

# Theatre in the Age of Uncertainty: Memory, Technology, and Risk in Simon McBurney's *The Encounter* and Robert Lepage's *887*

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## THE BEGINNING

At the 2015 Edinburgh International Festival, Simon McBurney's last piece, *The Encounter*, and Robert Lepage's European premiere of his last production, *887*, could be seen side by side and during the same week in the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC). The EICC is a government-owned building in central Edinburgh welcoming the visitor with a corporate-style glass façade and into an open plan lobby in which a café, an information desk, and the temporary box office are located. This could be a hotel, an airport, a bank, a “non-place” which, in the words of Marc Augé, inspires a sense of belonging, one of those locations where contemporary life so often takes place (Augé 1995, xii). These are places designed to produce an experience of safety and comfort, recognisable spaces across the globe, which generate similar ways of

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being and make easier the risky activity of decision making that characterises everyday life.

The EICC's steep escalator takes the visitor to the lower floor where two different conference auditoria are being used as theatres for this edition of the festival. In these venues, audiences can see Simon McBurney's *The Encounter* and Robert Lepage's 887 back to back on the same day. The programming is perhaps coincidental and certainly not based on the shared ideologies that the productions display and that this chapter will outline. However, it is not surprising that these two well-established theatre practitioners, who were born in the same year (1957) and are at similar stages in their careers, have produced two solo shows that can be read as a response to the impact that technological progress has had and continues to have on contemporary life, especially in relation to time (past, present, and future). It is not surprising either that, while the theatrical vocabularies are noticeably different, the ideologies behind the pieces are not, both marked by a certain bitter nostalgia for a time that, if not better, at least took longer to pass, for a time that moved at a speed more akin to human pace. The two pieces not only share some formal aspects (they are both solo shows which use direct address to the audience) but they also present a common ideological starting point: a signalling towards memory, remembering, and documenting as a response to the contemporary obsession with the future enabled by the prominent presence of technology.

Simon McBurney's *The Encounter* is a solo piece inspired by Petru Popescu's novel *Amazon Beaming* (1992) and is delivered in its entirety through headphones. While the title of the piece signals a single meeting, the one narrated in Popescu's novel between photographer Loren McIntyre and the Amazonian Mayoruna tribe, McBurney's piece stages a variety of encounters, the most interesting being the intimate one that the performer has with his audience. This encounter is mediated by binaural technology—the recording and distributing of sound three-dimensionally—as McBurney delivers his narrative through a dummy head microphone. The microphone, which is located centre stage for the entirety of the piece, produces a “binaural stereo experience [that] moves the listener into the scene of the original performance, in contrast to other space-related recording techniques, where the acoustic event is moved to the listener”.<sup>1</sup> There is a strange moment in the piece when the performer blows softly into the right ear of the binaural head microphone, and suddenly a rush of warmth can be felt through the

headphones and into the ear of each audience member. The warm feeling seems real even though there is no actual contact between McBurney and the audience. Somehow, the feeling of warmth is actually produced by the body's knowledge of the possibility of it happening. Proximity and embodiment are key to the production. Its intention is to enter the audience's consciousness through the headphones, producing the illusion for audience members that McBurney is talking directly, and exclusively, to them.

On the stage next door, director and performer Robert Lepage also proposes a close encounter with his audience, talking directly to them in a confessional manner about his childhood in Québec alongside the sociopolitical histories of the city. In *887*, he is also interested in producing an immersive experience, which encourages the audience to emotionally engage with the personal and national histories that Lepage unearths for them, and to travel with him to locations that signify critical moments in the development of his identity and that of his city and his country. He does this by talking openly about both his childhood and his current feelings about that period of his life. He talks about where he lived, his relationship with his father, his memories of his neighbours and friends. However, the production is not only preoccupied with the past; it is intermittently haunted by the future as Lepage's character expresses anxiety about his obituary, which will be published in the national press, and his fears about how he will be remembered after his death.

Both shows set out to produce a close encounter with their audiences, marked by an emotional and sensual proximity. This fits in well with recent trends in theatre and performance practice proven by the rise of shows and companies interested in work that has been defined as immersive and participatory. Correspondingly, the question of risk within the research field of theatre and performance studies has primarily concerned itself with practices that rely on the actual participation of the audience to achieve their artistic intervention. However, this chapter proposes a different engagement with the question of risk in performance. *The Encounter* and *887* cannot be considered immersive and participatory in the ways that are described above as they are not interested in producing an actual risk-taking theatrical experience in which spectators are in physical or psychological danger.

Risk understood as danger is at the core of theatre practice. It is visible in the creative and personal risks taken by practitioners, programmers, and audience members every time they engage in theatrical

activity. It is also key to theatre as an art form. Risk and uncertainty are intrinsic to the liveness that makes theatre unique, and it is this uniqueness that Lyn Gardner (2015) sees as theatre's chance to be saved from extinction. Gardner suggests that if theatre wants to ensure its chances of survival it should embrace risk taking in programming but also in all aspects of this artistic practice.

Lepage's and McBurney's productions exemplify some of this tangible risk taking. Theirs are solo shows that place enormous pressure on the performer alone on stage for two hours to deliver the performance well, to remember lines and operate the complex technology that both productions utilise. They have been generated through a creative process that engages innately in risk taking, dominated by uncertainty and difficult decision making. Both practitioners hold a particular status within contemporary theatre practice, seen as heralds of experimental theatre making, their reputations are on the line each time a new creation is unveiled. The context in which both productions were presented, the 2015 Edinburgh International Festival, is one in which risk taking is expected and also closely scrutinised as theatre programmers' decisions across the country and internationally are informed by the festival's programming choices. These are all known risks that are inherently associated with theatre practice and that scholars within theatre and performance studies have already identified in previous works on these questions.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, however, I argue that *The Encounter* and *887* engage with risk in a different way. I believe that their investigation and theatrical articulation of risk happens primarily through their consideration of time and technology, which are key aspects of risk theory in the social sciences. This is perhaps a less obvious, but no less powerful, contribution to the current debates on risk originated in the social sciences in the 1990s that continue to resonate today and also one that enlarges the engagement of theatre and performance studies with these enquiries.

I believe that the two productions can be seen as examples of performance that demonstrate the ongoing preoccupations with the basic concepts of what Beck and Giddens, at the beginning of the 1990s, termed the risk society: technological dependence, an obsession with the future, and a focus on the individual. What I propose here is that both productions are able to simultaneously highlight the continuing problematics related to those questions and, through their intense blurring of the actual and the fictional, serve as a platform to destabilise the simplistic

dichotomies (past/future; technological/pre-technological; individual/community) that have underscored debates around risk.

I believe that both *The Encounter* and 887 demonstrate how performance can critically participate in the debates around the risks and effects of technology. Their narratives of loss and memory are, I argue, poignant examples of the impact that technology has on the contemporary subject. As Spitzer suggests, “wherever there are effects, there are risks and side effects. This truism does not just apply to medicine but to any field of human activity. The automobile was a great invention for mobility, but causes obesity by inactivity, injury and death, as well as environmental hazards” (2014, 81). McBurney’s and Lepage’s productions dig deep into these effects and the great transformations that they have produced on societies, communities, and individuals while, simultaneously, their performances represent the great technological achievements of the twenty-first century, without which the shows would not exist.

Working within the social sciences, Beck and Giddens argue that contemporary societies (especially in the West) are chiefly concerned with the risks brought about by technological progress and obsessively preoccupied with the future and its management. I understand *The Encounter* and 887 as nuanced engagements with those concerns and the mechanisms of social control that they produce. This chapter takes an interdisciplinary approach to McBurney’s and Lepage’s productions by placing them under both a sociological and a performance analysis lens. The analysis of the productions is framed theoretically within social theory due to its influential input in the research area of risk studies. However, the chapter goes beyond an application of social theory on performance and gives attention to how performance—especially in its production of intimate settings, participatory experiences, and confessional modes of delivery—can offer important insights into the place of risk in contemporary society. In the chapter, I unpack the risk society’s main mechanisms for social structure and emphasise their politicisation, their use to support particular political agendas, in order to understand how risk is not only material but also contributes to the formation of ideologies. I explore this by uncovering the way in which both productions represent the pathologies that are already engrained in the fabric of Western societies to prevent such risks, and by exploring the elusive ways in which both pieces engage with risk, not so much as a practical aspect of theatre making, but as an ideological concept that underpins the life experience of the contemporary subject. There is an ethical responsibility in these

engagements, both in the making—by McBurney and Lepage—and in my writing. Risk, as it is understood in this chapter, demands an ethical approach to individual and community constructions of responsibility. It is important, I argue, to understand this concept as constructed and thus malleable. It is important also to understand how the question of responsibility is key to the technological developments that inflect understandings of memory, time, and identity. Through my analysis of these recent works I want to begin an ethical reconsideration of responsibility, and the endless loops that it is caught up in between the individual and the community, in order to challenge monolithic approaches and understandings to this key concept within contemporary life.

### THE MIDDLE

The proximity that both *The Encounter* and 887 achieve and defend, through technology and an emphasis on honest and confessional deliveries, generates the mood and attention required for storytelling to take place. Storytelling is key to both productions not only as a formal structure but also as an ideological framework in which to engage with their central concerns: time, identity, and their subsequent politicisations. Storytelling produces an intimate encounter, one that suspends the running of real time and allows for an immersion into a world other than the immediate one that surrounds both the teller and the listener. More importantly, storytelling is a key aspect of identity formation. In *The Human Condition* (1958), philosopher Hannah Arendt defends the importance of storytelling as a way of understanding the human experience by relating it to identity formation. For Arendt, a way of understanding “life” is to relate it to narrative and to recognise birth and death as the beginning and the end of a/the story. However, what makes “life” specifically human is the ability to transform this narrative into a story that can be told: “the chief characteristic of the specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography” (1958, 97), and a biography, I would add, is one’s identity. More recently, Richard Kearney has written about the role of narrative in the realisation of identities in “our postmodern era of fragmentation and fracture” (2002, 4). For Kearney it is “only when haphazard happenings are transformed into story, and thus made memorable over time, that we become full agents of our history” (2002, 3). The telling of the story

is a way of claiming back agency in history and “this becoming historical involves a transition from the flux of events into a meaningful social or political community” (2004, 3). Storytelling helps to form individuals and communities, it transforms biological life into human life, and, above all, it gives individuals and communities the power to produce their own history/ies and build their identity/ies.

I believe that McBurney and Lepage use storytelling knowingly in order to produce a close encounter with their audiences and also to signal theatre’s contribution to identity formation through the sharing of stories communally. However, their narratives mirror today’s era of “fragmentation and fracture”, suggested by Kearney, and replicate the feelings of uncertainty that are part of the everyday experience of life in the West. McBurney’s telling of Loren McIntyre’s story and Lepage’s stories of his childhood are fully embedded in a way of telling that cannot be linear but is necessarily disjointed. Both McBurney and Lepage go back and forth from various pasts to the present, travelling through several layers of fiction, piecing together documentary material, personal accounts, and fictionalised scenes. The constant interruptions to their stories and irruptions of other stories within them is, in McBurney’s case, aided by the production’s heavy reliance on technology and, in Lepage’s, propelled by the inability to remember produced by technological over-dependence. The shows are subtly linked, clearly proposing that technology is both the cause and the effect of how societies and individuals in the West operate, producing a life experience dominated by uncertainty and risk.

Beyond McIntyre’s and the Mayoruna’s stories and those of McBurney and Lepage, the story that both *The Encounter* and *887* are really keen to tell is that of the impact of technology on the contemporary subject, its role in the shaping of time, and its contribution to processes of identity formation, devolution, and individualisation. They do so through their confusion of the fictional and the actual, the live and the mediated so characteristic of the contemporary society in which their productions happen.

In both shows, the boundaries between character and performer are blurred as McBurney and Lepage, playing “themselves”, display their compulsive documentation of their day to day (McBurney) and discuss their inability to remember and memorise (Lepage). The private and the public are cleverly intertwined as both performers signal the formation of alternative and multiple identities that is enabled by technology. In this

sense, both productions inhabit a space in which the virtual, the factual, the real, and the fictional coexist, mirroring the contemporary blurring of these locations and the production of “glocal” (the global and the local) sites (Beck 2002, 31) in media- and technology-focused societies.

McBurney and Lepage invite the audience to believe that their personal stories and the facts presented about Amazonian tribes and Canada are real. In the shows, McIntyre, the Mayoruna, and the many characters that populate Lepage’s narrative are also real, as are the sites where their actions take place (the Amazon, London, Québec city). The audience is even encouraged to think that the performers might be holding their actual mobile phones, that the pictures shown and the voices heard are those of their true children, parents, and friends, of true scientists, artists, politicians. However, this authenticity is constantly, and very openly, undermined throughout the productions. Very early in *The Encounter*, when McBurney hammers down a VHS tape presumably containing all of his dad’s Super 8 films, the audience gasp. He soon picks up an identical VHS tape and reassures them that this is actually the real one. The audience need and want to believe that all that valuable material, McBurney’s documentation of his past, has not been lost. However, they are taken from the risk of the real to the instability of the unknown, and they are invited to consider the possibility that they no longer know what is real and what is not. The most important aspect of this confusion between the real and the fictional in McBurney’s piece is, arguably, its undermining of the certainty produced by technology and information technology. After the initial scene, the audience are able to realise that in fact recordings might not actually be playing out of McBurney’s iPhone, that the mixing of jungle sounds that he presumably produces live on stage might actually be pre-recorded, and, in various moments in which the synchronisation “fails”, they realise that even the red and green microphones that alter McBurney’s voice might actually be a gimmick. The audience’s trust in the performance to provide a genuine account of the events that it depicts vanishes, and they are invited to embrace uncertainty as the context in which the performance and, by extension, contemporary life takes place. Lepage’s performance of “himself”, which exposes him personally in physical and emotional ways, also signals his intention to blur the real and the fictional. The audience are encouraged to believe that the character in Lepage’s 887, which is Lepage himself, is narrating Lepage’s actual history, that the people and the events mentioned in the production are real and actually took place.



However, when the character reads his obituary, the production begins to signal to the multiplicity of identities that media-led societies can produce and the audience's sense of truth in relation to the production's materials is severely undermined. In reading his own obituary, Lepage questions how much of who he thinks he is will be remembered by his nation and how much what the nation will remember of him is part of who he thinks he is.

The blurring of the real and the fictional, the virtual and the actual is also encapsulated, and indeed enabled, by the iPhone, an object that is key to both productions. Both McBurney and Lepage open their performances by holding their respective iPhones and stating the role of smartphones in documenting humanity and in constructing life narratives and memories that will be carried into the future. McBurney speaks of how the thousands of images of his children archived in the device will help them to remember and will, irremediably, shape their memories of the past. He contrasts these digital images with the materiality of the VHS tape, which requires the force of a hammer to be destroyed rather than the inconspicuous malfunction of technology. He speaks about consciousness being split between the brain and the technologies with which we interact every day, and, in one of the production's climactic moments, he illustrates contemporary society's subordination to technology by stopping a hammer a millimetre away from his iPhone: the object that Western societies will never give up. The iPhone is also, paradoxically, presented as the object that stops humans from being able to remember, because it does all the remembering for them, and distances them from life experience itself. This reminds the audience that memories are mediated and, to an extent, fabricated by technology.

In Lepage's piece the focus on memory and remembering is also clearly established from the beginning. The production's articulation of these topics is delivered through a narrative that dips in and out of Lepage's childhood memories to remind its audience that the present is made up of the future but also the past. In 887, risk is presented in relation to forgetting and clearly linked to the impact that technological progress has had and continues to have on human societies. Lepage offers an intimate theatrical journey through some of the most difficult episodes of Québec's twentieth-century history—the Quiet Revolution and the early years of the *Front de Libération du Québec*—seeking to alert the audience to the risks of forgetting. However, like McIntyre's, the struggle in Lepage's 887 is also one of survival. Not so much of literal survival,

in which dangerous animals and treacherous wild environments threaten to end human life, but a metaphorical one in which an individual, who is representative of the Québécois nation, performs an act of remembrance to establish his identity and thus his existence, as well as that of his nation. 887 is an act of resistance against a society in which remembering is an obsolete practice eradicated by human reliance on technology, and against a society obsessed with the future and its relentless shaping of the present.

The productions take place in the context of cases such as the recent court case of Deric White—a London pensioner vs Apple—in November 2015 which clearly demonstrates how fragile and technology dependent memories are in the early twenty-first century. The 68-year-old Londoner sued the corporation when all his contacts and some of his photographs were wiped off his iPhone 5. In her article “Photos are memories we hand over to clouds” for the *Guardian* newspaper, Nell Frizzell accurately narrates this new way of understanding memory as something that we “hand over to clouds” (*Guardian* November 2015). *The Encounter* and 887 are firmly situated in this era where memories are intangible and immaterial, but increasingly important for identity formation. This, in turn, generates an obsession with documentation.

In *The Encounter*, this interest in documentation is clearly linked to knowledge, memory, and control. As McBurney explains in his opening monologue, it is inextricably associated with the contemporary Western fixation on archiving and its impact on identity formation. In the first minutes of *The Encounter*, the director addresses society’s reliance on technology to document its histories by telling his audiences about his own obsessive documenting of his children’s lives. More importantly, recording is presented as a response to a permanent sense of loss, to the imminence of that loss, to the risk of losing through forgetting. Here archiving is part of the process of storytelling, part of the mechanisms by which the contemporary subject builds her biography, and, as Arendt and Kearney suggest above, part of what makes humans specifically human. In this context, loss has dramatic consequences: without the technological archive, the contemporary subject cannot tell her story. Because of this, the central narrative in *The Encounter* also depicts a process of documentation: photographer Loren McIntyre’s attempts to photograph the unknown-to-the-West Mayoruna tribe from the Amazon jungle. In telling that story, McBurney seeks to produce a theatrical experience in which the audience follows very closely the physical and

psychological dangers and risks undertaken by McIntyre in his travels in the still-to-be-conquered-by-technology Amazon jungle, while also producing a moral fable about the sociopolitical consequences of technology's prominence and its impact on how humans produce a sense of themselves in relation to time. In McBurney's production, the Mayoruna are able to tell their story orally with no form of documentation other than that inscribed in their bodies (their scars, their memories, their rituals) and, as a result, own their histories without the aid of information technology, dispensing of all material objects.

Lepage offers a similar account of contemporary life experience when he recalls remembering his childhood address—887 Avenue Murray, Montcalm, Québec, from which the show takes its title—and phone number but confesses to not being able to memorise his current mobile phone number because technology remembers it for him. This is what science philosopher Manfred Spitzer has called “addiction to technology”, a term used to explain the relationship of dependence that humans have with technology in the twenty-first century and the effects that dependency has on memory. It is an addiction that has been linked to short-term memory dysfunction and degenerative brain diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's. In his 2013 book *Digitale Demenz*—published only in German and Spanish—Spitzer calls this phenomenon “digital dementia” and adds it to the long list of risks, real or panic generated, produced by a highly technologised society. Later in his work on the use of IT in education, Spitzer clearly explains the detrimental effects that the increased use of technologies in schools has on reading, writing, and memorising. He also identifies an added risk relating to the fact “that the internet, computers, tablets, and smart phones have a strong potential to cause *addiction*” (Spitzer 2014, 82, italics in original).

Spitzer also explains in *Digitale Demenz* that there is a clear link between current society's (high) use of technology and neurological dis/malfunction. Given that the brain is not able to “not learn”—it is in constant learning mode, and continuously adapting and evolving—high levels of exposure to information have clear effects on language development, attention span, intelligence, and, more importantly, memory (2013, 15). In today's societies the human brain is no longer the vessel for knowledge. Similarly to Frizzell's point, Spitzer explains how technology does all the archiving of memories and knowledge that was once the brain's task (2013, 16).<sup>3</sup> The old-fashioned methods of learning by heart names of mountains, rivers, countries, and multiplication tables is

deemed outdated, but, in Spitzer's view, it is a necessary tool to educate the mind into being an archive and becoming less technology dependent (2013, 16).

Spitzer argues that current neurological diseases have to be understood as "an expression of the lack of balance between an old way of life and a modern way of life", pressing for technology and technological development as the cause of the problem in much the same way that Beck, Giddens, and other risk theorists have done (2013, 15). In this way, Spitzer aligns himself with debates around the effect that progress, especially technological, has on contemporary post-industrial societies. These debates have been generated within the social sciences by authors such as Beck and Giddens for whom the risk society is a key concept to understanding contemporary life. This is a society primarily fixated on safeguarding the future, which is perceived to be threatened by technological development. It is a society constantly catching up with itself, monitoring its progress and how to manage the consequences that that progress brings, a society that becomes "reflexive", which, as Beck, Giddens, and Lash explain, "is to say it becomes a theme and a problem for itself" (1994, 8). This is the basis on which risk is built and a paradigm that is at the core of McBurney's and Lepage's productions. Both *The Encounter* and *887* suggest that the fear of losing one's memories, one's past, is both a solution, because it allows humans to find ways to prevent that loss (e.g. technology), and the origin of the problem, since with technology humans are unable to remember. This is a key aspect of Beck and Giddens' concept of the risk society: a society in which risk management is both the solution and the problem because it makes humans aware of risks that might otherwise be imperceptible and invisible to them.

In his 1992 book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Beck famously coined the concept of a society that is more concerned with the risks produced by progress than by progress itself. This society is, as Giddens explains in his own study of the concept, one invested in the future and chiefly preoccupied with how the future will impact (almost always negatively) on the present: "the idea of risk is bound up with the aspiration to control and particularly with the idea to control the future" (1999, 3). As such, the calculation and prevention of risks are principal concerns of this society and these preventive practices infiltrate political ideologies and social structures, affecting all aspects of contemporary life in the West. This view is also supported by cultural analyst

Kathleen Woodward, whose work *Statistical Panic* points towards this chief concern with risk, calculation, and their use to support particular political agendas. The new fear used as a control mechanism by late capitalist economies and governments is the “fear of risk itself” (1999, 178). For Woodward, “we live in a society of the statistic” and “rather than anchoring us to a stable life-world, statistics that forecast the future engender insecurity in the form of low-grade intensities that, like low-grade fevers, permit us to go about our everyday lives but in a state of statistical stress” (1999, 180). What follows is a commitment to self-regulation to fit into the statistics that promise success rather than into those that predict failure, death, disaster, and so on. These views still pertain to Western societies today, as international political agendas are chiefly concerned with the prevention and management of life threats such as pandemics, environmental disasters, and terrorism, which are presented as paradoxically preventable and inescapable. This future-focused politics engenders self-regulatory strategies, state control mechanisms, and a politics of devolution in which the individual is made to feel responsible for what the future will bring.

This is where *The Encounter* and *887* concur. This is the shared ideology behind both productions: a refusal to accept that life experience is all about what is to come. *The Encounter*’s and *887*’s journeys to the past, their representation, their re-enactment of documenting as a way of understanding the experience of the contemporary subject, and their defence of remembering as an act of resistance are all mechanisms to disturb contemporary society’s fascination with this statistic- and control-obsessed future.

Anthony Giddens’s article “Risk and responsibility”, published in 1999, establishes an important terminological distinction between the risk society understood as a society preoccupied with danger and one that is concerned with the future. Giddens states a key difference between an understanding of risk as a threat to materiality and risk as an ideology, which is resonant in McBurney’s and Lepage’s pieces. As he suggests:

The idea of “risk society” might suggest a world which has become more hazardous, but this is not necessarily so. Rather, it is a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk. The idea of risk was first used by Western explorers when they ventured into new waters in their travels across the world. From

exploring geographical space, it came to be transferred to the exploration of time. (Giddens 1999, 3)

In Giddens's view, the risk society is one "increasingly preoccupied with the future ... which generates the notion of risk" (1999, 27). Understood in this way, risk is not only a material threat but a way of understanding the world: an ideology. Thinking about the future, and preventing it from taking particular paths, has become part of the contemporary Western life experience. As Beck explains in his article on the cosmopolitan society (a society to which national borders do not apply, mainly due to the presence of technology), the idea of deterritorialisation, the fragmentation of collective memories, the loss of traditional social structures (religion, family, social class) necessitates a process of "re-traditionalisation", by which new forms of tradition that enable identity formation and facilitate in turn an understanding of the human experience are generated (2002, 27). Beck suggests that in today's societies tradition means "the tradition of the future": a tradition based on a global concern for the future (2002, 27).

This has interesting repercussions. The obsession with the future produces a constant need to calculate the risks in the present that have to be managed and this management, as Giddens suggests, has become central to political decision making: "a good deal of political decision-making is now about managing risks—risks which do not originate in the political sphere, yet have to be politically managed" (1999, 5). As an example, Giddens discusses the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis in the UK, when decisions about the size of the pandemic and the need to take radical action against its spread—the slaughter of over four million cattle—were, while scientifically informed, taken by politicians. If an obsession with the future brings about the management of risks as a key issue in political agendas, what follows is that, as Lupton suggests, "risk has become a mechanism for understanding social processes", and that it has to occupy a central position when apprehending the functioning of contemporary Western societies (Lupton 2006, 13). In her study on risk and sociology, Lupton summarises a trend within risk studies particularly concerned with governmentality that is useful to my exploration of risk in this chapter. In her view, a society governed by an ideology that is focused on the future issues a form of self-regulation in which individuals are expected and expect to take responsibility for their own actions (2006, 14). This is, as Lupton explains, what Foucault

categorised as “disciplinary power”, a form of governmentality in which “citizens are not often overtly regulated by oppressive strategies: rather, they are encouraged to adopt certain practices voluntarily as ‘good citizens’ and in pursuit of their own interests” (2006, 14). Examples of this might be, she explains, wearing a seat belt or eating a healthy diet: forms of self-regulation designed to prevent damage to the human body and ensure the survival of the species. Risk, as an ideology, becomes then a form of governmental control intended to produce good and appropriate behaviour, subservience, and individual versus collective responsibility. The latter is what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have termed “individualization”, an important term to understand the changes that the risk society has brought for the individual, which I will explore later in this chapter. There are two critical points to be made here. Firstly, it is clear that self-regulatory mechanisms are at work in all theatregoing experiences where audience participation is regulated by an invisible but well understood contract, which means that the audience will behave in the ways desired. McBurney and Lepage have no intention to rewrite that contract, and, in fact, their productions are very much in control of audience responses by giving the audience very limited agency, if any. *The Encounter* atomises the audience through the use of technology (the headphones, for example), by producing individual rather than collective experiences, perhaps signalling towards the individualised contemporary society that the audience inhabits in relation to the communal way of life of the Mayoruna. While not actively participatory, the performances encourage a participatory way of life in which individuals and communities regain agency from their dependence on technology: a way of life in which the West burns its material possessions and Lepage remembers his poem without technological aid.

I understand the narratives of past and memory, the foundations on which both *The Encounter* and *887* develop their stories, as responses to contemporary Western society’s fixation with the future and its impositions on the individual subject. In *The Encounter*, McBurney’s invitation to remember through his own re-enactment of McIntyre’s travails is mirrored by the Mayoruna’s voyage to the past. When McIntyre, who travels to the Amazon jungle in order to photograph the as yet unknown-to-the-West tribe, finds himself lost, the Mayoruna are his only chance of survival. He decides to follow them in their journey to “the beginning”, the sacred place where they will come to an understanding of who they truly are. “The beginning” is a journey to the past in which

the tribe will dispose of all material belongings, do away with permanent settlement, and establish a new social hierarchy. It is a gesture pointing to the need to remember as a journey for self-discovery and identity formation. At one of the climactic points of the performance, McBurney, stepping out of character, questions contemporary society's ability to travel to its "beginning". He points to society's dependence on the material world and its inability to control its obsession with the future. This is summarised in a highly theatrical moment in which McBurney, who has hammered down part of the set, stops millimetres away from smashing his smartphone. The Mayoruna's journey up the Amazon River is one of purge and embraces the risk of giving up material belongings in order to overcome the risk of being forgotten, while McBurney is incapable of destroying the object that does the remembering for him. This is how the production represents, in slightly problematic ways, how diametrically opposed the direction of the tribe's and the West's journeys are: as the Mayoruna (the exoticised good) travel to the past, Western societies (inherently evil) fixate their gaze on the future as a way of safeguarding the present.

Safeguarding the present also entails constant documentation. McIntyre's photographs, Popescu's book, McBurney's piece are all efforts to document an event. The link between these texts is established at the production's opening. The need to document the undocumented that drives McIntyre's journeys is also at the heart of McBurney's project. This is seen in the metatheatrical material around the making of the piece found within the production, and also in the extensive documentation of the project itself through the programme notes and McBurney's online diaries that record his own encounter with the Mayoruna tribe for the making of the piece.<sup>4</sup>

Travelling back and forth from London to the Amazon jungle, the production asks the audience to inhabit risk in the in-between space produced by the collision of the virtual and the actual: the virtual jungle representing a set of physical risks and the actual theatre in which the more metaphorical risk of forgetting is being proposed as a key aspect of contemporary human experience. Documenting, through different technologies, is then presented as a solution to this forgetting, and issues of responsibility arise when the production addresses directly what and who should be remembered, how this remembering should happen, and who is responsible for the remembering. The production seems to reject modern technologies and instead defend bodily ways of remembering



(tattoos, storytelling, dance, and other rituals). However, in a world where the human and the machine can no longer be separated, *The Encounter* knowingly relies on the technologies and the very strategies that it appears to reject. Remembering is the responsibility of the—technological or not—human subject, McBurney seems to propose.

In Lepage's 887 forgetting is also depicted as a risk. This is represented by the narrative that frames the production. Lepage has been invited to perform a public reading of Michèle Lalonde's famous poem "Speak White", which was originally performed by the poet at the emblematic Nuit de la Poésie in Montréal in March 1970. Lepage builds 887's journey to the past around his incapacity to remember the poem and his own anxieties about how his nation will remember him. In various scenes in the play the audience witness Lepage's struggles to learn the poem's lines, and this exploration of memory and what it might do to identity culminates in his reading of the impersonal obituary that a journalist friend has written in anticipation of his death. What cannot be remembered (the Lalonde poem, which speaks to the dominance and oppression of the English over French-speaking Canada) is obscured with what will be remembered: a distorted and subjective vignette of Canadian history metaphorically encapsulated in Lepage's unappreciative obituary. 887 is an attempt to present an alternative to these histories and to demonstrate the role of the individual in the making of those histories and memories. The end of the production is indeed a celebration of the individual as Lepage is able to recite the poem in full and receives a grand applause which overlaps with the applause he receives for 887 when the audience realises that this is also the end of the show they have come to EICC to see.

Forgetting is also depicted as a tangible risk in the production's reflections on dementia. Describing his grandmother's developing dementia, Lepage finds a powerful way to produce a theatrical metaphor that links technology, forgetting, and processes of national identity formation when the fireworks in celebration of Québec's liberation projected on a large screen turn into the malfunctioning neurones of his grandmother's brain in one of the most visually stunning scenes in the show.

The focus on documentation, memory, and remembering that is at the core of the two productions can be understood as what Andreas Huyssen describes as a process of "self-musicalization" which consists of constantly documenting and archiving human experience (2000, 24). Huyssen suggests that "we try to counteract this fear of forgetting and

danger of forgetting with survival strategies of public and private memorialization” and that “the turn toward memory is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space” (2000, 28). This is precisely how I think *The Encounter* and 887 function within the context of the risk society. If this is a society focused on the future and thus characterised by uncertainty and instability, the narratives of memory contained in both productions are a gesture towards the stitching together of those fractures in order to make sense of contemporary human experience. In his article “Present pasts: Media, politics, amnesia”, Huyssen describes “the emergency of memory as a key concern in Western societies, a turning towards the past” as a paradoxical phenomenon to a socio-political Western discourse focused on the future. He clearly describes the turn to the past as a response to what critics consider a media- and technology-aided focus on the future, but intelligently proposes the idea that, as Freud suggested, forgetting and remembering are inextricably linked, that “memory is but another form of forgetting, and forgetting a form of hidden memory” (2000, 27).

If the future is uncertain, however, the past is also unstable. Yet McBurney and Lepage are directing their criticisms at what Huyssen calls “mass-marketed memories”, the obsessive media-led frenzy of contemporary societies in McBurney’s *The Encounter* and the official historical discourses in Lepage’s 887. As Huyssen suggests, these “mass-marketed memories we consume are ‘imagined memories’ to begin with, and thus more easily forgotten than lived memories” (2000, 27). This is why both McBurney and Lepage turn precisely to the “lived memories” of individuals as a way of responding to the current prevalence of “mass-marketed” ones. In doing this, they both contain representations of the processes of devolution from the state to the individual that are at the heart of the risk society and that Giddens has signalled as a problematic shift in responsibility in which, as I have previously mentioned, the individual is expected to regulate herself.

These processes of individualisation are important to understand how Beck and Giddens’s risk society exerts control. These are mechanisms by which individuals are made to take responsibility for their own actions, made accountable for their decision making, and made responsible for their impact on the wider society. These are what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have termed the “do it yourself biograph[ies]”, the “risk and tightrope biograph[ies]” that are produced by the slow privatisation of

the welfare state and the relinquishing of state responsibility (2002, 2). More importantly, as Giddens suggests, this process of devolution from the state to the individual takes place in the context of rising uncertainty. Individuals are asked to make decisions and self-regulate in order to prevent risks that are known but, in many ways, impossible to prevent.

Decision making is an important aspect of the management of risk and an activity central to understanding how individuals and communities relate to and comprehend risk materially and conceptually. The process of making choices is, arguably, far from an activity that demonstrates individual agency and is instead situated at the crossroads of political, social, cultural, and economic agendas. As Alan Hunt suggests:

Everyday risks present us with the necessity of making a seemingly never-ending set of choices. The significance of these choices is compounded by the disparate pressures of the mechanisms of responsabilization that demand that we make them in a context that requires us to treat our lives as a project over which we should exercise a deliberate and long term calculative effort. (2003, 169)

“Responsibilization” is a process of devolution from the state to the individual, which Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash recognised as central to their concept of “reflexive modernization”. This process means that “individuals are now expected to master ‘risky opportunities’, without being able, owing to the complexity of modern society, to make the necessary decisions on a well-founded and responsible basis, that is to say, considering the possible consequences” (1994, 8). For the authors, the liberated individual of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is thrown into a world in which “opportunities, threats, ambivalence of the biography, which it was previously possible to overcome in a family group, in the village community or by recourse to a social class or group, must increasingly be perceived, interpreted and handled by individuals themselves” (1994, 8).

Furthermore, making decisions in the context of risk implies trust in contemporary society, and trust is supported by knowledge. Individuals tend to trust what they know and make decisions based on either what they know or the expert knowledge that they trust. This explains the power of global brands, whose logos and products are easily recognisable across the world, and of the production of spaces such as the EICC, a secure location that individuals trust because they recognise it

in the same way that they embrace the familiarity of a Starbucks café or a Wagamama restaurant. As Alan Scott explains, individualisation and, more generally, reflexive modernisation imply a return to uncertainty and insecurity (2000, 37). This is why the security provided by spaces such as the EICC is so important to the individual's sense of being in control. Once in the building, individuals become part of a recognised community: theatregoers, the Edinburgh International Festival's audiences who are used to going to the theatre in places like this and who find safety in the knowledge that nothing "risky" will happen in such a place.

In this way, while individualisation can be seen as a positive reclaiming of individual agency, it can also be understood as a problematic shift in responsibility, which leaves the individual vulnerable in the cases of financial and environmental crisis. It is worth thinking about how this shift in responsibility can be mapped on the recent increase in participatory practices in which audiences are made responsible for the theatrical event taking place. Avoiding direct audience participation but tackling individualisation in their narratives and, in *The Encounter*'s case, through the segregation of audience members, the productions are able to expose these questions without replicating their political mechanisms.

## THE END

The end of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century were marked by a series of endings: Francis Fukuyama's end of history was a way of establishing democracy as the only possible sociopolitical system (1992); Donna Haraway's end of nature and culture was the birth of naturecultures and a way of finally dismantling the artificial distinction between the wild and the human-made world (2007). In their work, Giddens and Beck also suggest another ending. The end of tradition is that in which traditional social structures such as the family, religious beliefs, and gender roles have been challenged and deemed outdated, giving way to new ways of identity formation (individual and communal). This series of "endings" is also a source of instability and uncertainty and produces and brings a sense of risk to the experience of life in the West.

Theatre practice is not aloof to these changes. The recent increase in immersive and participatory practices, one-to-one performance, and the inclusion of "risky" subjects such as animals, children, and non-professional performances in productions are some of the strategies that

theatre has utilised to engage critically with the permanent sense of risk that is a feature of contemporary life in the West. As I have argued in this chapter, *The Encounter* and 887 propose more subtle interventions into these enquiries by focusing on some of the features that generate that sense of risk, danger, and feeling of imminent loss. The victorious endings that close the productions depict McBurney finally being able to make his daughter fall asleep while he tells her McIntyre's story after a disruptive night, and Lepage reciting Lalonde's poem publicly in full after a difficult journey to make his memory work. They are peaceful and reflective moments that put an end to the productions' fractured narratives. They signal a shift in pace, the achievement of what seemed impossible at the start. McBurney's soothing storytelling allows him to foreground the importance of ancient ways of identity formation that do not rely on post-industrial technologies. The reading of the book, the comfort of the voice, and the touch are what is needed to finally put an end to the question of how memories are transmitted and how remembering happens. Retraining his brain and using old-fashioned memorising techniques to learn the Lalonde poem, Lepage is also rejecting certain modes of technology and redirecting the responsibility to remember towards the individual. However, these individual subjects (the characters played by McBurney and Lepage) are embedded in communities, as are their learned practices, attitudes, and ways of being. There is a distinct message being suggested in the pieces about the entanglements that are so key to identity formation and how they are facilitated and produced through modern or ancient technologies. There are also questions posed about whose responsibility it is to safeguard those entanglements and the processes by which they happen. These are all key questions that relate to the perception of risk, its management, and its conceptualisation, which both productions chiefly address.

As the audiences leave the safe space of the EICC, the process of decision making, and its attached risks, begins again: where to go, how to get there, what to do—decisions that are tightly linked to identity, culture, time, memory, and also to the learned understandings of risk that the contemporary subject is trained to manage.

## NOTES

1. Manufacturer's notes.
2. This includes my own work (Orozco 2010), the work included in Claire MacDonald's special issue of *Performance Research* "On Risk", Gareth

White's book on audience participation (2013), and Adam Alston's work (2013).

3. Author's translation from Spanish to English.
4. See McBurney's Amazon Diaries 1 and 2 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZioqgcYWXVQ> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX2zFnPEj98>.

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