

Editorial: Cultural Forms, Interpretive Communities and Social Imaginaries

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Karen Malpede proposes the ‘witnessing imagination’ as an alternative to ‘apocalyptic thinking’,¹ a suggestion that seems like perhaps the only possibility at the time of writing – with news of Trump’s return to the White House and with increasingly hopeless warnings of climate change presaging COP29. The witnessing imagination, for Malpede, encompasses ‘an unflinching ability to face ... the enormity of genocidal suffering and from within this terrible knowledge to somehow offer up surprising new, unsentimental affirmation of the human spirit’.² Writing at the turn of this century, she identifies witnessing as integral to her conception of theatre. Malpede’s proposal rejects both the utopian and the dystopic, yet has some resonance with Jill Dolan’s conception of the utopian performative which offers the smallest glimpse of togetherness, the possibility of optimism. This is the promise of live performance: that it can constitute a community of spectatorship, however briefly, outside normal space and time, and in doing so may facilitate recognition and response-ability.³ Lehmann uses the term ‘response-ability’ as a core concept in his formulation of post-dramatic theatre, to refer to the ‘production of presence’ rather than representation. He argues that, in contrast to other media, theatre retains a connection between the sending and receiving of signs, which he calls a ‘politics of perception’ or ‘an *aesthetic of responsibility* (or response-ability)’. He argues that this is an ethical experience, and that it reveals the ‘broken thread between personal experience and perception’.⁴ The term ‘response-ability’ is also used by Kelly Oliver, who identifies ‘address-ability’ and ‘response-ability’ as ‘the roots of subjectivity, which are damaged by the objectifying operations of oppression and subordination’.⁵ These concepts of ‘address-ability’ and ‘response-ability’ describe the ethical demands of human relationships with others, and are significant in the development of recent scholarship on vulnerability from Judith Butler, Erinn Gilson and others.

These concepts resonate with the essays in this issue of *Theatre Research International*. The essays explore performances from Germany, Korea, the USA and Sweden, from ancient Greek tragedy to nineteenth-century thesis drama, to contemporary actionist or immersive practices. All these works variously draw their audiences into active participation with form and content, revealing the tensions between cultural forms, interpretive communities and social imaginaries. These disparate works share, moreover, a concern with actively engaging their audiences in recognition of ‘others’ and ‘otherness’ in ethical encounters that stimulate critical thought and social debate, or in active play that demands creative engagement with the rules established by the theatre-makers and those of the spectators.

Evelyn Annuß explores the ‘afterlife’ of Christoph Schlingensiefel’s actionist work, focusing in particular on his famous, or infamous, performance art project *Bitte liebt Österreich!* (Please Love Austria!), staged during the Wiener Festwoche in the year 2000. Imagined as a challenge and a response to the rise of the far right in Austria at the time, Schlingensiefel modelled his work on reality television shows like *Big Brother* (the show had premiered in the Netherlands in 1999, with a UK version following in 2000). Schlingensiefel’s production took ten supposed asylum seekers and put them into a shipping container in the centre of Vienna, under the constant gaze of webcams. The audience was encouraged to vote for their favourite, who would be granted asylum. Anyone voted off the show was to be deported within a week. With a public uncertain how to receive the work, it gave rise to passionate debate and to outrage. Following Schlingensiefel’s death in 2010 the work has been musealized and was ‘remounted’ in 2014, yet in its reimagining it lost much of its subversive power. Tracing Schlingensiefel’s ludic, political engagement with taboo, Annuß argues that the ‘afterlife’ of his work can rather be seen in artists like Claudia Bosse, whose work speaks to the shifts and changes in European societies and politics since Schlingensiefel’s death. Both create work in public spaces, seeking to engage the public in debate. Yet while Schlingensiefel’s work might be regarded as agonistic, Bosse finds ways to facilitate ‘being together’ for artists and audiences.

Schlingensiefel’s staging in public spaces, blurring boundaries between performers and audience, performance and actual life, demands an active spectator capable of finding meaning. This active or emancipated spectatorship is a starting point for Jihay Park’s analysis of *The Great Gatsby* immersive experience. Immersive performance has burgeoned in popularity over the past two decades, often allied to site-specific and site-responsive practices, and further enhanced by digital developments such as virtual reality (VR) technologies. Park brings an original twist to this analysis by focusing on playification, gaming and ludic activities, drawing on the work of Johan Huizinga and Richard Schechner. This approach opens up an analysis of active spectating and audience emancipation that challenges assumptions of audience passivity. Writing of her experience of the work, Park reflects upon the proprioceptive and kinaesthetic experiences of navigating the architectural limits of the performance, and points to the contributions that game theory can make to performance studies.

Processes of reception are significant also in Birgitta Lindh Estelle’s study of the nineteenth-century Swedish play *Sanna kvinnor* (True Women) by Charlotte Leffler, which premiered in 1883 and quickly toured the Nordic countries. The play concerns three women – a mother and her daughters Berta and Lissi – and positions them as exemplifying two inimical aspects of femininity or ‘real’ womanhood. The mother and Lissi are feminine in their submission to their husbands, while the unmarried Berta is feminine in her commitment to decency and honourable behaviour. In the plot, this results in her challenging her father’s authority and his ownership of her mother’s estate. Tracing the tour and the critical responses to the work, Lindh Estelle unpacks the triadic relationship between cultural forms, interpretive communities and social imaginaries through the implied interpretive communities of *Sanna kvinnor*. Contemporaneous with *A Doll’s House*, the play emerges in this essay as a fascinating

representation of family life and of gender relationships that resonated with cultural norms of masculinity and femininity – as Lindh Estelle highlights aspects of the play which seem inexplicable to the reviewers of the time. In Finland, the first Finnish-language production aroused interpretations linking concepts of gender liberation to cultural nationalism, so that ‘Berta is celebrated as a freedom fighter with the same democratic spirit as the Finnish people’.

Will Shüler also turns to the question of interpretive assumptions and received cultural forms in his essay ‘The Athenian Male Gayze’. Critiquing historiographical practice that has ignored same-sex practices in ancient Greece while drawing on heteronormative concepts to analyse texts and performances, this paper reads the chorus of huntsmen in *Hippolytus* by Euripides through the lens of desire. The essay clearly distinguishes modern concepts of homosexuality from ancient attitudes towards sexuality, which viewed it as a spectrum of desire that did not presume to define identity. Shüler draws upon queer theory and a range of artistic media, including visual art, to examine these ancient representations of desire and sexual pleasure between younger and older men and compare them to modern readings that seek to strip the images of their erotic charge, and to interpret them through the lens of heteronormative masculinity. The essay is a compelling argument for a queer spectatorship in contemporary productions of Greek tragedy.

Oliver Baldwin also turns to Euripides via Harrison David Rivers’s 2017 play *And She Would Stand Like This*. The play focuses on the intersectional discriminations experienced by a queer-of-colour family against the social and health crisis of AIDS, using *Trojan Women* as the dramaturgical frame. Reviews of the premier production by the Movement Theatre Company in New York in July 2017 note the clever mapping of ancient characters onto contemporary ones, the replacement of the killers from Troy with a mysterious illness, and the incorporation of queer performance aesthetics into classical tragedy. Baldwin’s essay leads the reader through the transposition of the classical text into the lived experiences of marginalized people, drawing on the concept of tragic disidentification and disidentificatory appropriation. This approach reveals the ways in which Rivers appropriates *Trojan Women* and exploits its cultural capital to challenge cultural hegemonies and discriminatory social and political structures. Baldwin’s illuminating exploration of the work and its cultural context draws attention also to the activation and interpellation of the audience into the world of the performance.

This issue is very much a product of the work of the previous editorial team, particularly Silvija Jestrovic as senior editor and Nesreen Hussein as assistant editor. Silvija has been directly involved in developing the pieces featured in this issue, and has been a consistent and much-valued support throughout this transition period. For all of this, I am enduringly grateful.

This is the fiftieth volume of *Theatre Research International*, and the first issue that Ameet Parameswaran, David Rodríguez-Sólas, Marcus Tan and I are signing off as associate editors, assistant editor and senior editor respectively. The appointment of two associate editors offers us opportunities to reach out to a wide range of language communities and disciplinary strands, and to be increasingly accessible to scholars in

different parts of the globe; we are scholars and also educators, practising in our different cultural contexts and learning from and with our students. We look forward to engaging with the community of theatre scholars at all career stages across the world during the next three years, publishing and promoting exciting and innovative research in theatre and performance studies. We also wish a warm welcome to new members of our editorial board.

Looking back from this vantage point to the first issues of *Theatre Research International* in autumn 1975 and spring 1976, we can see that even at that initial stage the commitment to representing international practice and the multifaceted nature of theatre studies is evident. While the majority of these early papers address theatrical practice and critical paradigms from European and North American perspectives, articles on Chinese theatre and Tibetan dance appear within the first two years. Essays address issues of adaptation and translation, theatre as a business practice, artistic practices in different historical periods and across European dramaturgical traditions, and a wide range of theoretical models. As editors, we share the originary commitment to publish on theatre practices and critical paradigms from different parts of the globe, to address the decolonization of theatre scholarship, and in doing so to share aesthetics, scholarship, performances and perspectives with each other. *Theatre Research International* also offers a vision of what theatre is and what it can accomplish, exemplified in the range of essays in this issue: from actionism to political engagement for social change, to immersive spectacle, to challenging received historiography. In this fraught and increasingly divided political climate, we hope we can be part of maintaining open communication and networking in opposition to the things that would divide us from each other.

NOTES

- 1 K. Malpede, 'Theatre at 2000: A Witnessing Project', in Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn, eds., *The Year 2000* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 299–308.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 299.
- 3 H. T. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); and K. Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
- 4 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, pp. 185–6, original emphasis.
- 5 Oliver, *Witnessing*, p. 7.