares a common identity. On the other hand, Zaides also assumes the role of the outsider, the researcher, the observer. It is interesting to observe how this positioning is physically performed on stage: in *Archive*, he stands back to the audience and simply observes the videos at first. In *The Cloud* too, after reading, facing the audience for a while, Zaides turns to the screens, back to the audience, and observes how the AI transcribes and interprets his words into images. In these examples, Zaides takes the same directional positioning as the audience facing the screens to examine the material, and his involvement implicates and encourages the audience as “onlookers” to carry out a parallel examination.

Zaides brings the multiple positions present in his identity into his performances, which could be considered an example of working and researching through what Dwyer and Buckle describe as the “space between”, a blurring of the dichotomy outsider-insider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Zaides is aware and navigates through both positions and their in-betweens. By exposing his social identity and observational angle, he shows that there is no aspiration to pure neutrality; rather, he offers the materials to activate the audience’s own criticality.

## **2. Exposing the process and construction of the work**

As it has become apparent above, multiple identities of Zaides become visible through his presence on stage. In this second section, I will focus on his identity as observer and creator: Zaides as researcher and choreographer. I will argue that, by being present on stage, Zaides makes the authorship of the work more visible, and by extension, the process and construction of the performance more apparent. This methodology is reminiscent of that analysed by Gerald Siegmund in works by Pina Bausch and Jérôme Bel, where the mechanisms of the rehearsal are reproduced on stage (Siegmund 2017). If in those cases this generates, amongst other implications, a questioning of the identity of the performance and established dance practices (195), we will see how, in the case of Zaides, it can be read as an offering of his own processes of documentary practice to be questioned. Steven Bottoms has been critical of the reintroduction of an author with godlike qualities in some documentary theatre plays, and points out how theatre cannot provide an “unmediated access to ‘the real’” (Bottoms 2006, 57). Zaides appears to be very aware of this complexity, and ensures that his identity as the creator of the work is exposed and thus his mediation.

In *The Cloud*, Zaides verbally exposes details of the process of research and creation of the work. These details are intertwined with factual information around the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl and his personal biography. For instance, he speaks of the trials to get back in contact with his childhood friend Genadi; the initial idea of making a film and the later change of plans; the purchasing of an original USSR Chernobyl liquidator chemical protection suit through eBay, and his worries and trials searching for a laboratory to check its radiation level; the addition of a gas mask originating from Israel “to complement the liquidator’s suit”; or the test-filming with the suit in a forest (Zaides, 2024). His testimony exposes different aspects of the construction of the work: the personal bias and motivation to begin the process, initially from a desire to reconnect; it reveals sources, like the “original liquidator suit” acquired on eBay, which might put its trustworthiness into question; and it also discloses decisions taken from the point of view of aesthetics, like in the case of the addition of the gas mask. The comments only disclose a few details of the creation of the work, but they do reveal some of the decision-making criteria and, more importantly, they make the construction of the whole more apparent.

The process of construction in *The Cloud* is also made visible through choices in staging. Two technicians are sitting on stage behind tables with computers and a technical setup. Zaides is linked to them through the cable of his microphone. The audience, without knowing the exact role of the technicians, sees how they manipulate the screen and add images, while the AI transcribes Zaides’ speech and gradually transfigures the input given. The action of manipulation makes it clear that the document we are seeing projected on the screens is being *made live*; we are witnessing its *creation*.

In the case of *Archive*, it is worth noting how this mediation is performed physically before us by Zaides himself. The choreographer learns and reproduces the gestures in the videos; he *processes* the document through his own body. As the audience, we witness his translation or transcription of the movements; Zaides moves literally between us and the document. Pouillade applies André Lepecki’s concept of choreography as an apparatus of capture with oppressive powers (Lepecki 2007), and describes how in *Archive* this operation is made visible on the meta level: “(...) *Archive* is in itself the staging of an apparatus of capture, allowing us to see the double movement of capturing the real and being captured by it” (Pouillade 2016, 93). The staging of the work as a process of capture becomes critical in becoming aware of the lens: the lens from which the source documents were captured, the lens of Zaides as performer-creator, and lastly, our lens as audience, capturing or being captured.

As we can see, both *Archive* and *The Cloud* carry procedural qualities in their dramaturgical construction. This extends the aspect of research present in Zaides’ practice

onto the stage. In *Archive* Zaides stages a *process* of learning and reproducing. In *The Cloud*, Zaides' introductory presentation explains that we will witness the "unfolding" of an "experiment" and states: "(...) you are now part of [this experiment]" (Zaides 2024). Irit Rogoff describes Zaides' approach through her notion of "thrumming", a "being with knowledge". She believes in the need to challenge traditional notions of research and knowledge production, because of their "frontality" and "self-assurance", and she advocates for a conception of research that "denotes struggle, not opinions and manifestos", a form of knowledge that employs "doubt and uncertainty", considering Zaides' work as exemplary of this approach (Rogoff 2024, 2-3). Zaides' "being with knowledge", I would like to add, takes place not only on a conceptual level, but is underlined through his physical presence, literally *being with* the documentary materials in front of us. The choreographer's presence and visibility in being with the documents ensure that we notice the tensions and nuances present in the reading and capturing of reality. Together with a dramaturgy that extends the procedural onto the performance, this challenges the finality and conclusiveness of the work.

### **3. Appearance on stage as a political act**

That Zaides' works are political might seem redundant to state, considering the choice of his subjects. But it is important to highlight that through Zaides' presence, the performances not only deal with political subjects but also become acts of political activism.

Zaides is not creating the work and staying out, he is *showing up* for the cause, he brings his body into the space. Judith Butler draws on Hannah Arendt's idea of a political "space of appearance" to underline the necessity of the body to appear for this political space to arise (Butler 2015, 73). Butler notes how in the event of public demonstrations, the distinction between public and private is contested, and describes how the environment is "reconfigured and refunctioned" through the bodily action of its participants (71-72). Through Zaides' and the audience's appearance, a political space of enquiry and investigation is opened. By being present, Zaides also physically exposes himself to potential conflicts, as indeed happened with some violent demonstrations in the case of *Archive* (Pouillade 2016, 82). The space of the theatre is reconfigured, in the sense that by shifting the attention to extra-choreographical issues, the space too becomes, to a certain extent, extra-theatrical. The theatre's function is closer to that of a public forum or space for debate, as Schulze identifies in documentary theatre through Habermas (Schulze 2017, 225). This comes through as well in the importance and commitment that Zaides

expresses in organising audience discussions “(...)to keep the conversation going”, because “[w]hen it doesn’t happen, something feels incomplete (...)” (Zaides after Le Roy 2024, 10).

Zaides’ appearance with his identity and values is synonymous with engagement and commitment. Arguably, this restricts the work from becoming an easily reproducible product where the performer’s part is replaceable by any other, no matter their identity. The personal is non-exchangeable and it is political.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to underline the significance of the live aspect in Zaides’ work, a key element in the three principles I have discussed. Schulze sheds light on the particularities of choosing the medium of performance to carry out documentary work through the terms “immediacy” and “liveness”. Arguing that there is an ontological difference between the live and the recorded, namely the potential of failure, Schulze reminds us of the auratic effect inherent to live action (Schulze 2017, 230-33). Zaides’ live presence carries that effect, and this plays a crucial part in transmitting the multipositionality of his engagement with the factual materials. First, as a person with a biographical connection, Zaides emphasises the reality, humanity, and urgency of the issues through the embodied presence of an implicated witness. Second, his presence on stage as a researcher and choreographer makes the choices of representation and construction more visible by proposing documentary choreography as an artistic investigative process rather than as a closed or conclusive outcome. And lastly, while leaving space for the reading and criticality of the audience, his *appearance* is that of a political activist who is engaged in real-life issues and is on stage for a purpose. As we have seen through the examples of *Archive* and *The Cloud*, the three aspects can be considered characteristic principles of Zaides’ methodology in his practice of documentary choreography; his presence on stage makes those principles visible and carries an ethical dimension by putting emphasis on the personal as political.

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