

### **‘Impossible Is Nothing’**

The first ideas for this issue were brainstormed at a time when living, creating, and working ‘within limits’ were, more than a quirky research topic, a collective condition, as we coalesced in the shared effort to attenuate the spread of a new, mysterious pathogen. Some time has passed, yet work on this editorial begins within a new set of shared limits, as many academics engage (in the context of the latest wave of industrial action called by the UCU) in the collective performance commonly referred to as Action Short of Strike. The power of ASOS lies precisely in the act of stopping, withholding, and respecting boundaries that are so often crossed we forget they were there in the first place. Drawing attention to those long-eroded limits, and thus to the (self-)exploitative apparatus working everyday to suppress them, brings structural injustice into stark relief—imbuing this issue with unfortunate timeliness. When confronted, as writers and editors, with higher education institutions threatening and/or implementing pay cuts to workers for carrying out their duties within the limits of their contractual obligations, we can no longer ignore the systemic violence of working and living conditions under neoliberal capitalism. And yet, in that age-old, collective act of respecting limits, there is power and there is potential.

This issue was conceived in response to the opposite ideological and discursive trend that works to frame limits as something to overcome, necessarily and against all odds, as that has accrued uncanny currency in recent years. In 2004, Adidas launched the global brand advertising campaign that taught us, indelibly, that *impossible is nothing*. Opening the new millennium with ‘the desire to push yourself further, to surpass limits, to break new ground’, it set the tone for a phenomenon whose less heroic flip side came to the fore soon after in the 2008 financial crisis. Since then, exacerbated inequality, job scarcity, precarity, and the erosion of labour rights have been reconfigured as

commercial assets, enhancing flexibility and productive competition in a marketplace in which working harder, longer, and with fewer demands and limitations than one's 'adversaries' is the only way to survive. Limits are thus increasingly conceived not as boundaries of care, dignity, and respect—as the contributors to this issue come together in doing—but as hoops to jump through in the hunger games of contemporary living and working: a chance, in other words, to prove one's resilience by 'overcoming' them at the expense of individual (and societal) well-being.

### **Theatre and Performance Within Limits**

The same dynamic is legible in the arts. The cultural industries' unsustainable financial structure came to the fore in the COVID-19 crisis, which pushed a precarious system to breaking point. For over a decade, cuts to budgets and Arts Council funding have resulted not in the scaling down of production, but rather in pushing staff harder, maximising external revenues, relying increasingly on the under-remunerated human and artistic capital of precarious workers, and proving institutional resilience (Saville). While the narrative of art triumphing in spite of material and personal constraints is a seductive one, it is perhaps important to also consider the costs and consequences of playing into the hands of neoliberal restructuring by proving one can manage with less. Should we pretend that *impossible is nothing* in the cultural industries too?

Perhaps informed by this context, the last decade of theatre has seen a discernible turn towards an acknowledgement of limits. Plays like Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* (2014), Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016), Annie Baker's *The Antipodes* (2018), and David Finnigan's *Kill Climate Deniers* (2018) seem self-consciously trammelled by the limits of critiquing issues like neoliberalism (Harvie; Rebellato) and climate crisis (Chaudhuri; Angelaki) from within a system enmeshed in both. Siân Adiseshiah contends that even the 21<sup>st</sup>-century theatre of Caryl Churchill 'recognizes that staging critiques of the system is

limited in its political potential' (119). Natal'ya Vorozhbit's *Bad Roads* (2017) confronts its audience with the impossibility of understanding wartime while highlighting its permeating spectacle (similarly to other works explored by Finburgh Delijani—again, of particular relevance at the time of this issue's release); and debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* (2018) problematises the limits of empathy in theatre (Adiseshiah and Bolton)—in this case, between black experiences and white audience members. Alice Birch's *Revolt. She said. Revolt again.* (2014), as well as her collaboration with RashDash, *We Want You To Watch* (2015), and Hickson's *The Writer* (2018) all compulsively reiterate attempts at circumventing patriarchal realism (Aston; Fitzpatrick), only to be met by symbolic and representational limits.

Much as these plays understand their 'entrapped' position, they are far from fatalistic about it. On the contrary, the comprehension of their boundaries is what allows them, somewhat paradoxically, to be as dramaturgically innovative as they are. As we—the co-editors—both predominantly research contemporary British theatre, these plays and the scholarly work exploring them inspired us to pursue the theme of this issue. We were then delighted to see these field-specific observations become a springboard for contributors. Indeed, this issue engages not only with recent British theatre, but also with (auto) biographical opera, durational performance, live and performance art, traditional Chinese *xiqu*, Shakespeare, dance, and participatory online performance. The range of practices scrutinised sheds light on how, in the performing arts more broadly, working within limits can become crucial to creative practice, to humane working conditions, and to the respect of performers' lives, increasingly marginalised by societies fixated on productiveness, expediency, and a utilitarian understanding of culture.

### **Platforming Limits**

'All legitimate art deals with limits' to some extent—even if this is just the form, frame, or the temporality of the artwork (Lippard and Smithson, 194). However, the performing arts have often been

perceived as a place (or places) where limits can be transcended, as the ‘magic’ of performance can go beyond the material aspects of its creation and into a spiritual or quasi-religious dimension (detectable, for example, in the theories of Antonin Artaud). Departing from the popular understanding of limits in theatre and performance studies—and in culture more generally—as something to overcome, the articles and interventions of this issue of *Platform* consider what insights a focus not on transcended but on respected limits can afford theatre and performance scholarship and practice. How can working ‘within limits’—moderately, ‘up to a point’, and without going beyond what is considered reasonable, possible, or allowable—illuminate the power structures and steadfast obstacles of the world we live in? How can an acknowledgement of limits as a bound which should not be passed, by stopping at the boundary or frontier encountered and drawing attention to it, generate creative innovation or specific audience affect? What can theatre and performing arts ‘within limits’ tell us of a certain type of contemporary liberalism that espouses radicalism and change which it cannot, or will not, implement at a structural level? When, in other words, and on what conditions does working ‘within limits’ cease to be ‘lazy’ or conservative, and instead become a mode of critical creative practice?

‘There are other stories to be told here; they are not mine to tell,’ writes Christina Sharpe in *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), stopping short in her partial account of a traumatic experience concerning her sister and nephew (6). This verbalisation of a limit, which stops Sharpe’s writing from straying too far and beyond what might be necessary into the lived experience of another, is rendered all the more evocative by the perception of its rarity. Following Sharpe, this issue seeks to valorise and reflect on creative practices that take shape slowly, deliberately, sometimes clumsily *within limits*. And indeed, paramount to many of the contributions featured in the pages that follow is a preoccupation with the ethics of respecting/transgressing limits, the potential temptation to do the latter, and the importance of resisting.

Ethical considerations on which stories are ‘theirs to tell’ come to the fore in Dónall Mac Cathmhaoill’s and Karen Berger’s accounts of their own creative practices: for the former, as part of his first-hand experience of making trans-advocacy performance while maintaining a commitment to the lived experience of the individuals inspiring it; for the latter, in finding the right form to explore issues of colonial violence as an Australian settler for a practice-based doctoral project. Berger’s autofictional photo essay and accompanying comments and Mac Cathmhaoill’s ‘notes from the field’ reflections echo one another in framing the acknowledgement of limits as *the* crucial gesture of their work’s ethical integrity.

The fleeting quality of ‘authenticity’ as an ethical imperative that imposes its own limits is at the heart of Mac Cathmhaoill’s account of his experience as director of Tinderbox Theatre Company, directing a play made up of stories from the LGBTQI+ community in Northern Ireland. Fittingly titled *Boundaries*, the play was produced originally by Tinderbox in 2015-17, then performed in a new version in October 2018 at the Omnibus Theatre in London. Mac Cathmhaoill’s ‘notes from the field’ narrate and reflect on the play’s transformation between its first and its second run, pointing to the crucial role of ‘authenticating limits’ in respecting the work’s community of origin and political intentions, while disembedding and adapting it to a professional venue in London.

Berger’s autofictional photo essay documents the artist in the act of performing an invasion into what is at once her own home in Narrm (Melbourne), and the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, ancestral country that has never been ceded. Through this staged transgression of the artist’s home—which conjures a spectre of the ‘terra nullius’ the land it stands on was once taken for, rendering some of the violent absurdity of this attribution—Berger touches the limits of her own and a settler audience’s capacity to understand the lived experience of the colonised. Operating firmly within the limits of her own subject position and history, the artist—recast as one of Tim Flannery’s *Explorers*—raises questions of responsibility, accountability, and ownership of a colonial past.

A more ambiguous, yet equally ethically charged understanding of limits informs Milo Harries' analysis of Tim Crouch's *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation* (2019). Harries focuses on the moment, which he witnessed during the play's Royal Court run, in which the actors leave and the audience find themselves alone with the perceived responsibility to keep the play going, within the limits prescribed by the illustrated script they are left with. For Harries, attending to how the limits of the theatrical text and context are intuited, accepted, and mutually enforced among spectators—in this instance and in general—sheds light on the relationship between individual agency and an imagined collective desire, represented, in this case, by a preservation of the play's integrity. Here, like in the industrial action framing the writing of this editorial, the act itself of choosing *as a collective body* to respect a limit in order to preserve the integrity of a whole contains 'the very possibility of change' (Greig qtd. in Edgar 66).

### **Creative Limitations**

As many of the articles of this issue ably demonstrate, not only can the deliberate choice to work within limits be necessary or politically meaningful in protecting one's own wellbeing, but it can allow a specific type of creativity and focus through its apparent restraints. Imogen Flower shows how these aspects of working within limits co-exist and complement one another through an insightful exploration of Sex Worker's Opera. This performance group is composed of a mixture of sex workers and allies—with audiences not knowing which performers fall under which category—allowing the former to amplify rather than appropriate sex workers' voices, and protecting the latter from any risks associated with being publicly out. Flower discusses the group's practices of 'caring for limits', which inform the organisational level, the devising process, and the performances. Much like the practices detailed by Mac Cathmhaoill's 'notes from the field', SWO's decision to prioritise care for their contributors results in the upholding of the group's political and

ethical ideals: rather than asking any of the performers to go beyond what they feel comfortable doing—for example, by overtly drawing on their traumatic experiences—SWO uses limits as ‘a starting point for a socially engaged performance practice that is as equally committed to social justice within the rehearsal room as on the stage’ (36).

In her ‘notes from the field’ article, director and dramaturg Maria Gaitanidi illustrates how the benefits of keeping textual analysis and adaptation within the script’s historical and thematic context—rather than applying more contemporary concerns and readings—can result in productive work which, interestingly, shares in a more ‘natural’ way the politics of ‘heavy handed’ reinterpretations of the text. Producing a play generally regarded as misogynistic—Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*—Gaitanidi forgoes an explicitly ‘#MeToo reading’, even as the necessary prevalence of this social movement ‘foretells obvious expectations and risk-taking’ about the assumed kind of narrative (121). Instead, drawing on a major influence for Shakespeare and the Renaissance period more generally, Gaitanidi and the performers use Platonic ideas and dialogue to ‘enable a look into characters’ common ideological perspective in which they hold opposite sides of the argument’ (118). Utilising this context demonstrates, for the theatre-makers and the audience, that the play’s misogyny is ‘surface-level’, and has been emphasised by psychological readings.

Other performances that productively work within limits are explored in this issue’s two ‘performance responses’. The first, by Dohyun Gracia Shin, explores the ‘performance’ of South Korea’s 2020 Pride Parade, which took place exclusively online. Organised by the media company Dotface, the parade connected users’ avatars by generating a virtual road on which they met and marched together. Using Judith Butler’s writings on the ‘space of appearance’ (88-9; see this issue 128), Gracia Shin contends that the form the parade took not only allowed a safe and inclusive forum for participants, but actively contested the ‘queerphobic appropriation of the hashtag’ used by trans-exclusionary radical feminists to protest the parade and South Korea’s LGBTQI+ community more generally (131). The second performance

response, from Erin McMahon, looks at Bautantz Here's *Body Guarding* (2021), a site-specific piece of dance theatre watched online by the author. Reflecting on the limits of the performance's mediation due to safety concerns, McMahon considers how Bautantz Here connects to questions around the care of one's physical body, the boundaries between physical and mental health, and the balance between isolation and community thrown up by the pandemic.

Returning to the main articles, Chaomei Chen engages with another performance which creatively and productively works within limits: a restaging of a traditional *xiqu* script (operatic Chinese theatre). The Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Troupe's *Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*) was first performed in 2015, and featured an extensive rewrite of the original *jingju* (Beijing opera) text into a *liyuanxi* form (Liyuan opera) by the playwright Zhang Jingjing. This intended to emphasise the autonomy of the female protagonist Meng. In the original, Meng is a submissive wife suspected of infidelity by her husband, who then takes her back at the script's conclusion. In this restaging, Meng becomes more of an Ibsenite 'Nora' figure, reflecting the less restricted status of women in contemporary China. Chen highlights how, rather than dismantling the styles, conventions, and forms of *liyuanxi* and *xiqu* more generally (which include, for example, a specific code of performance movements and gestures called *chengshi*), the playwright and company respect these formal limits to convey modern themes while maintaining the *xiqu* tradition, which has been marginalised in the face of reform and the popularity of realism and Western-oriented styles.

Not all limits, however, are the same. The ambivalence of certain types of limits is explored in Raegan Truax's thorough, illustrative investigation of Gina Pane's *Work in Progress* (1969). This durational performance is troubled by the imposition of 'standard time'—instituted by powerful nations and coded by a Western, heterosexual, white, cis masculine perspective. Against the oppression of this dominant understanding of time, Truax explores 'queer refrain', where 'the bodily activity scripted for flow through capital time is halted,



stalled, splintered’ (65). Rather than using performance to transcend limitations, Pane instead uses duration, slowness, silence, and repetition to ‘make time’: chooses her own restrictions to code herself as (and suggest that we all are) a ‘work in progress’. Truax represents the push-and-pull of durational performance and queer refrain with innovative and disruptive sub-text throughout their article: at once contesting the relatively strict parameters of academic publishing, and using the curtailed space of the page and the rules of language and formatting to redeploy limits creatively.

The issue closes with two reviews of books published by Bloomsbury Methuen in 2021: Robyn Dudić reviews *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays*, while Rou-Ni Pan writes about *A Companion to British-Jewish Theatre since the 1950s*. The reviewers both underline their texts’ respective focus on the limits imposed by society on the identities of the theatre-makers explored, as well as both books’ championing of the specific styles, contents, and contributions of the writers, which have been downplayed or even obscured in British theatre and theatre scholarship more generally.

Finally, we would like to express our thanks and gratitude to those who have made this issue, and the ongoing existence of the *Platform* journal, possible: to the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London, for the continuing financial and academic support provided; to our performance responses editor Chris Green, our book reviews editor Grace Joseph, and the entire, ever-supportive *Platform* editorial team; to our advisory board members (including Patrick Lonergan, who will offer a response to this issue during its launch); to the peer reviewers; the copy editors; and, of course, to our wonderful contributors. *Platform* is proud to provide a platform for emerging researchers, allowing us to learn together and from each other—to be good scholars, editors, and colleagues, and to respect our own and each others’ limits.

- Lianna Mark and Alex Watson, issue co-editors

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