

# PLATFORM

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# WITHIN LIMITS









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**Within Limits**

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*Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts* is published once to twice annually. Contributions are particularly welcome from postgraduate researchers, postdoctoral researchers, and early-career academics in theatre and performing arts. We welcome the submission of academic papers, performance responses, photo essays, book reviews, interviews, and new dramatic writing. *Platform* also welcomes practice-based research papers.

Papers should not exceed 4500 words (including notes and references). Practice-based papers should normally include images in JPEG format (300ppi). Reviews should be around 1000 words. Photo essays should not exceed 2000 words and 10 pictures. All contributions should be formatted according to the MLA style guidelines (see Gibaldi's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*) and should include a 200-word abstract of the article submitted as well as the article itself. Authors should also send a 50-word bio with their submission. Submissions should be sent electronically as email attachments to [platform-submissions@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:platform-submissions@rhul.ac.uk).

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 @PlatformJournal



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*A Companion to British-Jewish Theatre  
since the 1950s*

Edited by Jeanette R. Malkin,

Eckart Voigts, and Sarah Jane Ablett

143 Rou-Ni Pan  
(Shanghai  
International Studies  
University)



**‘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 LGBTIQI+ 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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## *Notes on Contributors*

**Karen Berger** is a director, performer, and teacher who recently completed her practice-led PhD in Performance Studies at Federation University, Australia. She is particularly interested in site-specific work that interrogates our historical and contemporary relationships to place. Since 2013 she has worked with the Environmental Performance Authority creating collaborative participatory works. In 2016 her company, Bowerbird Theatre, produced *Deceptive Threads*, a personal story of immigration to Australia, which won the North Carolina State University's Khayrallah Lebanese Diaspora Prize.

**Jon Berry** is a playwright and researcher currently based at Royal Holloway, University of London. His academic work centres around contemporary metaphysics of theatre looked at through the work of Deleuze and Guattari, with a particular interest in the ontology of the political in Welsh 21<sup>st</sup>-century plays. He is currently working towards a paper on the autonomy of plays in political life outside of the human, as well as a small note on the notion of the 'real world' in theatre scholarship. His plays have been performed across the UK, and he has been awarded with a Theatre503 503Five award. He has recently joined the *Platform* editorial board.

**Chaomei Chen** is a PhD student in Drama at Trinity College Dublin and an early career researcher at Trinity Long Room Hub, funded by a China Scholarship Council-Trinity College Dublin Joint Scholarship. She also holds an MA in English Literature from Shanghai International Studies University in China. Her current research focuses on intercultural theatre and cultural memory in post-revolutionary Chinese theatre.

**Robyn Dudić** (they/them) is a PhD candidate at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and currently at the start of their project in which they examine non-binary notions of gender in experimental contemporary anglophone narratives. They have co-edited the special issue of *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 'Everything Is Queer: The Relevance of Queer Studies Today' (2020).

**Imogen Flower** is a PhD candidate at Guildhall School of Music & Drama funded by the Guildhall-SIMM studentship. Her research investigates the potential of community musical theatre as a form of artistic activism through a case study of the grassroots performance project *Sex Worker's Opera*. Following a BA in Music at the University of Cambridge and an MA Music in Development at SOAS, University of London, Imogen's focus has become increasingly interdisciplinary. She is interested in what can happen at the points where applied theatre, community music, and activist performance intercept.

**Maria Gaitanidi** is an experienced theatre director, pedagogue, and actors' trainer working in the UK, Italy, and Greece. She has studied with Luc Dardenne, Anatoli Vassiliev, and Maud Robart. Her work encompasses various artistic forms including theatre performance, poetry recital, site-specific action, live installation, film, and laboratory. This often explores classical and modern texts and combines different elements of her training and research, including 'ludic structures', an approach to acting and the theatrical art inspired by Plato's texts. She has directed plays by Chekhov, Pirandello, Plato, Euripides, Lorca, Pinter, and Shakespeare amongst others. She completed her first short film *Salt Wound* in 2019 and is currently directing a composition of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* for the National Theatre of Crete. Maria is Artistic Director of the School of Dramatic Art of Crete Notos.

**Chris Green** is an artist currently undertaking a fully collaborative, co-authored practice research PhD at the University of Plymouth. This research is centred on experiences of millennial precarity, drawing on philosophies of hauntology and lost futures (published in *Performance Research* and *Studies in Theatre & Performance*). Chris is a part-time lecturer at Leeds Beckett University after teaching at Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Plymouth. He holds a BA from the University of Chester and MA from Wimbledon College of Art. Chris is on the *Platform* editorial board, being the Performance Responses editor for this issue.

**Milo Harries** is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, where he holds the Judith E. Wilson Studentship at the Faculty of English.

His doctoral research centres on logics of encounter in the context of the climate crisis. He co-convenes the Cambridge Graduate Seminar for Drama and Performance, is co-editor of *Arcadiana* for EASLCE, and has worked as a singer and coach at the Royal Opera House, Glyndebourne, and Opera North (see [www.miloharries.com](http://www.miloharries.com)). In addition to contributing an article for this issue, Milo is also on the *Platform* editorial board.

**Grace Joseph** is a theatre director and researcher, currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at Goldsmiths University. Her project, shaped by her ongoing collaboration with disabled-led theatre companies, looks at the aesthetics of access in both rehearsal and performance. As a theatre director, she has trained at the Young Vic, worked at Shakespeare's Globe, and developed new writing with Camden People's Theatre and Battersea Arts Centre. She has also taught at Central School of Speech and Drama and is currently leading a research project with Extant Theatre Company on access to scripts for visually impaired artists. She holds a BA from the University of Cambridge and is studying for her Level 3 in BSL. Grace is part of the *Platform* editorial board, and is the Book Reviews editor for this issue.

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## *Articles*

### **Caring for Limits: Organisational and Creative Practices in Sex Worker's Opera**

By Imogen Flower

#### **Trigger Warning**

While the author takes care to avoid graphic or gratuitous details of traumatic events, this article contains mention of violence against sex workers and issues around pregnancy that some readers may wish to avoid.

#### **Abstract**

This paper suggests that, when not treated as inconvenient obstacles, limits carry the potential to unlock socially engaged performance practices that nurture solidarity, trust and respect. An 'ethic of care' (Tronto) that includes attentiveness to limits is proposed as an integral component of socially engaged performance practice that is intended to meet both the needs of those within projects and the external need for activist critiques.

Drawing on research with Sex Worker's Opera (SWO), a grassroots community musical theatre project, the author investigates the ways in which caring relations can be established and developed in response to limits—that is, refusals or inabilities to do certain things or participate in certain ways. Reacting against the cultural and political tendency to speak over, or for, sex workers (See Bell; Mac and Smith), SWO reclaims space for sex workers to tell their stories on their own terms and to share experiences and perspectives with other sex workers, allies, and the public, thereby amplifying marginalised voices. But, for members of a community stereotyped, stigmatised, and subject to inaccurate and reductive portrayals, the space to say 'No' when telling their stories is vital. The preservation of individual and collective limits in SWO is therefore a marker of a radical ethical and political practice—one that involves telling stories that come from the margins without further marginalising the people to whom those stories belong.

Focusing on the experiences of SWO members as the 'cared-for' group (Noddings) and working with the themes of 'self-representation' and 'access to participation', the author highlights examples of practice that evidence care for limits. These appear at the organisational level, throughout the devising process, and within the performance itself. Overall, practices of caring for limits are shown to connect small-scale interrelations with larger-scale activist visions for a more just future.

## Introduction

It's family. I think Sex Worker's Opera was probably the first time I've actually felt a family within theatre, because the care factor was first and foremost. (Sex Worker's Opera member)

Founded in 2014 by queer sex worker activists and allies in the LGBTQ+ community, Sex Worker's Opera (SWO)<sup>1</sup> was founded by Siobhán Knox, Alex Etchart, and members of their Experimental Experience Collective in 2013. Established, led, created, performed, and directed by queer sex worker activists and allies in the LGBTQI+ community, SWO is a grassroots musical theatre project reacting against the cultural and political tendency to speak over, or for, sex workers (see Bell; Mac and Smith). SWO reclaims space for sex workers to tell their stories on their own terms and to share experiences and perspectives with other sex workers, allies, and the public. The performance complements the international work of sex worker-led activist groups by advocating for decriminalisation and an end to stigma.

Within this context, the 'care factor' can be seen as a set of organisational and creative practices rooted in an 'ethic of care' (Tronto). A case study of SWO provides an opportunity to unpack the ways in which caring relations might be established and developed in response to limits: refusals or inability to do certain things or participate in certain ways. For members of a community stereotyped, stigmatised, and subject to inaccurate and reductive portrayals, the space to say 'No' when telling their stories is vital. The preservation of individual and collective limits within SWO is a marker of a radical ethical and political practice—one that involves telling stories from the margins without further marginalising the people to whom those stories belong.

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1 'Sex Worker's Opera' refers to both the project and the performance. To avoid confusion, I use the acronym 'SWO' for the project and the italicised title *Sex Worker's Opera* for the performance.

2 All of the quotes in this article come from listening sessions carried out as part of my PhD research in 2019 and 2020. They are anonymised and have been approved for use by the people they belong to.

Drawing from my research on and experience participating in SWO, this paper demonstrates that an ethic of care that focuses attention on limits within the organisation, the devising process, and the performance itself can enable a socially engaged performance practice that is aesthetically innovative, radically representative, *and* politically robust. Encompassing both theatrical and musical elements of artistic practice, my interdisciplinary approach enhances the breadth of this analysis, resulting in a more holistic impression of SWO. Notably, this article focuses on caring relations that position SWO members as the ‘cared-for’ group (Noddings, ‘The caring relation’ 772). Further investigation into the wider networks of caring relations surrounding SWO—extending to the directors, audience members, and community members more broadly—is warranted.

To begin, I elaborate upon the foundational ‘ethic of care’ framework and its application in the field of socially engaged performance and subsequently explore the article’s key themes: self-representation and access to participation. First, I highlight the significance of limits with regards to self-representation in SWO. I identify some of the caring practices that have emerged in response to these, ensuring that members can self-represent safely. Spotlighting an autobiographical piece from the performance of *Sex Worker’s Opera* (titled ‘Monkey in a Circus’), I illustrate the ways in which caring relations are fundamental to artistic practice involving self-representation, protecting the limits set by individual performers. Secondly, I examine the ways in which the limits of access to participation including socio-economic realities and individual traumas have demanded certain organisational stances. Another piece from *Sex Worker’s Opera* titled ‘Strip for the Dead’ is explored here (this can be considered as a piece of performance art within the production); analysis of this piece highlights the sensitivity with which one member’s emotional and psychological limits were worked with, rather than against, to address a difficult topic. Overall, I propose that an ethic of care that supports the setting of and responding to limits is integral to socially-engaged performance practice with an activist agenda.

## Care Ethics and Socially Engaged Performance

Feminist scholars have been developing frameworks for an ethic of care since the 1980s, emphasising relationality as an integral component (Noddings, *Caring*; Tronto; Held). While there are notable differences between their theoretical approaches, scholars agree on certain defining features of caring relations. For example, Virginia Held states that ‘the values of trust, solidarity, mutual concern, [and] empathetic responsiveness have priority’ (15). Held’s notion of ‘empathetic responsiveness’ in particular signifies overlap with Joan Tronto’s understanding of care as comprising ‘attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness’ (127). Meanwhile, Nel Noddings highlights the need for carers to be both ‘attentive’ and ‘receptive’, investing in an understanding of the ‘expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed’ (‘The caring relation’ 772). Taken together, these definitions offer a critical lens through which to consider care as a moral issue, the often-unequal distribution of power within caring relations and society more broadly, and the possibility of interdependence as a source of mutual and collective good.

There is also consensus among those writing on this topic that ‘care’ is used in the sense of ‘caring for’ (an active engagement) rather than ‘caring about’—a preference or a disposition (Held 30). Held contends that ‘in practices of care, relationships are cultivated, needs are responded to, and sensitivity is demonstrated’ (15-16). The care in question is therefore evidenced in practice, rather than feelings; it is this link to practice that bolsters the applicability of care ethics within the field of socially-engaged performance. Accordingly, the past decade has seen a surge in the number of scholars and practitioners looking to care ethics in order to better reflect on the caring relations and the quality of care present within the creative and organisational work that occurs between ‘facilitators’ and ‘participants’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I use this language for clarity and consistency in reference to work in the fields of socially engaged performance and community arts. When referring to SWO, I apply the labels that are used within the project: ‘directors’ and ‘members’.



When each are done well, recent work in this area encourages readers to see care as performance and performance as care (Stuart Fisher 4). This connection is decidedly political—for example, James Thompson states that ‘care practices need attention to their aesthetics, and community-based arts programmes need an understanding of care, if either is to make claims to be contributing to social justice’ (215). Thinking about care-full performance practice with marginalised communities, it is clear that the political need for certain stories to be heard should not take precedence over the needs of those who have lived them.

Crucially, Amanda Stuart Fisher raises a red flag around socially-engaged ‘performance practices that are *uncaring* [...] practices that instrumentalise participation or that inadvertently predetermine or enforce certain narratives of change and transformation upon unsuspecting communities’ (3; emphasis in original). Demands for attentiveness and responsiveness to participants’ expressed needs present a challenge to the problematic practice of imposing social development agendas onto marginalised communities without meaningful consultation, participatory planning, or contextual understanding, touting the inflated assumption that art will improve either the people or their situation. This approach is encapsulated by the metaphor of ‘parachuting in’ which, as Sophie Hope illustrates, frequently perpetuates, rather than alleviates, the social problems that these communities face (Hope 219).

Caoimhe McAvinchey offers a brighter picture of socially-engaged arts practice that foregrounds care and, by extension, makes a genuine contribution to struggles for social justice. She uncovers the caring practices central to the women’s theatre company Clean Break and highlights the ways in which these practices support the group’s ‘commitment to equality and justice’ (123). McAvinchey suggests that when an ethic of care permeates socially engaged arts practice there is scope for raising critical awareness of intersecting oppressions while, through ‘responsive and interconnected practices’, compensating for the ‘care deficit in society’ (*ibid.*). As McAvinchey summarises, ‘[f]or

Clean Break, theatre is both the medium to address social injustices experienced by criminalised women and the means to make a direct intervention in the individual lives of women they work with' (133).

The twofold nature of Clean Break's ethical and political agenda, as described by McAvinchey, is similar to that which permeates SWO, connecting internal caring practices with performances that outwardly critique harmful policies, state violence and intersecting oppressions. These facets of practice operate in tandem, and, as Thompson argues, only when care is present in the interior workings of the group can the performance itself constitute a genuine contribution to social justice. Other aspects of SWO signify a deviation from practices identified as problematic in the literature. In particular, the fact that sex workers and allies founded SWO, not a 'professional artist' with little attachment to or prior investment in the community, indicates a sharp departure from the phenomenon of the parachutist-practitioner, revealing instead a model of community leadership grounded in mutual concern and trust.

In the following sections on self-representation and access to participation, I paint a picture of SWO—the organisation, the creative process, and the performance. In focusing on members' needs and the ways in which the project has worked to meet them, it becomes apparent that these needs often manifest as limits. Therefore, I argue that an ethic of care that accounts for limits is essential to any socially engaged performance practice that claims to advance a social justice agenda.

### **Self-representation**

Writing on representation, poet and sex worker Amber Dawn describes a 'triangle of subjugation', whereby 'one point silences sex workers, the second disseminates inaccurate stories told by outsiders, and the third maintains environments of fear during the rare times we [sex workers] are asked for our stories' (19). Dawn's triangle depicts the representational violence and stigma that sex workers routinely face.

Countering this trend, SWO carves out a safer space where sex workers' voices are listened to, providing an alternative to the 'environments of fear' experienced elsewhere.

Applying a framework of care ethics, self-representation is an area of creative practice that requires attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, trust, and solidarity (Tronto 127; Held 15). In contrast to the 'triangle of subjugation' (Dawn 19) that keeps sex workers silent, self-representation is a way for sex workers to open up 'pathways for dialogue—a dialogue that is controlled by the very people it's about' (Ducharme 25). Within SWO, self-representation can therefore be seen as a partial antidote to the onslaught of dehumanising and fragmenting representations of sex workers. In 'caring about' (Held 30) the ramifications of sex worker misrepresentation, SWO demonstrates a commitment to tackling stigma.

In practice, though, self-representation also demands a great deal of 'caring for' (*ibid.*). Real-life implications of stigma include, for instance, lost job opportunities, damaged family relationships, loss of child custody, increased risk of violence, and mistreatment when accessing health services. As such, many sex workers decide not to disclose information about their work to others; they place limits on how open they are about their status as sex workers. Although some SWO members are happy to live and appear in public as 'out' sex workers, others are unable or do not want to. Hence, it continues to be essential that SWO is attentive and responsive to these limits, catering to the need for anonymity and enhanced safety—particularly in public performance contexts.

One response to this predicament was the introduction of a 50/50 model. Described as 'the secret weapon that would allow people to be involved in a safer way' (SWO director), the 50/50 model relies on the group comprising 50% sex workers and 50% allies. Audiences do not know who falls under which category. Allies, specifically, are prohibited from publicly revealing that they are not sex workers, avoiding a situation whereby audiences can deduce who is a sex worker through a process of elimination. Under the 50/50 model, the project

and the process remain sex worker-led, amplifying sex workers' voices and thus tending to the political imperative of self-representation. Simultaneously, sex worker members are protected from the risks associated with being publicly out.

Furthermore, creative practices that enable varying degrees of self-representation bolster the protective work of the 50/50 model; members might be telling their own story, the story of another member or a story sent into the project by a sex worker unable to participate in-person:<sup>4</sup>

It's a good way to do it and it's a safe way to do it. I like the concept of a sex worker-led group, with who's running it and collecting stories of other sex workers and bringing it in. (SWO member)

Importantly, the 50/50 balance of sex workers and allies extends across the cast and crew. This includes the three directors, unsettling the hierarchical distinctions that might be presumed to exist between 'directors' and 'participants' in socially engaged arts projects, such as artist/community-member, outsider/insider, privileged/marginalised. The 50/50 model indicates that at least one of the directors is embedded in the community, personally invested in the fight for sex workers' rights and acutely aware of the risks attached to this activism. The erosion of the distinctions between 'professional artist' and 'participant', or ally and sex worker, serves to keep sex workers in SWO safe, while also securing 'trust, solidarity, mutual concern, and empathetic responsiveness' (Held 15) among the group. The 50/50 model illuminates an ethic of care within the project's organisational and creative practice that plays an important part in nurturing trust and activist solidarity between members.

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<sup>4</sup> Over 100 stories have been sent into the project by sex workers around the world through SWO's Global Voice initiative. Many of these are available on the project's website (see <<https://sexworkersopera.com/learning/stories>> [accessed 29 October 2021]).

### **Performing Personal Stories: ‘Monkey in a Circus’**

I really think that the Opera can offer a healing space for some sex workers, by either sending their story and seeing it represented by someone else, or in my journey being able to sing to my sorrows. (SWO member)

Though limits around anonymity are respected and sensitively catered to, occasionally members have created autobiographical pieces—explicitly sharing personal stories. Focusing on one such piece, ‘Monkey in a Circus’, I suggest that the music itself, and the act of people making music together, constructs a site of care. Here, care is depicted as a response to limits around the medium through which this member could share her story, and her unwillingness to do so alone. As she recalled, ‘I wasn’t able to talk about it, but I could sing it in the song’ (SWO member).

While this member sings her story of working as a stripper, familial rejection, an abusive relationship, and miscarriage, the audience is exposed to an ‘aesthetics of care’ (Thompson). Standing next to the singer, dancing with her while playing an accompaniment, is the violinist. Behind her is a small chorus of three or four other singers, seated on a podium. There is no narrative reason for the violinist to be stood next to her, making eye contact, or for the chorus to be behind her, yet these creative decisions were described as:

Putting what we believe on stage[...]. It just beautifully showed that this person is telling this story, we want her to have someone there with her, and that doesn’t need any justification really. (SWO director)

Positing that ‘the aesthetic successes and failures of [a] show are not located solely in what takes place on the stage, but in the sensations of mutual reliance and concern between audience and performers, and between performers and their creative support teams’ (Thompson 225-6), Thompson’s concept of an aesthetics of care accounts for this melding of care with performance.



In ‘Monkey in a Circus’, the violinist and the chorus serve as both technical and emotional support, the aesthetic of care created by their presence onstage contrasting strikingly with the isolation and stigma of the autobiographical narrative. At a certain point, responding to a limit that the member performing could not cross, the chorus took on the responsibility of carrying the story, preserving this member’s right not to sing certain parts of it:

Other people learnt it and then started singing along with it [...] Keyly the bit where we say, ‘It miscarried, it miscarried’, because she never wanted to sing that, then became this very beautiful moment of sisterhood and solidarity. I think there’s something very beautiful about a group of sisters and siblings singing that [...] Holding that space because she couldn’t. (SWO director)

The musical and embodied support, or ‘affective solidarity’ (Thompson 225)—seen in the relations with both the violinist and the chorus—therefore enable this member to perform her piece with a community of people caring for her.

I use Thompson’s term ‘affective solidarity’ because the dependence here equals mutual support, not subjugation, as all those onstage collaborate to share this story:

We were really trying to collaborate all the time but she still had the space, the attention, to connect with me, look at me, and she was really there. It really felt like we were a pillar for each other, a support for each other, we really needed these two legs to try and walk through the song. (SWO violinist)

Nurturing and celebrating the strength of the sex work community is part of the activist work of SWO. The foregrounding of caring relations in the performance—through acts of embodied care, such as hugs, eye contact, or a chorus filling in for the performer to sing the otherwise

unsayable—signifies what Stuart Fisher terms the ‘ethical and political dimension’ of care, ‘disclosing values that determine how we should act in the world and within the limited resources we might have available to us’ (6). Therefore, performances of care in *Sex Worker’s Opera* not only envision a more caring way of relating to sex workers for would-be-allies in audiences, but also highlight the pre-existence of caring relations of solidarity within the sex work community itself, portraying an aspect of sex work that is frequently omitted from mainstream narratives. That these performances of care are often enacted in response to limits, as in the example of ‘Monkey in a Circus’, exhibits a practice of self-representation in socially-engaged performance that has ethical, political, and aesthetic integrity.

### Access to Participation

In this next section, I move from thinking about self-representation and focus instead on the organisational and creative practices that facilitate access to participation. I suggest that limits are often expressed through access needs and that, in SWO, these are frequently used as a starting point for ethical and political invigoration. Collectively navigating the things that members might be unable to safely do—such as travelling, taking time off work, or being in unchecked, oppressive spaces—has required a great deal of attentiveness and sensitivity, but has arguably led to a more sustainable, representative practice.

Here, I show that the care taken to ensure access needs and the implicit limits they encompass are met—particularly when they present challenges—demonstrates a genuine commitment to tackling social injustices:

The directors would often be working their arse off to give me the chance to work on the same quality level of other performers, who didn’t need so much effort, language, organising, listening—stuff which is just normal for other people. There had been solutions for me to be part of it. (SWO member)

One of the most significant ways in which the organisational practice has responded to limitations of access has been to pay members for their time and work. This has enabled those without the financial security to take time off work to participate and, therefore, enhanced the representation of the project. Writing on participatory art, François Matarasso highlights existing questions around paying ‘participants’, citing the concern that it might exaggerate power imbalances or create exploitative situations in which the people contributing their stories cannot walk away from the project, even if they no longer want to participate (109-110). To counter this risk, it has always been explicit that SWO members can remove their stories from the performance at any point or opt out of performing something on a certain night with no material consequences to their overall participation.

Certainly, in the worst-case scenario, payment could be instrumentalised to coerce and disempower; however, in the case of SWO, payment is widely regarded as a positive feature of the project. Not only has it made participation possible for less privileged sex workers—those unable to participate without compensation—but it has also acted to affirm members’ value and worth as artists, again like the 50/50 model, blurring the distinction between ‘professional’ and ‘community member’ and thus building solidarity:

I’m gonna say it, it’s fucking nice to get paid... It relieves any of that anxiety to have these conversations about how we value ourselves and our energy. That’s as an artist, that’s as a trans person, that’s as a person of colour[...]. It provided me that space to not even have to worry about not paying my rent that month[...]. It meant that I could come in with my full heart, full energy, being like, ‘What do you need from me? I will give you everything I’ve got’. (SWO member)

By establishing the organisational norm of paying members, the directors responded to the limits expressed and experienced by members as financial access requirements. Next, attending to creative

practice, I depict 'Strip for the Dead' as a response to emotional and psychological limits, illuminating a prioritisation of care for individual members' access needs within the performance.

### **Working with Trauma: 'Strip for the Dead'**

'Strip for the Dead' is a performance art piece that honours the victims of violence against trans sex workers. In *Sex Worker's Opera*, it follows on from a scene called 'Vigil', during which members hold a minute's silence with the audience, commemorating the lives lost to violence within the sex worker community. Despite her desire to participate, one member knew that doing so would transgress the limits of her PTSD:

We spoke about how to honour sex workers who got killed and I realised that's a really, really hard topic for me. I basically had only my way for dealing with it and I had ways where I'd figured out it's not possible for me to do it... So, we had a discussion and they said, 'Hey, is there another way for you to deal with this topic stage-wise?' And I said, 'Yeah, let me think.' I came up with my performance and this had been my solution. (SWO member)

Responding with sensitivity to her stated limit, the directors invited this member to create an alternative to 'Vigil'. 'Strip for the Dead' is a solo striptease set to improvised clarinet accompaniment with electronic effects, during which the performer is tied up by four others. The rope work is initially performed lovingly but becomes increasingly forceful and the performer, now naked, struggles to break free. Eventually she escapes, triumphing over the forces that have come to symbolise stigma and violence, and declares, 'I honour the dead by celebrating life'. Through her performance, this member integrated her embodied experience as a trans sex worker, her immersion in sex worker communities that face disproportionate violence, and her love for shibari, the art of Japanese rope bondage. In the end, 'Strip for

the Dead' enabled this member to be part of the grief ritual of 'Vigil' without triggering her PTSD.

This member's independent vision for the piece was given space to take form and grow, yet she is not alone in the performance. From the four performers who spent hours learning how to tie the ropes properly, to the two sound technicians controlling electronic effects, to the lighting technician responding to mood-changes throughout the scene, and to the clarinettist matching their playing to the choreography, members worked extremely hard and creatively to make the piece as polished as possible, to honour her vision and her needs.

At the beginning I'm doing this striptease... I am stripping for all the sex workers who were killed, not for the audience. And that's my honour... Then colleagues on stage are bonding me and, because I'm fully naked during this moment, it's a really intimate situation... The people who did it to me on stage had been also people where I consent that they are doing this performance with me. I wouldn't have done it with everyone, but to be honest with most of the cast. (SWO member)

Much like in 'Monkey in a Circus', the mutual investment in forging space for representation, as well as the need for careful collaboration to execute what is a technically intricate piece, fosters an affective solidarity. In every component of this creative process, in each person's role within it, there is a deep commitment to care for the person who is putting her story and her body onstage. This care is a priority because of, not despite, the limits on this member's ability to participate in the shared ritual of 'Vigil'.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this article, I have argued that socially engaged performance practice centred on care and, specifically, attentiveness to limits has the capacity to uphold ethical and political ideals, meeting the needs of



members within projects and the external need for activist critiques. I have shown that, in many cases, limits appear as needs and therefore must be responded to accordingly. Shedding light on organisational and creative practices through which caring responses to limits are evident in SWO, I have demonstrated concrete ways in which other socially engaged performance projects might navigate boundaries, impossibilities, and refusals, working with them rather than going against or around them. When they are not treated as inconvenient obstacles, limits carry the potential to unlock an ethical and political practice that nurtures solidarity, trust, and respect both within and beyond individual projects.

This has implications beyond the realm of live performance too. Caring relations continue to be integral to SWO's practice as the group embarks upon a collaborative film-making project, guiding their navigation of this new medium and the distinct challenges it poses to anonymity, ownership, and access to participation. The project's transition from community-led musical theatre to community-led musical film will be a rich and informative area for future research, and thinking about 'limits' will continue to be an intriguing analytical prompt. For now, however, it is apparent that in SWO—as could certainly be adopted by other performance-makers in pursuit of more ethical modes of working—limits present 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, connecting the small-scale 'care factor' with larger-scale activist visions for a more just future.

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## **‘This land is circumscribed’: Performing Limits in *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation***

By Milo Harries

### **Abstract**

This article asks what is at stake when Tim Crouch’s *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation* (2019) leaves its audience alone, studying a moment in which the audience are made responsible for the play’s progress. The article proposes that this moment extends and expands upon the central curiosities of Crouch’s work, framing the playwright’s fundamental concern as an enquiry not only into ethics but more broadly into what people will accept. It claims that this focus on acceptance allows Crouch’s theatre to flicker between ethics and ontology, refining a preoccupation with ‘the good’ into a series of experiments around what is held to be good enough. The playwright’s characteristic gesture, this article argues, is the question, ‘is that okay?’—authority, value, and a collective sense of reality deriving not from assertion but a continuous process of consent.

The article argues that this ongoingly negotiated acceptance rehearses social processes that are fundamental to contemporary life. When *terrestrial salvation*’s actors depart, the article contends, it brings to the surface the dynamics of power by which consensual realities are maintained. Drawing on the controversy that followed *The Author* (2009), in this case the article understands this negotiation as an interplay of individual agency and an imagined collective desire—a perceived allegiance to the completion of the play. The article proposes that convention, as a proxy for the audience’s expectation, will shape and restrict the limits within which each individual can act. The article concludes, however, by observing that the play nonetheless insists on the individual’s capacity and right to demur, whether they exercise it or not. It ends by arguing that the mere existence of this choice offers hope for the possibility of change, seeing in the individual the promise of new contracts, new collectives, and new horizons of the real.

Towards the end of Tim Crouch’s *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation* (2019), the audience are asked to read aloud (84). From the beginning of the performance, each spectator has had a copy

of the illustrated script, silently reading along at the actors' prompting. Now individual spectators are asked to speak—supervised, at first, by the actors who have played the roles that the audience are taking on. After a little while, however:

*The two actors leave the circle.*

*The two audience members continue reading. (86)*

The spectators are left alone, with each other and with their texts. At the performance I attended, the show kept going as written, the spectators reading and turning pages together until another actor came onstage. Yet this period was marked by a strange sensation: a feeling of power distributed everywhere across the audience, but not concentrated in any one place. There were glances of appraisal, negotiation, co-ordination; problems and questions shared silently around the room. Why were we continuing? Could we stop? If so, how? Who was in charge—and who put them there?

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This article is an attempt to respond to that moment, asking after *terrestrial salvation's* limits and the ways in which they are intuited, accepted, and imposed. In a broad sense, this article and the play it discusses extends the arc of Crouch's career and the scholarship that has accompanied it; though *terrestrial salvation* is a collaboration between Crouch, Andy Smith, Rachana Jadhav, and Karl James, it remains a 'Tim Crouch play' (Crouch qtd. in Ilter 404), with all that that definition entails:

the non-coincidence of actor and character, the overt fictionalization of both performance space and audience, the provocative juxtaposition of real-world materials with language that facilitates alternative perceptions in spectators' minds, and the exploration of complex ethical questions surrounding both authorial influence and spectatorial engagement (Bottoms, 'Authorizing the Audience' 75)

Both play and article carry forward the bulk of these concerns, engaging most of all with the agency, responsibility, and representational potential of the audience. As Smith, Crouch's longtime collaborator, has remarked, 'it is this observer – the audience, the spectators, the creators and destroyers – that have been at the heart of our practice together and apart over many years' ('This book is part of the play').

Seen from one angle, then, *terrestrial salvation* can be understood as a continuation of Crouch's central preoccupations. I will begin, however, from the premise that the play also constitutes a departure of sorts—or rather, that the play allows us to helpfully re-articulate and newly understand Crouch's priorities. Writing in the wake of *The Author* (2009), Stephen Bottoms claimed that Crouch's 'central, insistent concern' is 'the things we *value* – both culturally and personally' ('Introduction' 16; emphasis in original). In my opinion, *terrestrial salvation* reveals this definition to be useful, but incomplete. I would argue that *terrestrial salvation* promotes a reading of Crouch's work that would express Bottoms's thought in relief: that is, the play demonstrates that Crouch is less interested in what audiences positively value than in what they fail to reject. My claim is that Crouch arrives at ethics within a broader examination of acceptance, marrying his ethical enquiry to an equal curiosity towards authority, authorship, and theatrical form. To my mind, Crouch's primary and lasting interest—which takes in both ethics and dramaturgy—is what we will go along with, rather than what we value: were one to look for Crouch's theatrical signature, it would not be 'is this good?', but the question that echoes in various forms through *An Oak Tree* (2005), *The Author*, and *terrestrial salvation* itself: 'is that okay?' (Crouch xv).

Understanding Crouch's central concern in this way—not as an enquiry into what is good but what is good enough—allows for an intuitive connection between his minimalist economies of representation and his plays' ethical work. 'Okay', as a word and a principle, runs through Crouch's work as a marker of authority and negotiation, acceptance and control; to put it simply, Crouch's plays test what people will agree to be part of, both ethically (this is okay)



and ontologically (okay, this *is*). To be 'okay', in Crouch's theatre, is to participate in the progress of the play, with all of its ethical and ontological implications. Most famously, the word haunts *The Author* (170, 177, 184, 188, 194), marking the audience's ongoing responsibility for what they are seeing—as well as the play's ability to ignore them, if they resist. This is a power and a tension teased at in *An Oak Tree*, as well: '[a]re you okay?', the Hypnotist asks the Father, before prompting a response—'[s]ay "Yes"' (61). Discussing the description-propositions that open *My Arm* (2003), meanwhile ('[h]ere I am in my trunks [...] This is the house we lived in [...] This is my dad's car' (25), Crouch stresses the centrality of acceptance to theatrical representation:

This (playful) transubstantiation is achieved through an act of intention— simple as that. He says it, and it is so. In this respect, theater is the ultimate conceptual art form. I say I am Hamlet, and that's what I become! I say I've had one arm above my head for thirty years, and that's how it is[...]. All that's needed is an audience to accept it; for a contract of credence to be established[...]. We believe and it becomes true. (Svich)

Crouch's interest in value, then, could be seen as part of a broader study of the practice of ontology and ethics: an enquiry not into what we value, but what we can be persuaded to believe. Belief, in this framework, is less a positive action than an implication buried in behaviour: as in Stanley Cohen's 'implicatory denial', what matters most is not the belief one professes but the belief one's actions imply (8-9). Crouch's plays return insistently to *behaviour as if*: audiences that somehow behave as if a shoe were a boy, as if spectators bear no responsibility for what they are watching, as if the world might be coming to an end. One might notice, therefore, that although *terrestrial salvation's* back cover refers to 'a man who [...] manipulates a group of people to sit in a place together and believe in something that isn't true' (back matter), Crouch's preface opens up a more detailed account of how 'truth' and 'belief' come to be: he writes again of 'acceptance', and also of 'committing to the story',

‘giving licence’, ‘submitting’, and ‘conferring credibility’ to its ‘fictions’ (‘Parallel Worlds’ xii-xiii). In this system, ‘value’, ‘reality’, ‘truth’, and ‘belief’ are governed not by assertion but by acceptance: the arrival—whether via a shrug, a push, or a nod—at something with which we are prepared to go along.

This emphasis on acceptance foregrounds social processes over (and as) matters of fact. ‘Reality’ is entangled in consensus and power, as it is for Louise in Crouch’s *Adler and Gibb* (2014): ‘I will become your lover [...] I won’t only be the actress who played her, I will *be* her [...] When they think of Janet Adler, they will think of me’ (54; emphasis in original). Returning to the moment described above, therefore, we might now view it as a hole in the ice: a window into the social processes that sustain a consensual world. My argument in this article is that when the actors leave the circle, they bring to the surface one of *terrestrial salvation*’s fundamental concerns, and place at stake a fraught and vital part of contemporary life: the fact that ‘[in] order to have reality, we need to have community’ (Stephenson 232). The spectators discover themselves keeping the play alive, in a particularly pointed example of the principle Crouch puts forward in his preface—that ‘it’s the observer’s acceptance that allows the created world to thrive and expand’ (‘Parallel Worlds’ xii). It is this acceptance that each spectator is in theory now more able to withdraw, reframing and rephrasing an echo of *The Author*: ‘I have the choice to continue./ I have the choice to stop’ (202).

When *terrestrial salvation*’s actors leave the circle, the audience are thus faced with a decision: go along with the script, and the charted future it represents, or claim the authority to depart from it. This choice, however, has a context—a vacated circle, at the performance I attended, that was alive with catching eyes and turning heads. The questions this moment created—What do I do? What are we doing?—framed each person’s decision-making against and alongside the decisions of the rest. In this moment, as he does in *The Author*, Crouch ‘makes his spectators hyper-aware of themselves as a group experiencing the same event’, whilst nonetheless preserving an ability ‘to individualise spectatorial

response – to authorise his audience' (Bottoms, 'Materialising' 454, 448). The actors' departure, while forcing the question of the individual's acceptance of the play, its world, and its authority, at the same time exposes their involvement in a collective act. Each person can decide not to continue, claiming the authority to deviate from what Smith elsewhere describes as 'what's allowable, or what's allowed, in the frame that we create' (qtd. in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 429). Yet—for better or worse—in dissenting, they threaten the progress of the group, and the completion of what it has gathered to achieve. At stake in each individual decision is the survival of the play: the practice of a consensual reality, and the powers, pleasures, and possibilities that it contains.

The central act of this article is to ask what is found within those limits. *terrestrial salvation's* spectators are left within a border that they have played a part in producing, but which they cannot individually decide. Following Kirsty Sedgman, I will ask what *terrestrial salvation's* spectators do with and within this horizon, '[negotiating] the boundaries of their preferred experience amongst themselves' (24). First, I will ask what is opened, in that moment—who is present, and what the audience is being offered—arguing that the spectators, left with their scripts and with each other, are less alone than they might think. Next, I will ask how and why the play might carry on or be carried onward, considering the pressures that convention and expectation might surface in the circle. Weighing the entitlements associated with the performance of a play, I will argue that each spectator experiences limits whilst becoming those limits for others, as individual agency comes up against an imagined collective desire. Finally, I will ask what the play's progress represents, and what this moment might achieve. As it travels through this pause, I will suggest, *terrestrial salvation* disrupts the 'culture of stasis' that lurks along the limits of its regulated world, clinging instead to what David Greig describes as 'the very possibility of change' (qtd. in Edgar 68, 66).



What happens, then, when the actors leave? What are the audience being offered? From some angles, this moment might appear as a moment of individual and collective empowerment, especially in the context of Crouch's long-standing desire to 'authorize the spectator's participation in the performance process' (Bottoms 'Authorizing the Audience' 67; emphasis in original). The play's economy of representation, founded on the spectators' illustrated scripts, might be seen as a particularly readerly iteration of Rancière's emancipated spectatorship, each person '[composing] her own poem with the elements of the poem before her [...] refashioning it in her own way' (13). In rehearsal, the actors and production team referred to the scripts as the 'set' (Smith), implicitly styling it as a resource that offers each spectator the opportunity to produce a shared but nonetheless personal version of the play. By the time the circle is vacated, the audience have already been recruited to serve what Seda Ilter identifies as 'the main motives in Crouch's theatre', 'eschewing mimetic realism and psychologically driven acting methods', and '[moving] the authority and theatrical transformation off the stage and into the auditorium' (396). Is it so unreasonable to suppose that the audience are being granted power to accompany their responsibility, left to take charge of the process in an echo of the way Smith characterises *terrestrial salvation* as a whole: 'an invitation to come and play' ('This book is part of the play')?

The playtext poses a problem, however: the actors leave, but the audience are not left alone. The scripts remain, and with them a voice that flickers between observation and imperative: '[t]he two audience members continue reading' (86); '[t]ake your time' (87). The sensation recalls the moment where Sol 'senses the presence of her father' (31)—an authority persists, uneasily present on the page. The experience of reading, even silently, no longer feels entirely private, chiming with an argument Bottoms makes in relation to *The Author*: 'one could argue', he writes, 'that by co-opting our imaginations in this way, Crouch makes the violence and abuse seem all the more "real"' ('Materialising'

459). The way Crouch recruits his audience's participation can feel less emancipatory than invasive; in *terrestrial salvation* the privacy of reading is compromised, its freedoms less assured. These kinds of feelings complicate Smith's 'invitation to come and play':

the experience of perceiving and accepting an invitation is, at basis, an experience of self-agency, but it will often contain moments when an intuition occurs that a route has been pre-planned for us, that our actions have been pre-conceived. At moments like this self-agency is inflected with something different, with a feeling that it is diluted, an intentionality based on an awareness of another's influence in shaping our actions (White 59)

These flickers of unease gesture towards the fact that although the spectators are 'authorized', they are not this situation's 'procedural authors': *terrestrial salvation* might be an invitation to come and play, but the audience cannot choose the game (Murray 152). 'Procedural authorship', as Janet H. Murray explains, means 'writing the rules for the interactor's involvement [...] [creating] not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities' (152). The text demarcates the spectators' horizons, '[their] limits and the possibilities within those limits' (White 59); the world of the play is channelled, and claustrophobic: as Sol says, '[e]verything is determined' (56). The 'sanctioned' choices (35) exist within the framework laid down by the procedural author, who 'knows how it ends' (45); power flows from the ability to control the future, to write and 're-write', even after being proved wrong: '[h]e'll re-write, of course he will. And off you go again. New hope. New expectation' (85).

When the spectators start speaking by themselves, then, a question arises—the same question an actor playing Anna has posed to a spectator playing Sol, moments before:

ANNA	Are you just saying what you've been told to say? (60)
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This kind of joke, a familiar trope in Crouch's work, might slide the spectators past the question's full weight.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in Crouch's writing, the work's grip on the audience has been tighter, the structure more aggressively imposed. The audience cannot interrupt *The Author*: Crouch recalls that 'many times people called on me to stop. And I wanted to stop. But that is not the play I have written. The play carries on' ('Response and Responsibility' 417). In *terrestrial salvation*, however, instead of being unable to make it stop, the spectators are required to make it go: when the actors leave the circle, the audience are made responsible for the play's progress; they are the ones answerable to the presence on the page. This responsibility brings with it a choice—to continue along the script's charted path, accepting its authority and the limits of its world, or to halt its progress, exchanging its frames for whatever might succeed them. Anna's question, then, is deceptive: it is not just a case of saying what we have been told to, but also a question of deciding, individually and collectively, to obey.

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What goes into that decision? When the spectators read the direction, '[t]he two audience members continue reading' (86), what makes it come true? The beginnings of an answer can be found elsewhere in Crouch's defences of *The Author*, where he states his belief that 'we, as performers, have to pledge allegiance to the text' (qtd. in Bottoms 'A Conversation' 424). There is an obligation in the text, for Crouch: a duty and an impetus, that overrides even his own agency as an author-actor. 'We will not stop', he continues; '[w]e are absolutely rigid about that, because I think that's doing a disservice to the integrity of the text' (*ibid.* 425). Crouch and Smith stress the fact that *The Author* is a play *per se*, claiming that this endows it with the right and responsibility to keep going when challenged. For Smith, a play brings with it a particular disciplinary structure, a 'frame' that gives it the authority to

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1 For example, the moment where the actor playing the Father in *An Oak Tree* is required by the text to remark, as if they were breaking character, that the play is 'really well written' (94).



be performed as planned, and in full: '[p]erhaps we have this idea [...] that it's all allowed: "come on man, it's all allowed, it's a happening!" But it's not: it's a play' (*ibid.* 429).

Moving from *The Author* to *terrestrial salvation*, it seems fair to say that when the actors leave the circle, the audience are called to pledge a similar kind of allegiance. I would argue that this call was answered, in the performance I attended, because of individual assumptions about a collective desire: that the play carries on because each spectator believes it is what the other spectators are likely to want. This expectation is visible in—indeed, sits at the heart of—Bottoms' and Smith's defences of *The Author*, which has a responsibility, for Bottoms, to 'those who have come to see and hear and respond to the play as written' ('Materialising' 456). For Bottoms, the audience, by and large, want the play to remain intact: they have arrived expecting the 'integrity of the text', and deserve a commitment to it. Smith agrees:

most of the people in the audience have come to see a play. The situation is that we're at the Royal Court, or the Workshop Theatre, or wherever – that's where plays happen. And it says on the poster, 'a play by Tim Crouch'. If you're here for something else, then maybe our job has been confused a little (qtd in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 425)

There is a great deal to grapple with here.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, however, what matters most is the perception, true or not, that most spectators will arrive at *terrestrial salvation* wanting and expecting 'a play' to be performed as written. In each of the play's diegetic and extradiegetic worlds, it might be true that '[if] people are unhappy they can leave', that they are 'free to go', that '[no] one's here against their will' (58). But the decision the spectators must make is

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<sup>2</sup> Most obviously, perhaps, around the way *The Author* retains some of the authorial privileges of 'playhood' whilst attacking those habitually claimed by the spectators. See in particular Read and Frieze in Bottoms ('A Conversation') and Henke ('Precarious Virtuality').

neither abstract nor ahistorical. They are enclosed within a horizon, within limits, confronted with a decision about how to participate, and constrained by a sense of social acceptability: as Gareth White observes, '[the] horizon is a limit in the sense that it stands for the point at which [...] invited and appropriate action ends, and inappropriate responses begin' (59). The performance I attended was at the Royal Court, 'where plays happen': in this context, it is not unreasonable to expect this drive towards a conclusion to gain some kind of normative weight—a sense that the other spectators are owed something, as Bottoms claims.

Where Helen Freshwater suggests, then, that the anger amongst some spectators of *The Author* is 'partly a product of the fact that they don't know which social script to follow' (409), I want to suggest that part of the problem *terrestrial salvation* poses is, in a sense, the reverse: that the spectators' supposedly independent reactions exist in a matrix of consensus and coercion, powered by an implicit sense of a socially and dramatically 'pre-determined pathway' (Upton qtd. in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 425). With the imagined endorsement of the group, the script in each spectator's hands is an invitation and expectation to follow the path—to finish the play as written, as advertised, and as promised by its surroundings. Crouch-as-Miles is speaking to all of the audience's roles when he exclaims, '[l]ook where we are now! There's no going back, right? It's too late to walk out now, right? Someone?' (102). The social script associated with a play at the Royal Court—'where plays happen'—finds form as an allegiance to the performance's progress: the text not only expects but actually prescribes the answer to Miles's questions—'Yes' (102; emphasis in original). 'Most of the people in the audience', one might be expected to think, 'have come to see a play' (Smith qtd. in Bottoms, 'A Conversation' 425); the script, accordingly, represents an instruction to continue: '[the] play carries on' ('Response and Responsibility' 417).

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What is at stake in this progress? What is proved, if *terrestrial salvation* carries on? On the surface, the answer might seem bleak: the play's journey towards its ending could be said to reveal the coercive force

of communities of belief, each individual performing their exposure to the hostility of the group. Yet even an untaken opportunity—even just a glance, flickering across the room—insists on what David Greig calls ‘the very possibility of change’ (qtd. in Edgar 66). Within the story, the world Miles creates is one that does not admit a certain form of progress: even if his predictions are wrong, Anna says, ‘[h]e’ll re-write, of course he will. And off you go again. New hope. New expectation’ (85). Anna’s ‘again’ is instructive: Miles’ world is a ‘culture of stasis’ (Greig qtd. in Edgar 68), the renewal is a repetition, another iteration of the same systems and structures of power. What Anna is offering Sol, by contrast—to borrow a different thought from Greig—is a moment of transcendence: a tear in the fabric of the real (Greig, ‘Rough Theatre’ 220). This is an escape from the compound’s confines, certainly, a journey beyond its limits—but more importantly, it is a chance to set horizons of their own.

The actors leave the circle, then, and the spectators face a choice. Most likely, the play continues; the structures stay the same. But the fact that the decision arises insists that the spectators could choose differently—that they live in a world where another world is possible. The individual is not erased by the group, even if they struggle to negotiate their agency within it, and they carry with them the kernel of a different consensus, the seed of a different social life. More justly, then, the play can be understood to be engaged simultaneously in two modes of theatrical relation. On one hand, it offers the binary pairing of ‘audience’ and ‘work’ that Alan Read finds at the heart of ‘theatre as propaganda’ (94)—structuring a stable collective encounter with a static authorial world. On the other, the individual detaches from the collective, smuggling their independence within an expanded theatrical triad: ‘the performer, the audience and you’ (*ibid.*). In this thought, perhaps, we can discover the ethics that underpins Smith and Crouch’s desire to ‘complicate the togetherness that theatre can bring’ (Smith)—a conviction, after Levinas, that ‘Man’s [*sic*] relationship with the other is better as difference than as unity: sociality is *better* than fusion’ (Levinas qtd. in Kearney 58).

By making them solely responsible for the play, *terrestrial salvation* asks its audience to consider how realities are sustained, raising up for scrutiny a basic function of theatre and a vital part of social life: the stable continuous becoming of a world. They are asked to co-operate, invited to sustain the world already conjured, the progress of the play. Within that process, however, individuality—suppressed but surviving—maintains within it the possibility of change: new collectives, new worlds, new ways to re-group. In a recent paper, Smith expressed the hope that ‘through telling stories in this way, through play, we might acknowledge and consider our own power as well as that of others’ (‘This book is part of the play’). Through this lens, *terrestrial salvation* offers the theatre as a space of realisation: a place where things are made real, and made known. The play picks out the production of its present, tracing the horizons that its audience have agreed. In doing so, *terrestrial salvation* finds a source for Smith’s hope in the classic concerns of a ‘Tim Crouch play’, insisting that if we are responsible for our actions, we must retain some capacity to act; if we give these worlds power, we must first have had some power to give.

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## Durational Performance and Queer Refrain

By Raegan Truax

### Abstract

What histories, aesthetics, and political tactics are revealed by tracing durational performance at its limits? This essay offers queer refrain as a new theoretical framework for thinking with and through durational performance. Drawing on my own practice, I offer a close reading of Gina Pane's *Work in Progress: Modification Constante du Sol* (1969), tracing its queer feminist attributes to make historical, political, and aesthetic claims about durational performance. My analysis reveals the stakes in understanding how limits are deployed by durational performance artists to point us to something beyond excess and exhaustion, something untimely and unruly, something capable of queerly refraining from enduring at all costs. Without the mastery and cultivation of queer refrain, durational performance would risk its untimeliness and become operational for 24/7/365 existence. Instead, queer refrain as an embodied tactic cultivated by durational performance artists offers a prolonged and sustained break from exploitative social, cultural, and economic structures that demand and control time at the expense of bodies. Theorising as a durational performance artist and critical-creative researcher, I offer an artistic and embodied theory about the durational performance medium that provides a sense of a world where the body's capacity for working and progressing differently is valued, celebrated, and struggled for.

Time does not pass in vain... those who were seen as extremists for the freedom to express oneself in contemporary art by any means or technique available, are today seen as the founders of a contemporaneity that still refuses to let itself be locked into a simple historical definition (Dehò 13).

When a work of art appears to be exceptional or inassimilable, has a limit been crossed – or was it less a boundary than a yet-unseen path to be taken? (Johnson 5).

Whereas the "body" (its gestuality) is in itself a form of writing, an arrangement of signs that perform, that translate the endless search for the OTHER, its fantasies, its subconscious desires, its relations with time taken as an entity having neither origin, nor end, that must be decoded through one's "body" (Pane 35).



Paris. 1969. A woman folded. Clearly able-bodied and bent at her waist—she is not falling. She is ambling around a garden with knee joints askew. Her arms taut from shoulder sockets to wrists. Her armpits caress her thighs. Her hands parallel her ankles. Gazing downward, her fingers cradle an opaque ruler aligned to the curved edge of her black loafer pump. Concentrating on her feet and something more. Measuring the stride of every single step she takes, and something more. Measuring the ground. Hinged, contorted. Tension and flexion palpable. All of her joints slightly askew. Paris. 1969. An opaque ruler. A woman folded.

Gina Pane's *Work in Progress; Modification Constante du Sol* was performed in 1969 at the sixth Biennale de Paris. For the durational performance, Pane walks in a significantly toppled manner around the garden of the American Center taking one precisely measured step after another. Over eight consecutive hours, the artist will take 10,578 steps in this manner. As evoked by the title, the performance is ostensibly about work and progress. Yet Pane's toppled-over walk and her use of the durational medium disidentifies with many of the capitalist structures that measure bodily work and regulate senses of progress.

The site of the performance, The American Center, was initially a community and student centre frequented by expatriate artists and writers. Founded in 1931, by the 1960s it was a formative center of avant-garde creation and a meeting place for socialist organising. With the dust from May '68 still very much in the Parisian air,<sup>1</sup> Pane's action

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1 Multiple revolts against authoritarianism, racism, war, sexism, and class occurred around the globe in 1968. In France, what began as student revolts during this time rapidly evolved into a mass movement against capitalism and the largest worker's strike in French history. As Kristin Ross writes, 'France, for some five to six weeks, was brought to a complete paralysis' (4). Notably, Ross attributes the monumental power of the collective political agency that emerged in May '68 France to a 'shattering of social identity that allowed politics to take place' (3). The shattering Ross describes is inherently produced by a departure from the familiar time structures of work and capital that validate relationships, identities, and progress. Such a break is incredibly difficult to sustain: many historians and political philosophers (including Ross) have written about the ways in which the most radical ideas and practices from the '68 revolts were subsequently deployed in the service of capital in ways formative to depoliticised subjectivity, individualism, and neoliberalism. Pane's 1969 durational performance therefore calls the public toward the paralysed (nation) state formed in a shattering or a break from normative social identity and (as this article examines) shifts the energy and temporality of revolt from resistance to queer refrain.





*extrait oct 1969: Work in progress -  
ce sont les 10587 pas et demi que j'ai  
effectués lors d'une modification constante  
du sol de 124 à 204 qui ont été l'objet  
de l'œuvre -*

Fig. 1: Gina Pane, *Work in Progress: Modification Constante du Sol* (1969).  
Extrait de l'action réalisée à l'American Center dans le cadre de la 6e Biennale de  
Paris, 1969. Archives de l'artiste © Gina Pane, Adagp. Courtesy Anne Marchand  
and kamel mennour, Paris.

Where one might seek out uniformity or constancy, limiting the action of the performance to the singular task of measuring offers unique activity and a range of temporal discoveries. Measure fails as a calculation of distance over linear time, instead highlighting variety and discontinuity in the durational.

Discontinuity also surfaces the wristwatch as a tool generally used on time and/or to convey how a body fail the grand project of timeliness. In considering the wristwatch, it is important to note that clock-time plays a role in structuring the event for the artist and audience—clock-time is one kind of time. But no single temporal structure takes precedence in the performance. We see Pane’s watch in plain view, strapped on her left wrist, touching the artist’s body as she performs. As there is no visible clock in the outdoor setting, and hundreds of other photographs of Pane during the late 1960s and early 1970s never show the artist wearing a watch, the scale of clock-time at play during *Work in Progress* is intentional, personal, and intimate. I read in this detail an early indicator that durational performance works to reclaim all temporal possibility with corporeal sense.

With the use of a pedometer to count each of the artist’s steps,<sup>2</sup> we encounter how the fit and healthy body (specifically here in 1960s society) is overtly constructed as an upright body. The healthy upright body is able to work without limitation, thereby contributing to capitalist society and progress. A diligent soldier that marches between the metro, work, and home without stalling, crumpling, folding, or

find the strength to navigate this obstacle

<sup>2</sup> Art historian Sophie Duplaix describes how Pane’s steps were recorded on a ‘manpo-kei’: a pedometer device invented in Japan in the 1960s and marketed to the general public in 1965 with the social imperative that walking 10,000 steps per day is a necessary part of a healthy daily routine. Yamax, the company that invented the manpo-kei, invented a watch pedometer prototype in 2001. That such devices in their present-day configurations (like the ‘fitbit’) are worn as watches and include digital clockfaces is not coincidental. As the next section of this essay will show, healthy progress in settler colonial heteropatriarchal capitalist societies is progress regulated and measured by standardised time.

being still—the healthy upright body does not sit silently in a garden, nor should it bend and fold for hours studying the ground and its belly.<sup>3</sup> Folded exertions do not produce data. Pane's sweating brow, the collapsing arch of her foot, the small cuts populating her palms as she repeatedly stops herself from falling, these exertions do not count. The pedometer underlines how only erect steps are paramount for productivity. But here again, Pane's hunched and folded body subverts the systems at work to regulate its activity.

Exerting a formidable amount of energy, Pane diverts from upright walking. With the May '68 Events undoubtedly reverberating in the psyche of viewers attending the Biennale and the general public passing by, Pane's bent spine and her attentiveness to the gravelly terrain confronts one's sense of posture, movement, and measure. The performance is built around the task of measuring and yet distance is indecipherable, direction illegible. In the context of work/progress/unrest, *Work in Progress* invites a nuanced consideration of measure, duration, direction, and bodily orientation. It is the first durational performance Pane undertakes for a live public audience—yet it has never been analysed or given critical attention. Its presence and import is wilfully excluded from the canon of performance art generally and durational performance specifically. This is because the queer feminist attributes in Pane's work, attributes that I trace throughout this essay, do not conform to—or even remotely align with—the masochistic masculine male body that is stretched to its limits in performance art so that its audience can witness and authorise its 'heroic' male endurance. Deeply engaged with duration and

I'm

asked

to leave

---

3 My understanding of the upright body is indebted to Virginia Woolf's poetic essay *On Being Ill* (1926). Literally writing from a horizontal position while sick in bed, the novelist describes how illness thrusts the body into a temporal-corporeality where sensorial experience seeds life. Describing the maintenance of 'healthy' civilizations as dependent on a make-believe orientation to time, Woolf depicts everyday life as a battleground. The 'army of the upright' progresses only in relation to the ways health and self-worth have been externally defined while the ill body deserts this battleground and performs in ways Woolf reverses as 'irresponsible,' 'disinterested,' and 'courageous.' She appears as a 'public-sky gazer' who interrupts pedestrians (and normative notions of social and civil 'health') by looking at the sky for 'a length of time'—much as a durational performance artist might (see Truax).



experiences of queerness and femininity in the late 1960s, it is queer women artists who, in tandem with claiming space for and radically reconceptualising their own bodies, also reclaim time as a material. In the realm of performance art, queer women artists are central to the development of durational performance as a cogent medium.

unfurl when the sun is

set in the evening

the rest  
of the

## Durational Performance

day is for  
crumbling

In this essay and more broadly, I define and deploy ‘durational performance’ in two crucial ways. First, *performance* signals the medium as a subset of the genre of performance art, which most often consists of live events performed by live bodies for live audiences or publics.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, *durational* signals a set of concepts, techniques, strategies, and tactics bodied forth into an aesthetic realm. Durational should not be confused with ‘duration’ as an indicator of measured time or ‘durationality’ as an indicator of the ways an artwork can transcend a temporal present.<sup>5</sup> This is crucial for the medium as I construct it. The standard by which a work of art is analysed or considered as a durational performance cannot simply be that it takes a long time to execute. All performances have duration, a set length of time in which an artist performs, and all performances possess the potential for durationality. In durational performance, the durational has to do something. It is performative. It must set something in motion in the performance that we could not otherwise access, see, hear, taste or feel.

cricket  
chirping

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4 Performance studies includes many rich debates around performance and liveness. My definition of durational performance relies heavily on early art historical frames for performance art. Notably in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), art historian Amelia Jones distinguishes between body art and performance art by asserting that the former does not require a live audience while the latter does (13). Other important scholars who have helped advance my thinking include RoseLee Goldberg, Adrian Heathfield, Dominic Johnson, Peggy Phelan, Lara Shalson, and Diana Taylor as well as writing by performance artists, mainly Coco Fusco, Tehching Hsieh, Linda Montano, and Adrian Piper.

5 Amelia Jones describes ‘durationality’ in *Seeing Differently* (2012) as ‘linking the interpreting body of the present with the bodies referenced or performed in the past as the work of art’ (174). Durationality is a strategy for interpreting any artwork including photographs, paintings, and sculpture.



My work to dislocate the durational from the regulated measure of clock-time expands upon the colonising history of standardised time, philosophies of time that centre duration, decolonial methodologies articulated in Indigenous feminisms, and more recent work on temporality at the intersection of queer theory, black studies, and disability studies. Indigenous feminist theory in particular has deeply enhanced my understanding of durational performance as it constitutes an aesthetic form of protest and a decolonial act. Specifically, the articulation of ‘radical relationality’ by Melanie Yazzi (Diné/Navajo) and Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, Karuk) has helped me imagine, cite, and site, the decolonising labour durational performance artists do by dismantling time as a system and structure.<sup>6</sup> Durational performance makes the strenuous process of radically relating to time as a material and resource hypervisible, tactile, and sensible.

When considering the history of standardised time, it is important to understand this shift also as a process rather than a singular event. Brought into effect at the International Meridian Conference of 1884, standardised time did not simply emerge: it had to be imposed. Time reform was a coordinated military effort by North Atlantic nations that—well into the 20<sup>th</sup>-century—sought to govern the globe with their externalised and mechanised system of ‘standard time’.<sup>7</sup> The 26 nations that instituted Greenwich as the prime meridian in 1884 can be linked to the power structure of the current G20—which signals how the new system of standard time was an early step toward securing an inequitable and

‘all  
the spaces  
between  
the notes of  
birds’ songs  
...  
the silence  
before’

(Hilberry 74)

<sup>6</sup> Yazzi and Riley Baldy conceive of ‘radical relationality’ as ‘a vision of relationality and collective political organisation that is deeply intersectional and premised on values of interdependency, reciprocity, equality, and responsibility’ (2). They argue that decolonisation requires embodied methodologies and tactics that interweave ‘materiality, kinship, corporeality, affect, land/body connection, and multidimensional connectivity’ (2). They attribute radical relationality to the cacophonous struggles of Indigenous feminist scholars and practitioners underlining ‘the paradigm has already been created; we just need to enforce it’ (3).

<sup>7</sup> Two requisite contributions to the historicisation of standardised time are Vanessa Ogle’s *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870-1950* (2015) and Carlene E. Stephens *On Time: How America Has Learned to Live by the Clock* (2002).

violently lopsided global economy reliant on the exploitation and dehumanisation of black and brown bodies for centuries (see fig. 2). The transcript of the conference proceedings reveals how disagreements among the national leaders in attendance centred around issues of pride (primarily whose science would prevail) and the financial burdens of implementing one system over another ('International Conference'). Overwhelmingly, these bureaucratic debates provide evidence of how the body politic is not a concern. Focused on economic and military benefits, the new system profoundly affected everyday life and the ways people understood their bodies in relationship to labour, social interactions, speed, and productivity. Unconcerned with the body, the institution of standardised time colonises a global multitude to incorporate and circulate notions of progress and efficiency that align

'It's true,  
I remain  
SILENT  
during my  
actions,  
words  
being  
empty  
of their  
meaning'  
(Pane 33).

be still  
be still

weight heavy

have to lift

my foot

I'm asked to leave

one more step

Illegible words

stand and leave

i can't catch up

silent

be still be still

with values of speed and productivity: the tenets of a time tethered to capital interests and investments. The ruse? Where standardised time appears to impose a limit, its interest is in the expanded movement of capital, the flow of new technologies of communication, and the mechanising of bodies for 24/7/365 operation.

Precisely as the new regime of standardised time ripples into motion across the globe, duration as a concept becomes rife for debate in Western philosophy. Edmund Husserl's working notes contain ideas about duration that he begins to lecture on in 1905,<sup>8</sup> and Henri Bergson (perhaps the most cited philosopher in art historical

8 Husserl's volume *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* consists of several lectures and manuscripts on time written from 1905-1910. His working notes from 1893-1911 make up the second half of the volume. The lectures, manuscripts and notes were compiled and edited from 1916-1918 by Husserl and his assistant Edith Stein, who initially presented the bundle of work on 'time' to her mentor in 1917. Attesting to the difficult work of theorising time, Husserl writes, 'I do not at all intend to offer this analysis as a final one; it cannot be our task here to solve the most difficult of all phenomenological problems, the problem of the analysis of time. What matters to me here is only to lift the veil a little from this world of time-consciousness, so rich in mystery, that up until now has been hidden from us' (286).

scholarship related to durational art and performance) began working out ideas about duration (*durée réelle*) in his dissertation *Time and Free Will* (1889).<sup>9</sup> But it is Gaston Bachelard's *The Dialectic of Duration* (1936) that argues one of the most important philosophical claims of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century: lived time is fractured, discontinuous, and irregular. It seems a mystifying way to introduce his concept of duration, a term generally understood to indicate a continuous length of time rather than a rupture in time. Yet, duration as discontinuous and fractured invites the body to (re)claim time as inherently performative; time does not simply unfold, time and the body act on and construct one another.

My extension of Bachelard's philosophy is heavily informed by more recent work in black studies and disability studies. While Fred Moten's *In the Break* (2003) is a landmark text that conceptualises how black aesthetics and black labour resonate in rhythmic breakages from directional, linear, and standard time, it is Moten's theory of *animaterial* actions and anaperformative differences in *Stolen Life* (2018) that a call to attend to blackness everywhere facilitates the radical displacement (but not disappearance) of bodies in time, which is requisite for ushering in a new epoch. As Moten writes:

The experience of subjectivity is the would-be subject's thwarted desire for subjectivity, which we must keep on learning not to want, which we have to keep on practicing not wanting, as if in endless preparation for a recital that, insofar as it never comes, is always surreally present (244).

In this sense, blackness does not make a singular move to sever bodies from the apparatus of standard time—blackness is pluralistically held in the durational as a spacetime of elsewhere that values practice and preparation without script or arrival. Disability studies scholar Alison Kafer also articulates additional power dynamics at play in subjective

<sup>9</sup> Bergson distinguishes lived time from mechanised time in this text and theorises duration as a phenomenon of continuity and flow.

to imbalance

quick shifts  
more still and I am falling

wait my eyes said wait

dragged

please wait my eyes said wait  
my foot heavy

have to lift my

wait weight wait weight wait weight

trying to lift but heavy still

can't lift my

renderings and experiences of duration. In doing so, she defines the phrase ‘crip time’, which is ‘flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of “how long things take” are based on very particular minds and bodies’ (27).

In evoking Bachelard, Moten, and Kafer to read Pane’s performance, my analysis is anticipated by centuries of embodied BIPOC queer feminist crip knowledges and participates in establishing the durational as vital to the project of restructuring *all* relations of domination. Pane is white, a woman, queer, and was able-bodied in 1969. With and in excess of Pane’s identifiable markers, Pane’s fold can be thought of as instantiating a certain flexibility in bent temporality. As Kafer articulates, ‘in imagining crip futures, I mean more than particular, identifiable bodies. I mean possibility, unpredictability, promise: the promise of recognizing crip where I did not expect to find it, the possibility of watching “crip” change meanings before my eyes’ (46). The crip flex of bent time palpating in *Work in Progress* exposes an extreme gap between what our bodies can do and the white heteropatriarchal systems lubricated by capitalism and implemented over centuries to propel our activities, behaviours, and senses with the speed and senselessness of unlimited measure. Lingering in intersectional feminist queer crip temporalities indebted to BIPOC knowledges and methodologies, the durational becomes flexible and fragmented material. It generates a kind of spaciousness in time, a palpable vibratile discontinuity, that not only welcomes but in fact depends on bodies that interrupt and ‘explode’ normative, curative, and/or linear notions of continuity and flow.

The durational understood as a flexible material and/or a tactic for bending and crippling time rather than a marker of continuous or standard time is crucial. When Bachelard writes ‘the phenomena of duration are constructed by rhythms, rhythms that are by no means necessarily grounded on an entirely uniform and regular time’ (20), he reminds us that rhythm itself does not indicate uniformity but temporal variety. Importantly, in a durational performance like *Work in Progress*,

a breeze ruffling the ears



Fig. 2: Conference delegates on the steps of the State-War-Navy Building. International Meridian Conference, Washington, D.C., 1884. Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, D.C.

temporal variety surfaces because Pane executes a performance score of *limited* activity and ‘animaterial action’—measuring steps and the ground by sustaining an incredibly restricted mode of movement. Only thrust into the durational can the highly constricted score generate new rhythms. In one way, the durational is offering Pane a suspension or escape from capitalism’s mandates around work and progress, the 24/7/365 rhythm and mechanisation of the body that the May ’68 Events of Pane’s present caution are on the horizon: ‘[m]étro, boulot, dodo’. The durational also calls the body to sense and perceive temporal variety. Crumbling, folding, sidestepping, falling, there is an abundance of temporal variety and very little measure in Pane’s work. It is this aspect of Pane’s performance that, as early as 1969, pursues an intersectional queer crip feminist aesthetics (the durational) and finds fleshy folds

in spacetime that erupt in excess of the performative turn to the body that has been intentionally (and misleadingly) canonised via masculine narratives of ejaculatory and masochistic labour. In contrast, the pursuit of new rhythms and temporal variety in labouring that appears in *Work in Progress* searches for something else than the temporally colonised world we currently know. 'Work' in the durational requires a strict kind of bodily discipline: a mode/limit that I term queer refrain.

## Queer Refrain

Queer refrain is less a concept to be defined and more a bodily mode. Where 'refrain' suggests a break, a rupture, and a conscious cut, queer refrain is always/already in the break, glimpsing and forming new bodily rhythms in flexed and fractured time. In theory and literature we can see examples of queer refrain in Audre Lorde's figure of the 'sister outsider', Virginia Woolf's deserter (who is also a 'public sky-gazer' [12]), José Esteban Muñoz's intimates 'After Jack', and Saidiya Hartman's wayward cast of characters. These referents are queer, women, women of colour, poor, ill, disabled, precarious, artist bodies—bodies that know—and theories for the body that understand that standardised time and capitalism are not fixed entities but aspects of daily life that become concretised only if we perform their de facto scores repeatedly. Queer refrain is therefore a phrase I use to signal behaviours that rupture standard and/or capital uses of time and perform additional untimely transgressions within that rupture. Queer refrain is not singular but intersectional and cacophonous. It involves working within and heightening corporeal limits to unearth dynamic temporal and sensorial worlds. It is not tethered to a more conditional refrain that is always/already bound by capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and whiteness—incapable of imagining 'work' as anything other than labour in the service of capitalism (Bartleby's infamous 'I would prefer not to', for example).

In my forthcoming book on durational performance, queer refrain is the intersectional theoretical framework that enables the



s global scope of my study *only as it is also an embodied queer feminist*  
w practice refined by minoritarian artists with intersectional identities.  
e While the scope of this article focuses on Gina Pane's never before  
r analysed *Work in Progress*, and Pane is a queer white woman, queer  
v refrain is mobilised by and for durational practitioners who identify  
e as queer and femme, queer and black, queer and crip, queer crip and  
brown, poor and queer, trans and femme, black trans femme, non-binary  
palliate white crip, exiled and brown, crip and undocumented, Indigenous and  
woman, nomadic and dispossessed, genderqueer and asian, two-spirit  
and neurodivergent, afroqueer and crip. This heritage is significant  
and it calls for an even more expansive theory of intersectionality  
the weight of time. that, following José Esteban Muñoz, signals a particular sense and  
'sensing of the world'—intersectionality as it conveys 'convergent  
and diverse modes of recognition that are best characterized perhaps  
as affective particularities' (149). Aware of and intent on lingering  
within the capacities of difference and affect activated in the global  
breadth of durational performance, queer refrain underlines  
durational performance as an artistic medium that cannot fully be  
encountered, theorised, or consumed occularcentrically. Queer refrain  
sustains an untimely transgressive stance to cursory glances, tropes  
of representation, effortless appropriation, and palatable digestion.  
Conjuring refrain as rhythm, vibration, stagnation, suspension,  
malfunction, and strategy alongside queer as touch, feeling, desire,  
flex, difference, and possibility, queer refrain opens the body up to a  
complex polyvalent layering of temporal relationships—or temporal  
variety to use Bachelard's term. In queer refrain, the bodily activity  
scripted for flow through capital time is halted, stalled, splintered. A  
durational portal toward temporal variety opens in excess of the visible,  
in excess of heteropatriarchal methods for *making sense*. In durational  
performance, slow steps, elongated breaths, recumbent limbs, and  
folded torsos perform queer refrain to *make sense* of situations, social  
relationships, and life(times).

the tickle of rain against inner nares

*Sense* is a slippery noun. It references our bodily faculties – the way we perceive the world through touch, sound, sight, taste, and smell. It also indicates a mode of interpretation that adheres to an a priori system of order; does this sentence make sense? Presented with this question, a reader might presume that to ‘make sense’ is to convey an idea and its purpose clearly in a way that others can logically perceive, follow, and understand. What about making sense in relation to sensation and sensuality: a triggering of bodily sensors and synapses that could allow sense to anchor perception and understanding. Hinged with her belly facing her pelvis for the majority of the performance, Pane’s *Work in Progress* renders a sensual and tactile queer refrain. Her intimately folded orientation tediously undoes the upright body. Sense begins to structure temporal experience.

It follows then that sensing in queer refrain unlocks the most critical aspects of *Work in Progress*. That Pane’s archive offers us only a single photograph of the eight-hour durational performance, some handwritten ‘data’, and a blueprint of the garden—on which Pane has drawn an arrow and stated her intention—‘Gina Pane se manifesterà le 8/10/69 de 12h à 20h’ (see fig. 3)—is indicative of a further commitment to what I describe as queer refrain. Limiting the ephemeral trace of the performance is a calculated move to exceed heteropatriarchal constructs and legibility that echoes the durational form Pane helped pioneer. But how to draw out the corporeal struggle, temporal variety, and the sensuousness of the performance with these strategically sparse documents? To answer this question, a break.

a quivering cling to the crumble,

disintegrating flesh to wind.

Elsewhere here where else where else where else then here to  
hear the

exquisite

collapse of flesh when a foot feels held by  
the ground

measure measure step measure  
a breeze ruffling the ears  
sidestep backstep barely step  
measure measure drag the back  
a breeze ruffling the ears ankles knees hips stack the head  
mediate the rush find a focal point  
bend the knees fold forward  
side step fall back catch the ground  
squat down measure duck  
measure front back and both sides  
then suck tastes like nothing like  
up to knees hello hamstrings  
chest into the fold step measure  
hands half a hand both hands  
dangle and breath dangle and

cricket chirping

e step measure measure  
unge measure measure  
ck foot steady stretch roll feet  
ad quick breath quick breath  
point long step lower the chin  
measure measure small bounce  
ground cut suck tastes like ash  
measure waddle measure  
trickle of blood shake  
ke me salt and air deep breath  
ntravel the feet bring the  
re one hand's two hands three  
on the ground step backward  
breath

cricket chirping

my timing is off

my timing is off

trying to lift but heavy still

cricket chirping

my timing is off

my timing is off

can't lift my  
wait weight wait weight  
have to lift my  
my foot heavy  
please wait my eyes said wait

chirping

my timing is off

to leave



Fig. 3: Plan of *Work in Progress* October, 1969. Centre Pompidou/MNAM-CCI/Bibliothèque Kandinsky, American Center for Students and Artists. Courtesy of the artist and of Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

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In the spring of 2018, I accepted a residency in Paris that allowed me to make multiple trips to the museum garden where Pane performed *Work in Progress*.<sup>10</sup> Wondering how my research might develop if I relied more heavily on my durational performance practice, I decided

<sup>10</sup> In 1986 the American Center was demolished and replaced with Fondation Cartier, a museum of contemporary art. The garden was reinvented at this time with respect to the original site ("The American Center").



to investigate *Work in Progress* more palpably. My interest was not in reperformance, and I did not begin with preconceived movement patterns or the two most decipherable elements of Pane's choreography: 1) step 2) measure. I spent most of the earliest weeks being still in different postures (sitting, standing, squatting, flat, curved, bent), attuned to different ways of sensing the environment (through touch, sight, taste, smell, and sound). I would return to my studio after these visits and write down, without censor, ways I could further research Pane's folds, steps, and rhythms. I distilled these lists into different research tasks such as 'stand toppled at the waist for the day', 'count every step', 'smell everything', 'follow Pane's arrow and be still'. Even as I was not permitted to carry a measuring stick into the garden with me, I spent my research period executing tasks from this list.<sup>11</sup> This restriction produced many questions about Pane's ruler, particularly as I realised the 'data' transferred with Pane's archive contained a record of duration and movement (8 hours, 10,578 steps) but not distance or direction. As a performance structured around the action of measuring, surely the ruler was more than a prop? Crown of the head facing outward, gaze facing the belly or ground, Pane offers the ruler to her public as a recognisable marker of measure and progress. It enables an initial connection yet distinctively marks a frictive distance between her body (within the durational) and the passer-by who must be willing to leave the rhythm of capital time with Pane in order to sense Pane's work. As I did not need to signal to or invite a public, I abandoned fidelity to this object for my research and focused my experiments on discovering different methods for measuring steps, the ground, and bodily movement. For example, I spent one day trying to capture all the sweat from my body in a jar as I walked. On another eight-hour day I meandered around the garden in a folded manner, using my forearms to measure the ground. I continued with different tasks over three months. So much was opened by the constriction, the queer refrain,

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<sup>11</sup> The museum security guards monitoring the metal detectors at the museum entrance would either confiscate the object and hold it in their booth for me until I left for the day or escort me to the coat check to make sure I checked the object.

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I filled thirty-two journals with my research. I was not ‘performing’ but each day I navigated relational exchanges and the subsequent feelings that surfaced—my body becoming out of place, anachronistic, *untimely*. I inhabited loneliness interspersed with intimacy, frustration, humour, and play. I drifted between periods of boredom and moments in which all my senses were triggered. I would shake, cry, and laugh uncontrollably. I often lost all sense of clock-time. When my stomach stirred, I would go to the boulangerie and eat. When I felt anxious, I would smoke a cigarette. When the museum guards hovered near me, I knew the museum was closing and I would leave. Underlying my embodied investigation was my recognition of how I was perceived by others at the museum day after day. I stayed too long. I was not doing anything visibly productive. One museum guard felt compelled to remind me there were works of art to see. Researching *Work in Progress* demanded exit from normative senses of time, productivity, visibility, and something more profound was afoot (see fig. 3). To remain arched, folded, hunched, crunched, bent, *and* committed to measuring each step felt paradoxical, untenable, even nauseating. Blood rushes to the head, the tibialis muscles shake, balance is lost and rediscovered, the body often staggers, falling is inevitable, recumbence a brief reprieve, tedium fractured by yellow chélidoine poking up from the earth, the smell of lemons, then ash, breath trapped in the esophagus—how to stand and fold again? What makes sense?

\*

Each day I studied this work, upon leaving the museum garden and stepping onto the paved sidewalk of boulevard Raspail, I experienced a sensation I can only describe as dizzying and noisy. Emotionally, I would place the sensation on a continuum between melancholy, mischief, and madness. One observation consistently recurred, it felt increasingly impossible to move among the bustling flock of upright bodies navigating the metro, work, and a social rhythm that was

Stay with me. Feet crimson toes purple. This blood will be our clock. Fold. Still.



Fig. 4: Raegan Truax conducting research on *Work in Progress* at Foundation Cartier, Paris, 2018. Photograph by Nina Kurtela.

quick, devourous, inattentive. How to stay on the side of the senses? To understand what *Work in Progress* does beyond its initial critique of capitalism requires embracing the kind of sense-making the durational conjures. Halting the flow of a logical analysis, *Work in Progress* generates intricate and interdependent temporal relationships that surface by sensing into the artist's fold.

before the weeds die

I lap at their roots

purple shoes flit in my direction the palm of  
 her hand on the small of my  
 before the erasure back  
 first still then slowly tapping then small circles then  
 still again  
 the moment after warm then lifted  
 gliding away but not  
 leaving  
 tracing purple shoes across my field of upturned  
 vision  
 falling I subtly follow her everywhere  
 unknowing the garden through her touch

A uniquely queer and feminist medium is emerging as Pane folds and steps in the durational as a vital material for injecting the social landscape with a different sense of untimely values. In 1969, durational performance does not yet exist as a cogent artistic medium. Even today, in art historical discourse and performance studies, ‘durational performance’ remains a slippery term, often used vaguely, inconsistently, and ahistorically. As a durational performance artist, I have affinity for this slipperiness and the particular ways the medium consistently exceeds institutional capture—<sup>footprint</sup> what Valerio Dehò describes in this article’s introductory quote as a refusal to settle or become trapped into a singular origin story. But in praxis, durational performance is not without specific histories, lineages, aesthetics, and politics. The most visible lineage descends from the French Composer Erik Satie’s 1893 composition *Vexations* which John Cage and ten artists, ‘the Pocket Theater Piano Relay Team’, perform for a live audience in New York City in 1963. Cage’s contributions to a durational turn in performance art are often misread alongside masculine and masochistic works by Jackson Pollock, Vito Acconci, and Chris Burden. There is no mention of Pane’s profound intervention in 1969, and yet *Work in Progress* is pivotal for establishing durational performance as a cogent medium. It is arguably Pane’s performance and queer refrain that can help us best make sense of *Vexations* and Cage’s ‘pocket theatre relay’, recharting the lineage of durational performance through its queer and feminist dimensions.<sup>12</sup> <sup>handprint</sup> <sup>drags of forearms</sup> <sup>crisscrossing lines</sup> <sup>some spit and sweat and that</sup> <sup>trickle of blood</sup>

Here surfaces Pane’s body, toppled over, experimenting with rhythm and silence. My heritage of durational performance coagulates across the constructs of my senses. My reading of *Work in Progress* reveals the stakes in understanding how queer refrain is deployed by durational performance artists to point us to something beyond a break from standard time, something untimely and unruly, fractured and sensual, nauseating and boring, tedious and titillating. Without the mastery and cultivation of queer refrain, durational performance

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<sup>12</sup> See Truax for this recharting and my full account of *Vexations*.

would risk its intersectional queer feminist heritage and operate fully in excess and exhaustion, recuperated back into the service of unlimited capital and white heteropatriarchy—bodies recycled through 24/7/365 existence, trained to endure at all costs. Mastering queer refrain creates entirely new capacities for organising our social world and interactions.

Back folded, knees askew, eyes tracing the texture of the ground, I appear to have written myself into a position best supported by my corporeal senses.

I fear these rocks and today's wind might swallow me. I should swallow them first  
Let the taste help me change my orientation without leaving the fold damp silt salt rind tepid gust  
There is an odd inevitable pull (against gravity) to stretch into a more vertical alignment

the supported by my corporeal senses.

I am trying to stay with the rocks and the wind

tickle  
of rain  
against  
inner  
nares

For a long time I found this position restrictive. After all, that is how queer refrain works. Because if we are in fact, 'works in progress', as Pane's title from her first public durational performance suggests, changing how we measure our steps will help us find new temporal rhythms for existing differently together.

a breeze ruffling

the ears

Such an existence does not abandon all order but queerly refrains from being temporally and therefore sensorially regulated. With stomach clenching as she lifts her back foot, the social body is simultaneously anchored and unhinged as durational performance develops. Pane will waver off-balance. She will lose her footing, fail repeatedly, and there will be no visible point to it all. There will be no clearly altered terrain to validate her work. She will have been slow, repetitive, and silent. Eight hours. 10,578 steps. But what happens and how it is recorded depends on the kind of sense one cares to make within and of the durational. In lieu of conclusion, a refrain: you cannot march in the army of the upright and stay on the side of the senses. More queerly: nose to navel, small gashes along both elbows, no arrival in site—making sense requires mastering queer refrain. This may be the durational performance artist's most bold strategy and most risky tactic. Working in excess of steps off the clock, she is making time.

spasms  
jolting  
all your  
limbs

all the silent spaces

when  
the sun  
is set  
in the  
evening

Stay with me. Feet crimson toes purple. This blood will be our clock. Fold. Still. Crumple. Still. Heartbeat breath a gasp, more clocks. Still. The sun dips but does not settle. 'we shouldn't settle for what is reassuring, but rather struggle to expose, to denounce these mechanisms of servitude wherever they may be found' (Pane 31), now burgundy, byzantine, between steps, folded, stay with me still

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## Restaging Feminist Modernity with the ‘Shackles’ of Traditional *Chengshi* Aesthetics in *Liyuanxi Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*)

By Chaomei Chen

### Abstract

The system of performing codes known as *chengshi* has continuously been regarded as an impediment to the modernisation of *xiqu* (traditional Chinese theatre). These rigid codes—which include ways of speaking, moving, and role types—are at once inconsistent with and ‘unrepresentative’ of modern life. They have therefore become financially and aesthetically ‘uncompetitive’ compared to the West-derived spoken drama which has become the taste of contemporary Chinese audiences. With regards to *xiqu* reform and modernisation in contemporary China, practitioners and researchers have debated whether *chengshi* should be reformed in *xiqu* and how to reconcile *xiqu*’s aesthetic tradition with its modernisation. This article argues that it is conformity to the traditional *chengshi* aesthetics that paradoxically promotes feminist modernity in the *liyuanxi* performance *Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*), written by Zhang Jingjing and performed by the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Troupe in 2015. Following a re-framing of the intracultural reinterpretation of classical scripts in the context of *xiqu* reform, I will further elaborate the traditional *chengshi* subtleties that promote the protagonist’s female agency in this production and relocate female representation in *liyuanxi* on the topography of Chinese modernity and feminism.

*Xiqu*, the traditional operatic form of theatre, is among the more predominant types of performance in contemporary China. Its most salient feature lies in ‘*chengshi*’, a set of performance vocabularies derived from the summarisation and abstraction of quotidian experiences, such as ‘*changqiang* (vocal styles), *nian* (speaking), *shenduan* (body movements), and *hangdang* (role types)’ (Shanghai Arts Institute 169). However, with its illusionistic, slow-paced, and intricate performing conventions, *chengshi* has been taken as an impediment to *xiqu* modernity. Uncompetitive with generally ‘modernity’-oriented, West-

derived spoken drama, a chief concern in contemporary *xiqu* is whether its *chengshi* codes should be retained or abandoned. A specific type of *xiqu* I will be exploring here is *liyuanxi* (Liyuan opera): a Hokkien-language genre boasting a history that is over eight hundred years old. The main characteristics of *liyuanxi* are its classical, elegant movements and melodious, tender vocal and instrumental tunes that considerably predate and differ from the well-known *xiqu* genre of *jingju* (Peking or Beijing opera). In other words, it retains relatively more ‘traditional’ performance aesthetics than other *xiqu* genres: therefore, its use of *chengshi* is arguably vital.

The central case study of this article is the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Troupe’s (or FPLET) *Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*; 2015): a *liyuanxi* adaptation of a classical *jingju* script.<sup>1</sup> The original narrative features a patriarchal husband divorcing his wife after suspecting her of infidelity, then taking her back when her chastity is confirmed. The FPLET version, composed by the female playwright Zhang Jingjing,<sup>2</sup> rewrites the passive wife in the feudal patriarchal society into an ‘awakened’ woman with more independence—taking a more active role in the divorce. The ‘intracultural’ practice of adapting an extant narrative employed by Zhang should be considered in the contexts of *xiqu* reform: a complicated and controversial issue interweaving with Chinese societal modernisation since the founding of the PRC in 1949. The reform has continuously been surrounded by the conflict between tradition and modernisation, between localisation and westernisation.

Josh Stenberg regards this production as ‘conservative experimentation’, because the ‘generic conventions’ of *xiqu* ‘are largely

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1 Due to the limited length of the article, the plot of the *jingju* production will not be summarised in detail. For more information on this see Josh Stenberg (326). There is also a contemporary Taiwanese *jingju* adaptation of this play discussed by Stenberg (327-330) and Daphne Lei (42-63).

2 All the Chinese names mentioned here will follow the Chinese cultural convention that introduces the surname before the given name (e.g., Zhang Jingjing instead of Jingjing Zhang), except when the person’s name order is widely recognised in global scholarship.

observed', though 'the gender ethics are revised' (324). However, the claim of 'technical conservation' and the reversal of gender dynamics in Stenberg's discussion (339) perhaps fails to more fully consider the debates around *xiqu* reform since 1949. In response to *xiqu* reform's demands of cultural modernity and purification of obsolete *xiqu* conventions, FPLET, the *liyuanxi* troupe behind Zhang, tends to rediscover *xiqu*'s own narrative system and aesthetic tradition before the broader cultural assimilation of other/Western cultures. The theatrical regeneration from within echoes what Brian Singleton calls an 'intracultural' practice 'found in the reappropriation of folk traditions' as 'a political as well as cultural resistance to the commodification of "traditions"' in his exploration of Indian local theatre (96). In other words, the generic innovation of *xiqu* does not necessarily include radical artistic innovation. Instead, a dynamic incorporation of modern consciousness into its traditional aesthetics provides a viable model for contemporary *xiqu* transformation. This article argues that the very observance of traditional *chengshi* aesthetics of *liyuanxi* 'paradoxically' promotes feminist modernity in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*. I will frame the intracultural reinterpretation of traditional scripts along the axis of *xiqu* reform, demonstrate the traditional *chengshi* subtleties that facilitate the heroine Meng's female agency in terms of performance, and relocate the female representation of both women characters and playwright in *liyuanxi* on the topography of Chinese feminism and modernity.

### **Intracultural Reinterpretation on the Topography of *Xiqu* Reform**

Intracultural practices, as they are used in this production, have proved to be important in the process of *xiqu* reform. Critical opinions diverge regarding the most appropriate way to reform *xiqu* in terms of the conflict between tradition and modernity. The Chinese *xiqu* historian Zhang Geng's model of categorisation has been adopted in *xiqu* scholarship since the 1950s: classical plays, newly created/re-written historical plays, and modern/contemporary plays (245). Greatly

influenced by socialist ideology, Zhang Geng suggests that only modern, ‘realist’ plays can represent the ethos and aesthetics of the socialist era (343-345). While Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak advocates reform that incorporates ‘popular innovations’ into ‘both new and extant plays in order to reach the broad, “semi-educated” urban audience as well as “semi-literate” peasantry’ (165-166), Fu Jin contends that *xiqu*, as an illusionistic art built upon its *chengshi* aesthetics, is incompatible with modern plays that incorporate Western realism (376-378). However, informed by Yang Ming’s exploration of *xiqu* modernisation through recent *kunqu* productions (182),<sup>3</sup> I contend that the ‘reinterpretation’ of historical texts in a modern context—while using traditional forms—can enable *xiqu* modernisation and make it relevant without affecting its style.

As a reworking of a classical *jingju* script, the production of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* exists in tension between traditional aesthetics and modern audiences and culture: a challenge also faced by other adapted scripts. Unlike the scholars above, Dong Jian disapproves of a clear demarcation between nationalisation (tradition) and modernisation (Westernisation), with a replacement of ‘the modernisation of nation’ with ‘the nationalisation of modernity’ (Dong 32). The blurring of the modernity/tradition distinction has also been echoed by Siyuan Liu, who proposes two strategies of ‘modernities’ against ‘old’ theatre during the 1950s *xiqu* reform: purification and hybridisation. While purification ‘involves a decisive break with the past and a rigorous process of purification’, hybridisation refers to ‘hybrid modernity’ at once ‘distanced from the past and continuous with it’ (Liu 202). During the 1950s, the two strategies had a destructive effect on the development of some regional *xiqu* genres through artificially demarcating between ‘scientific’, civilised modernity and archaic, feudal tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> The aesthetic system of *liyuanxi* is similar to that of *kunju*, with authenticity—or in Wichmann-Walczak’s words, characteristic ‘flavour (*wei*)’—as a defining feature: hence targeting a more culturally and theatrically literate audience.

Assimilating provincialism and elitism as its discursive cornerstone since the 1950s, *liyuanxi* was assigned to a refined, 'elite' level in the process of 'purifying' specified by its distinctive *chengshi* aesthetics. Unlike the case of other regional genres, this reform indeed rescued the almost extinct *liyuanxi*, but it was again damaged by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) which exerted destructive effects on various aspects of Chinese culture—specifically here through a mechanical integration of the Stanislavski performing system built upon socialist realism. After 1976, however, the urgency to retain Chinese local traditions and aesthetics in pursuit of modernity has been put high on the agenda of *xiqu* reform in reaction to the rise of nationalism (Fu 40). The local traditional aesthetics of *liyuanxi* have been re-evaluated and rediscovered as a 'living fossil' of *xiqu*, rejuvenating this genre up to the present.

### **Resuming Female Agency within the Boundary of *Liyuanxi Chengshi***

Though a destructive strategy to some regional genres in the 1950s, Liu's model of 'hybrid modernity' at once 'distanced from the past and continuous with it' (Liu 202)—if resituated on the landscape of *liyuanxi* reform—can demonstrate the feminist aspirations that FPLET's *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* generates from its traditional generic *chengshi* conventions. Female agency is considered as a positive form of resistance within the patriarchal social system. For example, as the political scientist Lois McNay states, 'the feminine subject is synchronically produced as the object of regulatory norms by phallocentric symbolic systems and formed as a subject or agent who may resist these norms' (59). There are moments when women, as 'oppressed' objects, are given agency to subvert the 'oppressing' institution. In *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, the delicateness of traditional *chengshi* practices serve to magnify Meng's latent conjugal crisis, arouse her suppressed female consciousness, and facilitate her female agency in three aspects: namely, through her illusionistic marionette-like yet freely expressive body, the simultaneous juxtaposition of self-introductions (*zibao jiamen*), and female narrative and writing.



As a rewritten *jingju* play, there is no extant production of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* in the *liyuanxi* repertoire. How to maintain its *chengshi* aesthetics, then, poses a challenge to the performers. The specific *chengshi* in *liyuanxi* is built upon *kemu*, *kebu*, and dance. ‘*Ke*’ designates the special body movements of *liyuanxi*, with its general principles known as ‘*kemu*’ (lit. the mother of *ke*). ‘*Kebu*’ (the step of *ke*) refers to more specifically codified movements with specific hand, eye, body, and foot gestures in line with the characters’ singing and speaking and the instrumental tunes (Wu 374). The performers thus follow the strict principle of ‘one line of lyrics in accordance with one step of movements’ (*yiju qu yibu ke*). The influence of puppet theatre also accounts for this rigid performing system, among other *xiqu* genres in the *Min Nan* (Southern Fujian) area (Wu 72).

With regard to the performing system based on ‘*kebu*’, the body is central to the performing system of *liyuanxi* as it is in other genres. The *xiqu* body is both ‘kinetic and sentimental’, namely, ‘the *xiqu* body moves in space, and it moves audiences’ (Wilcox 45). In other words, the body movements in *xiqu* externalise the character’s emotions, which touches the audience. The importance of sentimentalism or lyricism in *xiqu* performance gives rise to the representational principle of *xieyi* (a sketch of meaning): ‘[d]istinct from representational verisimilitude, *xieyi* seeks to convey the essence of things rather than to imitate their exact form’ (*ibid.*). Therefore, the abstract corporeal externalization of unspoken feelings is essential to *xiqu* aesthetics.

In *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, Meng’s illusionistic, marionette-like yet freely expressive body movements—especially the ‘hand dance’—articulate her female agency created through ‘regulated liberties’, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s term (102). Lois McNay formulates the concept of agency in feminist theory through a new understanding of Bourdieu’s idea of ‘habitus’ and ‘regulated liberties’: ‘[f]or Bourdieu, the temporality inherent to the concept of habitus denotes not just the processes through which norms are inculcated upon the body, but also the moment of praxis or living through of these norms by the individual’ (25). The *dan* (protagonist) actress Zeng Jingping succeeds

in rendering Meng's feminist liberties within the 'regulated' classical *liyuanxi* body. Taking small, mincing steps within the *chengshi* conventions, Meng's body identity 'involves the inscription of dominant social norms or the "cultural arbitrary" upon the body' (*ibid.*). Guilty and remorseful—limited by the social expectations imposed on women—Meng chooses to subdue her awakened female desire after the rainy night when she stays with the male stranger Liu.

Nevertheless, Zhang subverts the patriarchal system of ancestor worship through the moment of sexual metaphor. The moment of 'living through of these norms' by Meng as 'the individual', namely, 'the temporality of habitus', becomes a generative one that endows the individual with autonomy (McNay 25). Zhang clips the original *jingju* plot in which Meng forsakes her own filial piety by leaving her marital home to ritualistically honour her

husband's ancestors. Another scene is significantly added by Zhang: Meng's discovery of the beauty of 'spring'—a traditional metaphor of female sexuality in Chinese *xiqu*—on her way to sacrifice to Wang's ancestors for *Qingming* festival at his request.<sup>4</sup> *Qingming* festival is a traditional Chinese festival where the tombs of a family's ancestors are swept to show filial piety. However, a sexual awakening is embodied in Meng's lively singing in line with her 'hand dance' (*shouwuwu*), which undermines the patriarchal sacrificing system that lays great emphasis on filial piety. Unlike other genres adopting 'water sleeves' as an extension of costumes to create a visual effect, *liyuanxi* is characterized by its 'hand dance' with systematic finger gestures to



<sup>4</sup> The discovery of spring is a traditional metaphor in *xiqu*. For instance, in *The Peony Pavilion* (1598) written by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), the *dan* Du Liniang discovers the full-bloom spring in her garden, indicating her awakened female sexuality.



Fig. 1: Meng's final encounter with Wang and Liu (Lin Cangxiao, Zeng Jingping, Zhang Chunji). Zhang Jingjing's *Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*), performed by the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Troupe, 2015.

externalise the character's emotions. Through the exuberant 'hand dance', the emotional female body enacted by Meng undermines the mature, disciplinary one institutionalised by the patriarchal society. Furthermore, her female agency culminates at the moment when she actively 'seizes' the 'brush pen' (a patriarchal symbol of writing and narrating) from her husband to write the divorce paper by herself, before pressing his finger as a seal on it. Just as the calculated use of the husband's finger grants her autonomy, the 'hand dance' becomes a subversion of patriarchal authority.

In addition to her paradoxically ‘confined-yet-free’ *xiqu* body, self-introduction (*zibao jiamen*) is another important form of *nian* (speaking)—one of the *chengshi* conventions that promotes her female agency. Though commonly regarded as an outdated *chengshi* practice in *xiqu*, *zibao jiamen* serves as an innovative way to expose the characters’ innermost emotions and foreshadow their conjugal crisis in this play (as the playwright does with Meng). Originating in a time when most *xiqu* audiences were illiterate, self-introduction was once an effective way for the audience to understand the story’s background. However, this practice has been discarded by many productions after the *xiqu* reform, due to its ‘tediousness’ incompatible with ‘realist’, quick-paced representations of life. It denotes a set of *chengshi* practices generally comprised of *yinzi* (lead-in singing), *dingchang shi* (the introductory poem sung by the characters), and *dingchang bai* (the introductory lines spoken by characters) and aims to introduce the characters’ names, hometown, and identity as well as foreshadow the plot (Zhu 294). All three parts are maintained in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, yet not without theatrical innovation.

Here the juxtaposition of two characters’ simultaneous, rather than alternate, self-introductions creates a strong dramatic tension from the different perspectives of the husband and the wife. The self-introductions take the alternate order of Meng following Wang in Zhang’s original script, which is lengthier than the final 2015 production. Alternating their lines sentence by sentence, the lead-in singing reveals Wang as a man merely intent on achieving career success and fame through the imperial examination, while Meng as a lonely wife distressed by her husband’s departure. In their *dingchang bai*, for Wang, it is ‘the day of examination’, whereas it becomes ‘the day of parting’ for Meng (Zeng Jingping 04:40-04:55). Meng shows concern for Wang’s safety and health during the journey, but Wang only cares about her chastity as a marital obligation. Hence, the intricately designed self-introductions disclose an inherent conjugal imbalance between a lonely, considerate wife and an indifferent, suspicious, fame-seeking husband.

Meng's female identity is reshaped through the privileged medium of her own narrative, enacted through the nuanced *liyuanxi* narration style. Alone in the titular Imperial Stele Pavilion with the stranger Liu, her interior monologue, intensified by the accompanied tunes of *liyuanxi*-specific instrument *nan gu* (southern drum, or foot-pressing drum),<sup>5</sup> illustrates a self-interrogation over her loveless and unreliable marriage. Her later rumination on that rainy night with Liu, expressed in her hand-writing of a poem as a souvenir of Liu's genteel manner, further reconfigures her female identity through a discovery of her own feminine charm. Instead of being objectified by the male 'gaze' of Liu, she actively restructures her own agency through her own 'praxis' of the gaze. In this sense, her identity as an autonomous 'woman' begins to emerge from her previous understanding of her 'self' as an obedient 'wife'. Her introspection and the cross-examination of her inner feelings, with *xiqu*'s emphasis on lyricism, propels her self-discovery and reconfigures her identity.

In summary, the 'regulated' *chengshi* practices of *liyuanxi* paradoxically enact Meng's female agency. Meng's female body enacted by the actress Zeng Jingping's *liyuanxi* body articulates female agency in her 'living through' of the social norms imposed on women; Meng's and Wang's simultaneous self-introductions (*zibao jiamen*) subvert the patriarchal power relations between genders; and Meng's female narrative and writing convey her female subjectivity as a 'woman' rather than a 'wife'.

### Feminism and Female Representation on Stage in China

As the 'cultural inheritor' and the sole professional troupe of *liyuanxi* in mainland China upon its foundation, FPLET is famous for their

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5 With a centimeter of about five centimeters, the specialty of this drum lies in that the drummer (*gushi*) puts one foot on different places on the head of the drum to create a variety of tones, volumes, and timbres with the drumstick striking on it. The drummer usually has all the performing codes, including *ke*, *bai* (speaking), *chang* (singing), and each role type's personalities and emotional subtleties at their command to manipulate the timbre and rhythmic nuances of drumbeats, which should match the various actions of the performer (Wu 103-105).

innovative and successful restagings of classical or historical plays touching upon gender relations since the 1980s. Its late playwright, Wang Renjie, pioneered a new route of *liyuanxi* reform through his reinterpretation of female characters in successful, rewritten historical productions such as *Dong Sheng yu Li Shi* (*Scholar Dong and Madame Li*) (1994). As one of the successors of Wang in FPLET, the young female playwright Zhang Jingjing acknowledges the influence of Wang's works—which often staged feminist subjects. In a personal interview, Zhang notes how Wang's representations not only inspired her to become a playwright and to write female subjects, but informed her own female consciousness. These factors drove her to rework the traditional, patriarchal *jingju* play *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* from the female perspective of Meng (67).

There has also been a long tradition in Chinese theatre of borrowing historical female stories to meditate on women in contemporary society—as the representation of women on the traditional stage was far more biased and inadequate under patriarchal dominance. In this regard, the reworking of female characters in contemporary *xiqu* contributes to a re-evaluation and rewriting of feminist modernity. This kind of rewriting has been involved in a number of *xiqu* productions, such as the *chuanju* (Sichuan opera) *Pan Jinlian* (1985), the *yueju* (Shaoxing opera) *Xishi Guiyue* (*Xishi Returns to Yue*) (1989), and the Taiwanese *jingju* *Wang Youdao Xiuqi* (*Wang Youdao Divorces His Wife*, another version of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*) (2004). These productions explored the subaltern status of women and the suppression of female sexuality in feudal society to reflect current feminist issues. This intracultural dialogue with the past echoes Xiaomei Chen's (2001) argument, along with Liu Binyan's appraisal of Wei Minglun's rewritten *chuanju* *Pan Jinlian*, that 'instead of casting contemporary stories in traditional theatrical forms [...] one could appeal to contemporary audiences by rewriting stories from the traditional repertoires' in response to the *xiqu* crisis (Chen 207). Here the *xiqu* crisis refers to the dramatic decline of *xiqu* productions and audiences since the 1980s due to the invasion of more popular



entertainment forms such as TV and films. As the Taiwanese *jingju* scholar Wang An-Chi states, ‘the directionality of feminism has been diverted from the denouncement of patriarchy to the rediscovery of female subjectivity’ (153), which is also true in mainland China. Likewise, gender representation on the *xiqu* stage has transformed the representation of female characters from a male-centred perspective towards explorations of female emotions and sexuality.

This evolution of female representation in *xiqu* is intertwined with Chinese feminism—which had a different trajectory from its Western counterpart. The ‘home-leaving’ protagonist Meng Yuehua in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* is reminiscent of the female protagonist Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879)—a theatrical symbol of female liberation in China since the New Culture Movement.<sup>6</sup> Ibsen’s play was considered by the Chinese to be Ibsen’s articulation of freedom in marriage, love, and the patriarchal family.<sup>7</sup> As an image of the ‘new woman’, the ‘Chinese Nora’ was no longer a daughter, wife, mother, lover, among other gender stereotypes, but identified as a female subject empowered with agency. Nevertheless, this ‘outspoken’ female agency—with Nora famously ending the play by leaving home—emerged in China like a shocking flash in the pan, and so was later silenced in literary narratives until the 1980s (Dai 3).<sup>8</sup> By this time, feminist consciousness was put in the cultural spotlight due to an increasing Western cultural influx, but the feminist movement still failed to benefit lower and lower-middle class female groups. Not until the early 1990s have ‘Chinese feminists enthusiastically embraced the global feminist concept of gender and used it innovatively to create

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6 The New Cultural Movement, heralded by such Chinese intellectuals with global visions as Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Hu Shi (1891-1962), and Lu Xun (1882-1936), was a movement during the 1910-20s that rejected classical culture and promoted a new Chinese culture based on Western ideals.

7 Ibsen is generally acknowledged as one of the most influential foreign playwrights in China over the past century, where his most frequently adapted play has been *A Doll’s House* (He 118-135).

8 Between the founding of the PRC in 1949 and the 1980s, ‘state feminism’ dominated the gender paradigm in China (see Wang 41).

local practices' (Wang 40). Integrating global feminism into Chinese society has helped to redefine traditional gender norms and champion female agency in the new century.

It is against this social backdrop that the production of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* takes place. Zhang Jingjing asserts the female agency of her protagonist Meng as well as herself, which enables the play to engage with young female audiences. During the Shanghai Little Theatre *Xiqu* Festival in 2015, *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* tickets were sold out two months before its performance. The play was especially popular on tour in large cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing among young female audiences. Such witnesses have tendencies towards '[d]etraditionalisation, disembedding, the creation of a life of one's own [...] and the irresistible pressure to be more independent and individualistic' (Zheng 147-148). The term 'disembedding' comes from the first stage in Ulrich Beck's conceptualization of a triple 'individualization': 'removal from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the "liberating dimension")' (126). Contemporary Chinese society has witnessed its women become more independent, autonomous, empowered individuals who increasingly defy traditional gender paradigms.

Zhang's motive to rewrite this play originates from her own experience as an audience member of the original *jingjiu* performance that depicts Meng as a docile daughter and submissive wife. As a young female of the post-1985 generation,<sup>9</sup> Zhang received a bachelor's degree from Nanjing University, one of China's top universities. Her choice to become a playwright also went against her own father's will (Jingjing Zhang 67). Unable to identify with the play's patriarchal narrative, Zhang reimagines Meng's 'lived' female emotional and affectional subtleties as relocated from the oppressed closed space of domesticity to the free open space of the pavilion, thus re-identifying her not as a

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<sup>9</sup> This generation is generally considered too young to compose classical literature such as *xiqu* scripts.

‘wife’, but as a ‘woman’ alone with another man. The reworked story thus expresses the playwright’s understanding, respect, and support for Meng, behind whom millions of Chinese women once were and are still victims of patriarchy (*ibid.*). In this sense, though having not ‘elected to phrase their work in terms of feminism or similar terms’ (Stenberg 338), Zhang’s reworking is imbued with a feminist consciousness.<sup>10</sup> As Meng is endowed with the agency to escape from her marital plight, the writer has also matured as a contemporary female *xiqu* playwright breaking free from the fetters of a conventional patriarchal narrative paradigm.

Zhang further de-institutionalises the myth of love and marriage in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, a practice often employed by modern female playwrights to stage lived, dynamic female experiences and subjectivities. Traditionally, only a young ‘maiden’ boasts the right to pursue ‘love’ on the *xiqu* stage. However, the search for love is, of course, legitimate for a woman at all stages of her life—something that is not represented in traditional *xiqu*. Meng’s escape from a loveless marriage is authorised in Zhang’s adaptation because the reliance on men is obviously not a necessity for contemporary women. In the final encounter with her ex-husband, Meng further steps forward to subvert the overplayed dualism between loyalty and disloyalty with an emphasis on marriage’s volatility and unreliability, going beyond the original narrative’s traditionalised discourse of marriage and loyalty. This subversion creates a strong resonance for its female audience, especially those in large, competitive cities riddled with high divorce rates and numerous marital problems.

## Conclusion

As Dong Jian suggests, the sharp demarcation between tradition and modernity in the process of *xiqu* reform should be reconsidered. An organic interaction between traditional *chengshi* aesthetics and modern

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<sup>10</sup> This is also true for Ibsen. Though he did not call himself a feminist, his ‘Nora’ has become an icon of feminism.

consciousness stands out in the orientation of *xiqu* development in contemporary China. Traditional *liyuanxi*, as well as *xiqu* more generally, is struggling to survive in a contemporary Chinese market flooded by various entertainment media. In this regard, the gendered restaging of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* demonstrates that an intracultural practice within traditional aesthetics turns out to be an appropriate way to strike a balance between tradition and innovation. Even the assumed ‘outdated’ *chengshi* narrative of self-introduction can become innovative. This production not only reveals the female plight in Meng’s time, but also performs a transformative, de-traditionalised female agency that engages in dialogues with its contemporary female audiences.

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## *Photo Essay*

### **Performing the Limits of Home**

By Karen Berger

This photo-essay is offered as a brief description of the rationale and content of the performance associated with my practice-led PhD in Performance Studies from Federation University, Australia, awarded in 2021. In keeping with the tone of a home-based performance, my language is somewhat colloquial, and theoretical considerations are not exhaustive. For a fuller consideration of my work please see ‘Performing the Bounds of Responsibility’ (2021), ‘Breaking Boundaries in the work of artist, Tracey Moffatt’ (2022), or the video of the performance (2021) from which the images are extracted.

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Some childhood memories associated with the limits of home remain with me. When we first arrived in Melbourne from England, my parents took us kids house-hunting. I remember visiting a potential house and my sisters and I knocking a sliding door off its hinges. We didn’t stay there. The house they did buy I was really keen on. The garden consisted of a big elm tree and dry grass. Being six, I was small enough that the grass reached above my eyes and so I thought the garden went on forever. I was really disappointed when fences went up to reveal a normal-sized garden. The elm was a winner though. I can remember the first time I climbed it high enough to be able to see over the surrounding fences. The bird’s-eye view of the land was intoxicating. And in my favourite childhood dream I could see even further: looking through the kitchen window I see the sky completely full of large swirling comets, planets, galaxies.

Searching for a theme for a Performance Studies PhD project, I come across Tim Flannery’s *The Explorers* (1998), an edited collection



Fig. 1: Using an excerpt from Tadeusz Kantor's *I Shall Never Return* (1988), I wake from a nightmare of Odysseus' brutal return to Ithaca.



Fig. 2: An excerpt from Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, describing his illegal border crossing from Czechoslovakia to Poland, takes me out of the house through the window.

of journal excerpts by Australian explorers. There is something about the intimacy of reading a wide range of peoples' experiences with the challenges of a 'new' land, that fascinates me. I am aware that when I read the episodes that most intrigue me, my eyes move off the page into the space around me. As I unsuccessfully try to bridge the gap between past and present, reaching the limits of my abilities to really grasp what is going on draws me to further explore the material.

I am particularly struck by accounts of Indigenous peoples. First Fleeter, Captain Watkins Tench describes the gulf of understanding that existed between the Europeans and their guides: '[t]o comprehend the reasons which induce an Indian to perform many of his offices of life is difficult; to pronounce that which could lead him to wander amidst these dreary wilds baffles penetration' (qtd. in Flannery 64). In a fundamental sense, calling these new arrivals to Australia 'explorers', seen to be pushing their way across the limits of 'known territory', is an oxymoron: Indigenous people have been living here since time immemorial.

It seems to me that the best way to approach this controversial material would be to work on it with an Indigenous performer. I ask a colleague if she'll work with me. She agrees but we only manage a few workshop rehearsals before she finds she is no longer available. This places a significant limit on my plan. I defer for a year and eventually think I have found a way to deal theatrically with the explorers' journals in a productive way: I will perform the texts in my own home as if I were an explorer finding 'unexplored' lands. This performance of finding 'terra nullius' in my home will serve to show how absurd it was that 'explorers', and the colonial Government they served, could convince themselves that they were taking possession of an unclaimed land. I live in Narrm (Melbourne), home to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation for at least 40,000 years, ancestral country that has never been ceded.

Richard Davis argues that a particular kind of limit, the frontier, 'is one of the most pervasive, evocative tropes underlying the production of [Australian] national identity' (Rose and Davis iii). My



Fig. 3: A Gunter's chain.



Fig. 4: The surveying 'ritual' accompanied by Ovid's quasi-religious lines.



site-specific performance aimed to give audiences multiple visceral experiences of limits, with my theoretical understanding primarily inspired by *Borderlands* (1987), by Chicana Mestiza activist, Gloria Anzaldúa. Walter Mignolo provides a useful theoretical summary of Anzaldúa's work:

Border thinking or theorizing emerged from and as a response to the violence (frontiers) of imperial/territorial epistemology and the rhetoric of modernity (and globalization) of salvation that continues to be implemented on the assumption of the inferiority or devilish intentions of the Other and, therefore, continues to justify oppression and exploitation as well as eradication of the difference. Border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside; and as such, it is always a decolonial project (206).

In 'Epistemic Violence: the Hidden Injuries of Whiteness in Australian Postcolonising Borderlands' (2018), Goenpul scholar, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, highlights the fact that Anzaldúa recognises the importance of bodies (301). Moreton-Robinson asserts that Indigenous sovereignty struggles occur in the Australian borderlands as Indigenous bodies undermine the possibility of white Australian belonging (301). The epistemic violence that is the result of white efforts to maintain Australian social order 'continues in the everyday' (311). Both Moreton-Robinson's focus on the everyday, and her assertion of the importance of bodies feed into my home-based performative intervention, as performance is the art form that most engages with the body. In a site-specific performance, especially one where the audience walks between sites, the bodies of the audience members must engage more than in a traditional theatre.

Helena Grehan argues that Indigenous-themed performances, often staged at festivals and in mainstream theatres, can result in non-Indigenous audiences wanting 'to explain, to understand, to be



Fig. 5: From Caryl Churchill's play, *Top Girls* (1982), here I am Dull Gret, calling her neighbours to join her in descending to Hell to 'pay the devils out' for causing the Spanish to invade Flanders, resulting the in the murder of her children.



Figs. 6-9 (pp. 100-102): Nineteenth-century 'explorer', J.L. Stokes, is breathlessly excited by his 'discoveries'.

forgiven, or to escape' (30). By performing in my home I hope to resist this reaction, which is fundamentally one of seeing the Indigenous as 'other'. By overlaying the experience of being in a seemingly 'normal' suburban home with dense texts from a large range of times and places that demand intellectual and emotional work, I want to encourage an audience response that is more immediate and personal. My aim is to hinder the types of avoidance Grehan lists above for non-Indigenous audiences and elicit reflection on their own responsibilities for living on a stolen land.

Moreton-Robinson emphasises the performative nature of the colonial violence still enacted on Indigenous people: 'the first naval boat people produced invisible borders [...] that continue to deny Indigenous people our sovereign rights' ('Bodies'). She argues that these reiterative cultural practices are used to perform the idea of the nation as a 'white possession'. Historically, this was staged by men who used mapping and naming as integral aspects of colonisation. These men also ignored Indigenous performances of sovereignty, for example the threatening gestures, words, and spears thrown at Captain Cook when he landed at Botany Bay.

As Paul Carter points out, the explorers' journals themselves had a performative purpose, intended as an important tool of the imperial project, epistemologically claiming the land (71) by implying 'a centre of power round which the boundaries of the unknown are progressively pushed back' (64). It is for this reason that Carter regards the following excerpt from J. L. Stokes' journal as the *locus classicus* of Australian spatial history—the landscape itself is irrelevant, it is the explorer's experience, particularly his conscious enjoyment of language, that is important. As Carter shows, the explorer can make history twice, 'first by his journey and then by his journal' (117). This calls to mind Richard Schechner's oft-quoted definition of performance as 'twice-behaved behaviour' (36).





We stepped out over what we felt to be untrodden ground. It had often before been my lot to be placed in a similar position, and I have necessarily, therefore, given expression already to identical sentiments; but I cannot refrain from again reminding you how far inferior is the pleasure of perusing the descriptions of new lands, especially when attempted by an unskilled pen, to that which the explorer himself experiences. All are here on an equal footing; the most finished writer and the most imperfect scribbler are on the same level; they are equally capable of the exquisite enjoyment of discovery, they are equally susceptible of the feelings of delight that gush upon the heart as every forward step discloses fresh prospects, and brings a still more new horizon, if I may so speak, to view. And it maybe added that, to the production of the emotions I allude to, beauty of landscape is scarcely necessary. We strain forward incited by curiosity, as eagerly over an untrodden heath, or untraversed desert, as through valleys of surpassing loveliness, and amid mountains of unexplored grandeur; or perhaps, I should say, more eagerly, for there is nothing on which the mind can repose, nothing to tempt it to linger, nothing to divert the current of its thoughts. Onward we move, with expectation at its highest, led by the irresistible charm of novelty, almost panting with excitement, even when every step seems to add certainty to the conviction that all that is beyond resembles all that has been seen. (Stokes qtd. in Carter 82-83)





Fig. 10: Major Mitchell finds 'a land so inviting and still without inhabitants!'

In my performance, I enact the breathless excitement of this text as I drive my car out of my driveway and down our non-descript suburban street. In one of those serendipities that site-specific performance can sometimes provide, my street ends in a dead end where there is a house on whose garage door is painted a 1960s kitsch mural of hunting Aborigines—an extraordinary example of appropriation that would be considered utterly politically incorrect now (see fig. 9).

Major Thomas Mitchell was extremely influential in the progress of colonisation. Though his descriptions of the country were sometimes significantly inaccurate, it was these descriptions that attracted overlanders. From Portland to Sydney, so powerfully were his wheel marks seen to show the limit between good country and bad, that all squatters settled south of the line (Carter 255).

Mitchell and his men surveyed a large part of south-eastern Australian using a Gunter's chain (see fig. 3). Largely superseded by more advanced technology, there is a large collectors' market for such items. As one American website claims,

To surveyors and collectors alike, the link chain symbolizes a rugged era, when surveying tools and techniques were literally defining America. [...] Owning a link chain now captures a bit of this glorious past; to heft it enhances the kinship one feels with the surveyor who toiled in the field long ago. ('The Surveyor's Chain')

I bought (on eBay) a Gunter's chain, which I used twice in my performance—at first when enacting the quasi-religious lines of Ovid, quoted by Mitchell in his journal (see fig. 4):

Communemque prius ceu lumina solis et auras  
Cautus humum longo signavit limite mensor

And the ground, which had hitherto been a common possession like the sunlight and the air  
The careful surveyor now marked out with long-drawn boundary line. (Mitchell qtd. in Carter 119)



Fig. 11: But discarded under the house are less savoury remains.



Fig. 12: Harvesting the murnong.



Later in my performance, the chain is used to help physicalise the sorrows of a mother whose children have been killed by colonising forces (see fig. 5). Indeed, not only was the process of colonisation epistemologically violent in its imposition of a conception of land ownership, but thousands of Aboriginal people were murdered in raids and battles. In my performance I chose to refer to this aspect of colonisation through a number of found texts, and through the reveal of bloody napkins hidden under the house.<sup>1</sup>

In his book *Dark Emu* (2014), Bruce Pascoe, a Professor of Indigenous Agriculture at the University of Melbourne, bemoans Mitchell's arrogance in assuming that Australia was a land just waiting for European farming. I use this Mitchell quotation taken from Pascoe as I enact confidently pushing through our garden gate (see fig. 10):

The view was exceedingly beautiful, shining fresh and green in the light of a fine morning. The scene was different from anything I had ever before witnessed either in New South Wales or elsewhere. A land so inviting and still without inhabitants! As I stood, the first European intruder on the sublime solitude of these verdant plains as yet untouched by flocks or herds, I felt conscious of being the harbinger of mighty changes; and that our steps would soon be followed by the men and the animals for which it seemed to have been prepared. (Mitchell qtd. in Pascoe 142)

But Pascoe is also grateful for Mitchell's observations showing that Aboriginal people built houses (21), and even more importantly, that they were farmers (20), which soundly disproves the legal fiction of 'terra nullius'—that the land was 'nobody's land' because it had not been cultivated. In south-eastern Australia, where I live, the cultivated food plant that Mitchell refers to as most prevalent is murnong, or yam

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of the attempted Aboriginal genocide, which falls beyond the remit of this short piece, please see my paper 'Performing the Bounds of Responsibility' (2021).



daisy (23). Sadly, it did not take long, with the combination of settlers' sheep over-eating the plants and their hooves hardening the soil, for the murnong to become rare (24). Inspired by Pascoe, I have planted murnong in my garden. Towards the end of my performance (fig. 12), I break the soil to dig up the first of my murnong to share with my audience.

Artist and historian Rachel Joy shows that many 'occupier Australians' refuse responsibility for the wrongs of colonialism by claiming that they didn't personally commit any crimes (140). However, this idea is based on the false understanding that colonialism is over. Rather, as stated by anthropologist Patrick Wolfe, '[i]nvasion is not an event relegated to the past but a structure' (Wolfe 140).

Or in the words of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker):

Let no one say the past is dead

The past is all about us and within (93).

This research was important to me as a way of exploring the borders, or limits, to my knowledge, to how far I can go, as a non-Indigenous person, in my explorations of the land of Australia. I tried to follow historian Greg Denning's injunction: '[d]are to voyage across times, cultures and self' to expand your self-awareness and receive some understanding of the otherness within you (346). By creating a solo performance, in which I used text from many different sources, including various explorers' journals, I brought material from many voyages and times into myself. Aware of my limits, I searched for othernesses within me as my own home became porous to the cultural productions of different times and places. My aim was to deepen my own and a settler audience's understandings of the complexities of relationships to this land in order to foster our sense of responsibility, within the limits of our own subject position and history. With my artwork, by performing the feeling of having crossed a boundary into my own home, I aimed to raise questions rather than offer conclusions.

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## *Notes from the Field*

### ***Boundaries: Respecting Authenticating Limits in the Production of a Play on Trans Marginality***

By Dónall Mac Cathmhaoill

Theatre works examining the unenviable position of LGBTQ+ people in Northern Ireland are by no means numerous. A single queer theatre company, TheatreofplucK, has been producing theatre of a high standard intermittently in Belfast since 2004, and the dedicated LGBTQ+ arts festival Outburst, established in 2015, stages theatre shows as part of its programme. Framing this is the context in which the work is produced: homosexuality remained illegal until 1982, and LGBT marriage rights were extended only in December 2020. To this day, LGBTQ+ rights are fiercely resisted by reactionary politicians, notably the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

TheatreofplucK aside, professional companies in Northern Ireland do not routinely address issues concerning the LGBTQ+ community, though there are exceptions. One such, the play *Boundaries*, produced originally by Tinderbox Theatre Company in 2015-17, is the subject of this article. The story of the play's development is an illuminating illustration of the pitfalls and possibilities of work that seeks to represent communities. Initially conceived as part of the Connect Programme at Tinderbox, it was developed in collaboration with the Rainbow Project, the leading NI LGBTQ+ advocacy organisation.

During 2014 and 2015, as director at Tinderbox, I ran workshops at the Rainbow Project with participants from across NI who had been victims of hate crimes. The initial aim of the project was to create a piece of advocacy theatre, following a set of principles

I had developed in the Connect Programme: the work was to enable the agency of participants, tell their stories, and result in public performances. We also decided to audio record participants' stories in their own words, as a useful tool for future advocacy and campaigning work by Rainbow Project. As the project unfolded, it became clear that there was no interest in performing among the participants. The Connect Programme had previously established an actors' ensemble to provide this type of advocacy-through-performance, and the Connect Ensemble began working to develop a play from the material.

With Marina Hampton, a Connect Ensemble actor, I drew up a list of the incidents and events that were most dramatic in the anonymised audio recordings, and worked to shape a narrative. The narrative spine was drawn from the account of a trans woman (Diane) who had been attacked repeatedly by a group of transphobic youths, culminating in a sexual assault. Other incidents and details were drawn from participants' accounts to create a composite narrative that was, we hoped, powerful and authentic.

C. T. Onions notes that 'authentic' derives from *authentia*—the original authority (63). Thus, for a work to be authentic it must be derived from the original authorities: in this case, the project participants. Sarah Rubidge (219) maintains that authenticity is not an intrinsic quality of a performance, but is ascribed by the spectator. However, the nature of the values that are utilised to arrive at this ascription, both by audiences and by the participants whose stories are being told, is inevitably personal. Luule Epner argues that 'the notion of "authenticity" allows us to observe the familiar relationship of **fictional** to the **real** from a new angle' (111; emphasis in original). This is suggestive of Elizabeth Burns' 'authenticating conventions'—those elements that enable the spectator to determine the authentic in theatrical performance (32). These conventions—such as an authentic regional accent, ethnically-appropriate casting, or accurate description of a city quarter—are therefore essential in creating affect, through the ascription of authenticity. They allow the spectator to identify the relation between representation and reality, indicating the truthfulness

of what is being presented. Their limiting potential also ensures fidelity to the accounts of the participants whose stories contribute to the performance text.

The greatest challenge in navigating questions of authenticity occurred when it came to casting. With a trans woman as protagonist, we had, as we saw it, three choices:

1. cast a trans woman
2. cast a cis-gendered man dressed as a woman
3. cast a cis-gendered woman

None of the three was likely to be viable. For the first, a thorough scouring of available actors, agents, and networks failed to locate a Northern Irish trans actor suitable for the part. The second seemed ethically questionable, potentially offensive and/or ridiculous, and dramatically inadequate. The third seemed the least bad option, but still inadequate.

However, in grappling with the issue, Judith Butler's insistence on gender as a performative act of self-presentation seemed to open up another possibility. Consideration of Butler's 'stylised repetition' (519) directed our thinking to how gender is presented on stages. We therefore settled on the solution of staging two presentations of Diane: her gender identity as she perceives it, and her gender identity as it is perceived by others. We did this by casting two actors, one queer male, Rea Hill, and one cis-gendered female, Debbie McCormick. Identically costumed and made up, they looked very similar. The play was performed in Belfast as part of a three-night run of three short plays by the Connect Ensemble, in the Crescent Arts Centre, The Sunflower Bar, and the Barracks queer performance space, in March 2015, with a running time of about 20 minutes. However, all agreed there was a much bigger, more impactful journey for audiences in the material, and we retained the intention to create a longer performance at a later time.

The Connect Programme culminated in 2017 with a large-scale theatre event where many of the works created during the 3-year project were presented, including six performances of *Boundaries*. Shortly



thereafter, Marie McCarthy, Artistic Director of the Omnibus Theatre in Clapham, London, expressed interest in programming a longer version of the play for the theatre's autumn 2018 festival of new Irish work. With the DUP newly installed as partner of the Tory government, and thus able to veto any extension of legislation for LGBTQ+ rights to Northern Ireland, it seemed the right time for a larger production of *Boundaries*, as a piece of performance as protest. I therefore rewrote the play, extending its length and exploring some of the issues that had formed part of the discussions in the original project. The dramatic structure of the play remained unchanged.

In summer 2018 we cast the play with two new actors—one male one female, as before—and began rehearsals. Then, with only five weeks to the opening, our female actor had to drop out. We recast, and rehearsals began in earnest with a new actor. With just over two weeks to go, our replacement actor was taken ill, and we lost her too. Faced with a difficult choice, either to pull the play or recast again, and knowing any new actor would be terribly under-rehearsed, Liam Tennant, our remaining actor who identified as non-binary, offered to do the whole show as a one-actor piece. Again, this was an unacceptable solution: potentially offensive and dramatically inadequate.

Once more, we went back to the drawing board. In considering our options, I felt that a more fundamental problem lay at the heart of any attempt to remount the play. By this stage, the original verbatim accounts of the project participants at Rainbow had gone through several layers of mediation. My concern was that the play was drifting ever further from the source material, and would cease to be authentic. Having travelled so far from the originating authority of the story, the validity of the work would be compromised.

With this in mind, I contacted Jennifer Clifford, a psychologist, trans rights activist, and trans woman with experience as a theatre writer. Jen agreed to get involved. Liam and I interviewed her, recorded her experiences, and asked about many of the issues that would become significant in the rewriting of the play which followed. The new play—and it was a new play—drew extensively on Jen's accounts of her young

adulthood, and her experiences with young trans people she met through her work.

The rewrite was set at an earlier time, when Diane was a young adult—pre-transition, on the point of change—and we asked Jen to perform. We shot a video prologue and epilogue, featuring Jen as the older, settled trans woman, appearing on either end of a flashback sequence where her experiences of hate crimes as a young person on the point of transition were recalled in the live performance. This idea determined the new play's form: the image of a gender-resolved trans person was permanently reified on film; in the diegetic past of the play, Diane as a young person on the cusp of transition was performed live: unstable, unresolved, and fluctuating. The play was performed in late October 2018 at the Omnibus, to appreciative audiences, and we completed the run feeling we had done the job right.

The story of *Boundaries* demonstrates a key challenge in creating advocacy theatre with community participants: incrementally, the work changes. The proposition that a work of art is made new at each iteration, each reception, means that not only is authenticity contingent, but that it is constantly challenged. Additionally, the desire to create work that advocates for rights and protests injustice is always in tension with the need to create work that is of an acceptable standard aesthetically. Work that fails aesthetically, that diminishes the affect experienced by the spectator in witnessing a participant's account of their experiences runs the risk of being ineffective as an act of advocacy. This tension between aesthetics and authenticity can lead to work that is tokenistic or worse, exploitative.

In *Boundaries*, the play-making process and the concomitant upheavals both had impacts on the script. The demands of live performance and of working with real people (who sometimes get ill or drop out) meant that the performance text was under pressure throughout. This is not uncommon: applied theatre is generally made in difficult conditions. *Boundaries* became a very mediated work, a work where the original stories and witness accounts had been filtered. It still hoped to advocate for its community, LGBTQ+ people, still hoped to be

effective as an act of protest while also having value as theatre—but by the end of its life, it risked the charge that it lacked authenticity.

The remounting of the play for a London audience in a professional venue created a crisis of authenticity. Baz Kershaw (39) notes that authenticating conventions are audience-specific. The play, in its successive iterations for different audiences and purposes, underwent inevitable changes. In response, the production sought to return to the limitations inherent in the authentic stories of the participants in the original process, by rewriting and restructuring the production in collaboration with trans participants.

By adding the additional layers in which Jen Clifford was present—the narrative material from her interview, the video in which she appeared, and the layering of a second, older Diane onto the performance—the production was bound more tightly to its authentic source material. More importantly, authority was restored to the originating community, and affective power to the play.

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## Platonic Visions on Shakespeare's Wall

By Maria Gaitanidi

In Plato's *Banquet*—and according to Greek mythology—humans were originally created with four arms, four legs, and a head with two faces. Fearing their power, Zeus split them into two separate parts, condemning them to spend their lives in search of their other halves. A relatively young Shakespeare wrote *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1594, just before *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Reading a play as separate to an author's entire corpus of work could be misleading. Can we judge the beauty of a rose bush from just one flower? With such considerations in mind and in hand, two of Plato's dialogues—*The Banquet* and *Phaedrus* which focus (among other subjects) on ideas of Love/Eros—a laboratory began at Shakespeare's Globe in the summer of 2019. The ensemble of actors was mainly chosen thanks to their ability to use Platonic dialogue in order to play with ideas rather than interpret characters in a primarily psychological way. The form of Platonic dialogue allows for a playful exchange between acting partners, freed from the prejudice of a text's 'set' interpretation. Instead of looking into the past to understand and judge characters' words and actions, Platonic dialogue can enable a look into the characters' common ideological perspective in which they hold opposite sides of the argument. The actors take opposite stances towards the idea contained in the scene and use the here and now each night to play anew with each other, both aiming for the realisation of this idea.

A brief example of how we used Platonic dialogue can be seen through this extract from Petruchio's speech about Katharina:

She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house,  
My household stuff, my field, my barn,  
My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing. (3.2.236-238)

The reading of these few verses can spark endless controversy. However, the questioning suggested to the actors of the ensemble was as follows: what if both Petruchio and Katharina agree on what is a true union—a recovery of the ‘lost half’ of man? In the context of *Banquet*, Katharina represents beauty, wealth and education, intelligence, free will, and independence of spirit. This is, perhaps, an ideal ‘everything’ a partner could want. Woman/Katharina comes to represent the Soul, the inspiration, the form; Man/Petruchio represents action, will, and direct movement. A Soul, as in *Phaedrus*, needs training to let go of material attachments, to recognise its own beauty, its power over the world that surrounds it and is made of it. For that, the material part of the human being needs to be ‘tamed’.

Shakespeare wrote during the Renaissance: he was, surely, well aware of the ancient ideas circulating among the intellectuals and one can easily acknowledge this in *The Taming of the Shrew*, a play about the marriage of the feminine and the masculine in the human soul. As mentioned above, the play is written just a couple of years before one of the most quoted and well-known plays about love in the world: *The Taming of the Shrew* could emerge out of a similar thematic and temporal context. Like the black and white horses that, in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, lead the chariot to see the Ideas, the Soul is torn between Good and Evil and depends on the collaboration of both in order to reach the heights it deserves. The black horse needs taming and is not a separate entity to the white horse, they both need love and they both need to be together (see fig. 1). In Renaissance symbolism, the Sun represents Light, Man, Action—whereas the Moon represents Darkness, Woman, Desire, and Inspiration. One cannot be without the other, and one is by no means submitted to the other. These were the premises proposed to the company when entering Shakespeare’s Globe, as we embarked on the creation of a production for the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse to open in February 2020. To write about an experience where the content of a play (‘The Taming of the Human Soul’) transcends the life of the artists





Fig. 1: *The Fall of Phaeton* (1829) by James Ward.

involved by becoming a shared truth—and where the staging process becomes a brutal verification of the play's words, with Petruchio and Katharina not fitting in the fake world of Tranio and Baptista—demands placing in a text something that belongs only to living action, bound to disappear following its fleeting existence in the moment of its birth.

However, as the times we live in (since exactly the 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020 in the UK) navigate between the shadows of a not-so-far-away past and the visions of an uncertain future, before the sun sets, there are still some old games of shade and light on the walls of a place that is supposed to be built on the remains of its true predecessor. If in fact the centre of the old Blackfriars Theatre after which the Sam Wanamaker theatre is built was used as a game market in the morning and an arena for the actors in the evenings, then it presents the perfect place for catharsis. The first step of this process was initiated in the encounter of three artists

(Michelle Terry, Paul Ready, and myself); the next was the rehearsals and, consequently, the production as a continuation of rehearsals and not a finished product. This piece of writing might be considered as one step further. Writing may do here what in fact creating within the limits of an institution has done: reveal a fragment or a glimpse of truth, that is only allowed when freedom is a far-away perspective and not a concrete reality.

The following paragraphs will describe the elements that composed the dialogue as a process of creation between a London theatre institution, married to a space considered a historical landmark by its visitors, and an artist—this being myself as the director and pedagogue for this process. At the centre of the dialogue is *The Taming of the Shrew*.

### **The Dialogue Begins**

A play traditionally understood and staged as the uncomfortable wedding between Katharina and Petruchio shows the patriarchal taming of a woman through what appears to be a series of humiliations. As ‘appearances tyrannise truth’ according to Plato (*The Republic*, Book II, 365c, 42), commissioning an artist to stage such a play in the aftermath of movements such as #MeToo foretells obvious expectations and risk-taking: it is a play that is bound to contest its surface-level politics and used to critique patriarchy. It is offered to a female director with a cast of well-known actors who are married in real life—including Michelle Terry, Paul Ready, Melissa Riggall, Mattia Mariotti, and James Northcote—who are expected to take the lead roles with the strong desire to invert archaic male/female power dynamics. The reader may already identify the growing frontiers around the production before learning of the practical limitations regarding rehearsals, staging, marketing, PR., and internal production practices.

At this stage one could ask a legitimate question: why accept such a contract? To ask another, illustrative one: why would Petruchio

accept to ask in marriage Katharina after hearing an unflattering description of her character from his old friend Hortensio? To gently remind the reader of Katharina, here are a few lines from Hortensio's speech:

Petruchio, shall I then come roundly to thee,  
And wish thee to a shrewd, ill-favored wife?  
Thou'dst thank me but a little for my counsel;  
And yet I'll promise thee she shall be rich,  
And very rich. But thou'rt too much my friend,  
And I'll not wish thee to her. (1.2.60-65)

In the long tradition of textual analysis and staging, Hortensio's answer and Petruchio's acceptance signify that becoming rich is the main purpose of this marriage proposal. It is soon forgotten that Petruchio is already wealthy—having inherited from his late father, as he announces when he arrives in Padua. Both the artist, to whom the proposition was made, and Petruchio do not need anything else but to begin the dialogue. Why should seeking a rich wife have one unique meaning? Why does Petruchio search for a wife in Padua? Why not Venice? Verona? Mantua? This is a play written during the Renaissance in Europe: a time of tremendous intellectual and artistic unrest and innovation. As evident in his works, Shakespeare was not oblivious to the spiritual world, its connection to the physical realms, and the influence of the ancient Greek writers on his contemporaries and himself. The binary oppositions present in the world as a totality (here there is no separation between spirit and matter) allow for a rich analysis of the main ideas in the play. Padua was well known in the old world as the centre of knowledge, house to the greatest universities. Lucentio and Tranio arrive in the city to learn: although the master seeks knowledge in books, Tranio advises him to look for wisdom in the experience of the senses.

As a director who has mainly trained and worked in what is perceived by more mainstream producers, actors, critics, and theatregoers as alternative theatre, entering such a commercial theatre

represents huge risk. Like—simultaneously—Lucentio and Tranio, I entered Padua/Mantua: the city of commerce and negotiation. This marriage could not in any way be performed and understood in traditional ways.

## **The Arrival**

Following a ten-year itinerary in the realms of Russian and Polish theatre and an exceptional collaboration with artists exploring physical action and speech as action, during which I had nurtured pedagogical relationships with British actors, this opportunity appeared desirable in two ways: it allowed the actors to perform outside laboratory walls, and the director/pedagogue to expose the work to a wider audience.

The invitation to direct a play by Shakespeare was presented amidst various workshops and lengthy conversations. These were based around different perceptions of the theatrical art in London and abroad; the history of staging Shakespeare; the approach to the actor's craft; and the various ways of analysing text that may reach surprising outcomes when compared to traditional readings—especially in Shakespeare's case.

It was summer, everything seems more beautiful in August by the river Thames. Walking along the Southbank, exploring texts full of myths, and touching on unexpected material for an actor (such as Plato's dialogues) contributed to the mutual agreement between two artists: for the artistic director of the theatre and the director of the play to advance together towards the realisation of something that was promising to be quite unusual. Despite this mutual spoken contract, which, in fact, was never really transcribed into formal writing, limits were not imposed here.

The first narrowing order was pronounced when the casting of the play began and it immediately altered the atmosphere of the whole process. The actors are the core of the work, focusing on the raw human material encountering the text and the space. Selecting the right actors

for such a project can not be done through a simple audition. Even when working for a year or so with an actor, all human material is not appropriate for all kinds of work and vice versa, all kinds of work are not for everyone. Similarly, Shakespeare's plays are made of such fabric that a psychological analysis of the play does not fit its own nature. To give a humorous example, when one buys Prada shoes it is most probably not for the beach or to be worn with shorts (although everything is certainly possible)—it would be better to wear them with a garment worthy of their quality.

The limits imposed by the internal policies of the theatre did not allow for a true selection of who is capable to sustain this kind of process. It is extremely different to hear about something enticing and think it sounds rather exciting and then find oneself in the midst of a production which never intends to deliver an end product but continue to grow throughout the 12 weeks on stage. The various reasons an actor says 'yes' to a job are definitely not in concordance with a project which intends to explore a creative approach, that cannot itself be compounded within the borders of 'art as simply a job'. Let us explain further this rather questionable thought by adding: who truly would see working on a play such as *The Taming of the Shrew* as a 10am-to-5pm, Monday-to-Friday job if they knew that the play speaks about the human soul?

As Russian director and pedagogue Anatoli Vassiliev, my teacher, once wrote in *7 or 8 Lessons on Theatre* (1999), 'everything that we feel is like a heavy machine, something hard to handle. [...] I felt the need for the actor not to dive simply into a story, into a situation, but for whoever creates to be able to introduce their own playing, their own game' (214; my translation).

## The Game

What is contained in *The Taming of the Shrew*? The body of the play is made of flesh, bones, and spirit. Petruchio will teach everyone how to abandon everything that has to do with matter, with human recognition

(fame), with acceptance from others. What defines women? Fashion or personal desires? Both Katharina and Petruchio know that it is a personal choice. The game they play however is different. It is hiding behind the rules of their time and of all time. Despite hundreds of years that separate us from its writing, the modern Baptista house, the institutional theatre, is still constructed according to the rules of the time: women must keep their place, freedom is offered to masculinity, femininity is still judged according to male hierarchy, and being different—like Katharina—is condemned by ‘the institution’.

Burdened by centuries of representation, history, and analysis—and buried under expected clichés which in fact serve again and again the same purpose and the same scopes—the content of the play was not revealed to the actors on the first day of the work but progressively through the five weeks of rehearsal allowed by the norm.

Who has dictated the marriage rules for all Katharinas and Biancas of the world? Who decides who is going to be with whom? Who is going to play whom? Who will truly direct? Baptista? Petruchio arrives at his wedding in gypsy clothes, in the shoes of a miser. Who takes him away from the wedding? It is Katharina.

A norm written in contracts, decided by unknown people and stamped by unknowing hands. A norm created amongst other norms, at a theatre space, imposing limits based on the said wisdom of past experiences. As declared by the authorities of the theatre, represented in its majority by non-artists, limits are wanted in order to protect the artists involved in the plays staged, and/or to fulfil the desire for innovation and adaptation to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century (needs or new awareness).

Limits are not a curse. In the theatrical traditions originating in the practices of Stanislavski and Grotowski, limits were seen as a window frame to freedom. Stanislavski's only limit imposed, according to Maria Kanebel in *L'Analyse-Action* (2006), were the words of the text: ‘in speech vowels are water and consonants are the borders without which the river becomes a swamp’ (203; my translation).



If Juliet is 16 years old, it is for a reason—not that it matters for the age of the actor but for the given circumstance, the feel of it. If Romeo's family is enemy to the Capulets, he cannot be her nephew. When Juliet asks him to not swear by the moon, the word 'moon' cannot change to 'cross'. Moon bears



within an ensemble of elements given by the author and able to trigger a myriad of sensations as different as the artists who work on the play. The word remains the immovable shell, hosting infinity. If we choose to stage an adaptation of the play, or a performance based/inspired by the play, of course the rules of the game change. The institution in question commissioned this production with the strong desire to see a certain version of the play, with a certain outcome. The author, being Shakespeare, and following him the director, which is myself, have not thought about producers simply wanting one hour and a half of a night out. For Petruchio to tame the human soul, it took three hours in the end: and the taming can still be quite fast. When Petruchio returns home with his newlywed in the play's fourth act, he acknowledges that taming is not without suffering:

Well, I've begun my reign with a carefully thought-out plan, and I have every hope of succeeding. My falcon is now hungry and unfed and must not be given enough to eat until she comes to me. (4.1.162-165)



Figs 2-3: Melissa Riggall (Katharina) and Paul Ready (Petruchio) in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare's Globe, London. Photography by Johan Persson (2020).

In *Criton*, Socrates is given the choice to drink hemlock or leave Athens forever. He chooses to stay and die, having dreamt of the Laws of the City of Athens assuring him that he has not acted against them. For a whole month all actors continued playing while the director was waiting, having already decided for herself, waiting for something to be

completed. Katharina's last speech invites everyone to respect and bow in front of whoever feeds from, whoever feeds the soul, not simply the flesh. If the soul stops being fed, then departure is imminent.

On the 16th March 2020, one day before the closure of the London theatres, Baptista's house of cards fell. Petruchio and Katharina left in peace for Petruchio's home.

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## *Performance Responses*

edited by Chris Green

### 2020 Online Pride Parade in South Korea

Dotface via Instagram. 23 June - 5 July 2020.

By Dohyun Gracia Shin

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the South Korean government strictly controlled public assemblies. The Queer Culture Festival and parade was not an exception. In this situation, the LGBTQ+ community in South Korea had to create alternatives to access public space. One of their efforts was realised in the form of the online Pride parade by Dotface (.face), a media company for social justice in South Korea. For the online parade, Dotface designed a webpage where participants could create an image of their own avatars parading on the road. For my own participation in the parade, I chose my avatar's expression, hairstyle, look, and flag on the website. It generated a picture of my avatar standing on the road. The website guided me to share the image on my Instagram account with a hashtag: #We\_make\_a\_new\_road\_out\_of\_nothing. This single image did not mean a lot when it stood on its own. However, when I clicked on the hashtag, I could see all the avatars' images accumulated to create a virtual road. An avatar in an isolated grid—as I was in my own room—then was connected to other avatars (see figs. 1-3). I thought this community attempted to show our 'appearance' together in the pandemic situation where the institution (in this case, the government) limited public assembly. To quote Judith Butler, the 'claim of equality [...] is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being' (88-9).



Marcela A. Fuentes' idea of 'performance constellations' (3) was helpful for me to digest this experience, which encouraged me to reflect on the power and effect of digital activism. 'Performance constellation' refers to the power to change the offline world by connecting fragmented, individual powers scattered in the vast online space. In this case, anyone (who had access to the internet) could participate in the online Pride parade as long as they tagged the hashtag to their photos whenever and wherever. Instead of parading from the Seoul Plaza (Seoul City Hall) at the designated time, users could freely join the parade from June 23rd to July 5th by uploading a photo from various locations and, by so doing, overcame the limitation of the metropolitan-centered parade. The asynchronous and multi-sited performance of the participants brought about collective action, which made this act of hashtag-uploading function 'as' performance. Hashtags were not merely an index or comment but an 'affective, interpellative mode' (Fuentes 90) that required further actions—whether an agreement, participation, or even refutation. An Instagram user might not be interested in the parade and not click on the hashtag. Yet, images of the online parade could still infiltrate their timeline if anyone on their 'private' timeline uploaded an image. The act of invading one's customized, private timeline with the public hashtag (#We\_make\_a\_new\_road\_out\_of\_nothing) 'contests the distinction between public and private' (Butler 71). Furthermore, the infiltrating virtual bodies (in this case, avatars) become the bodies who 'lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action' (Butler 71).



Fig. 1: Screenshot taken from Dotface's online Pride parade YouTube video. Photo by the author.

This act of exposure and claim *per se* is significant in South Korea, where LGBTQ+ visibility desperately matters.

Furthermore, Dotface and the participants used the online parade as performance to resist the queerphobic appropriation of the hashtag. In the middle of the parade, there was a moment when the participants faced hashtag hijack by trans-exclusionary radical feminist and homophobic protestors. They uploaded derogatory images with the hashtag, which intervened in the virtual road made up of avatar images. With Dotface, the participants chose to stand up against the transphobic/homophobic hashtag usurpers by creating a counter-narrative. This hashtag war was a performative act that attempted to nullify each side's semiotic, political, and affective message by tactically pushing the posts away. While the winner of the fight might be judged upon the quantity of hashtag images they uploaded, it was also importantly about the visualised camp fight—about who overwhelms the other and occupies more space on the virtual road on the hashtag timeline. Dotface officially reported the situation to Instagram to have the interfering pictures deleted, but the action did not happen quickly enough due to the liveness of the parade as performance. Accordingly, Dotface and the participants uploaded more parade images with the designated hashtag to shove the transphobic/homophobic off the grid and deliver the message: 'our solidarity is stronger than the phobia'. By this action, Dotface's online Pride parade visualised the fight against queerphobic hashtag usurpers by uploading hashtags in a form of performance as resistance—occupying, competing over, and reterritorialising of the virtual space.

Most importantly, avatars—virtual bodies as extensions of ourselves—provided a safe, accessible, and inclusive alliance for the participants. According to an interview with Hepziba Kim, the designer of the avatars,







the main agenda was to give the users experiences of inclusion—‘the experience from which no one is excluded’ (‘Communication Winner’). For instance, in reviews, some participants said they felt safe in the form of an avatar where there is a less possible danger of an outing. Especially teenagers (who are still under the protection of their parent/s) shared that they could participate in the Pride parade for the first time in their lives due to its anonymity. Given the limits we had, Dotface’s Pride parade was not only about the participants occupying the online space but was also about how we presented our identities in a virtual parade as a celebratory protest—‘virtual forms’ of bodies. The participants explored diversified representations of identities with avatars, the bodily images. The users further edited the avatars—those Dotface provided for the users to customise—from their end. They added accessories, partner avatars, companion animals, and flags that were not designed by Dotface. Some transformed their avatars into characters from LGBTQ+ films with whom they identified and even into non-humans. They played with the limitation and boundaries of their other ‘selves’, which extended to the level of adding, transforming, creating, and counteracting. As per the etymology of avatar, ‘the incarnation of a deity in human or animal form’ (‘avatar’), it was a process of becoming a virtual ‘I’ with numerous potentialities that allowed the participants who are in a precarious circumstance to represent themselves in a safer way.

This performance, which created a road through the generation of avatar images, lasted for only thirteen days of the parade. The parade is over, and the avatars’ march might be interrupted by other users who upload unrelated photos with the hashtag. Nevertheless, if you scroll over the hashtag, the data of the parade is archived and exists. This

Fig. 2: Screenshot taken from Dotface’s online Pride parade YouTube video. Photo by the author.



archive bears a possibility of a revival and sustainability—as this online Pride parade came back in 2021. Also, Dotface’s virtual road was revived for the commemoration when the South Korean LGBTQ+ community lost Byun Hui-su, the first openly trans soldier in South Korea. It was another performance constellation that created online public space, contending the power of the community against anti-trans legislation and the power to protect online public space as an inclusive zone for the community to feel and be safe.

Dotface’s online Pride parade took shape within the limits that we faced in the pandemic, reflecting the idea of *queerness*: participants explored and expressed themselves; they navigated and defied heteronormative gaps and queerphobic actions in the form of avatars; and finally, they (virtually) walked towards the fluid direction of open possibilities. In so doing, the online Pride parade contributed to the event's vision by suggesting the potential use of the virtual beyond limits and boundaries. It crossed the lines between rural and urban (geographical limits and accessibility), ephemeral and archival (temporal limits), and one’s body and avatar (bodily limits). It was not (physically) there but was definitely there through a sense of affection, solidarity, and kinship that the participants shared (though the impact each participant felt might have varied). After the 2<sup>nd</sup> online Pride parade in 2021, some questions stayed with me. Will it be sustained and survive even after the pandemic? Would this event remain a temporal alternative to the in-person parade—an event which people are so ready to (re)attend? Or will it have its own vitality, walking along with the in-person parade, side by side? It is too early to have a clear answer for these questions. Yet, I am looking forward to future possibilities and to seeing where this virtual communal attempt will lead me next year.



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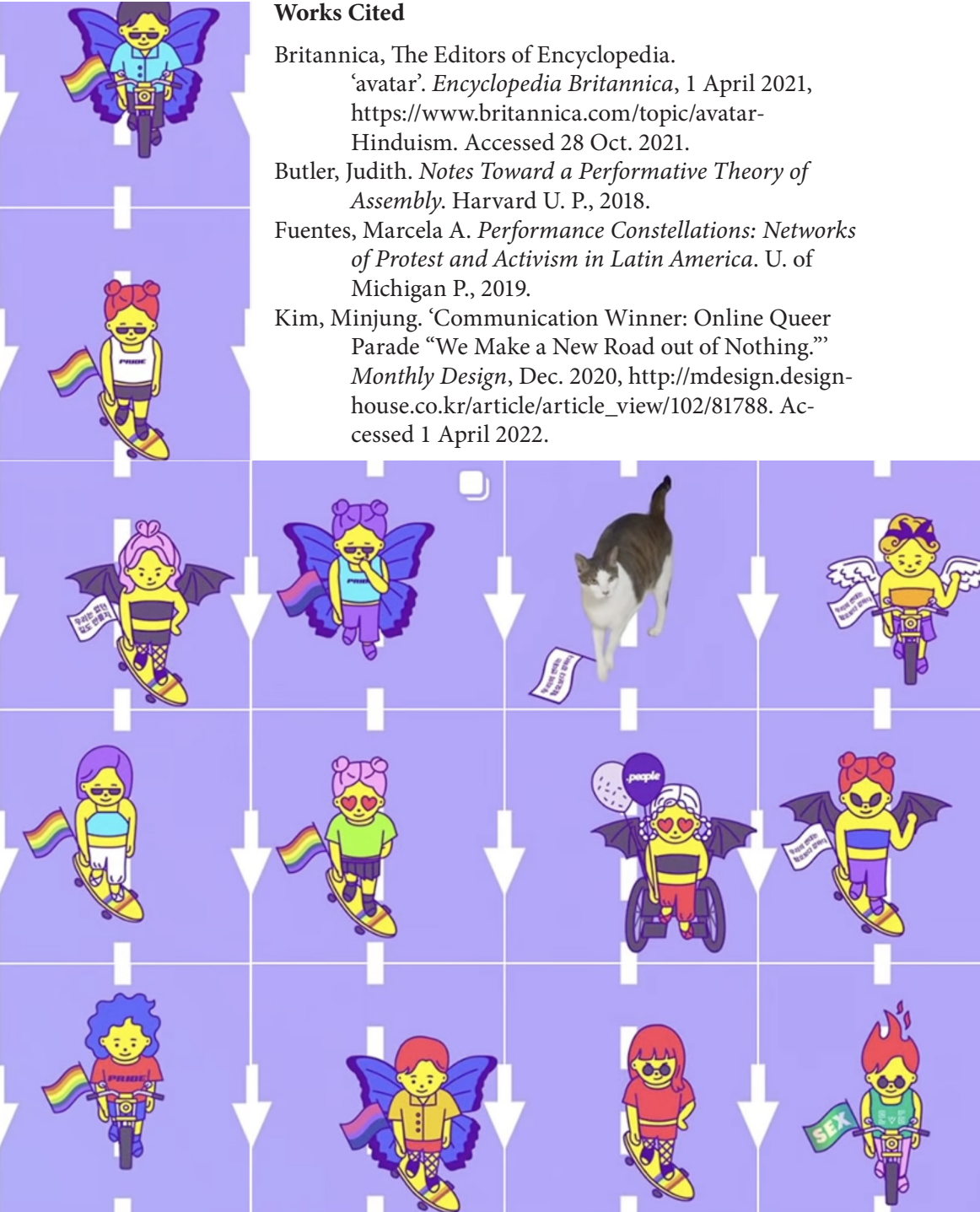


Fig. 3: Screenshot taken from Dotface's online Pride parade YouTube video. Photo by the author.

## ***Body Guarding***

By Bautanzt Here. Directed by Nadya Zeitlin. Perf. Julianna Feracota, Porter Grubbs, Amber Kirchner, Jenna Latham and Ellie Tsuchiya. *54 Columns*, Atlanta, USA. 24 October 2021.

By Erin McMahon

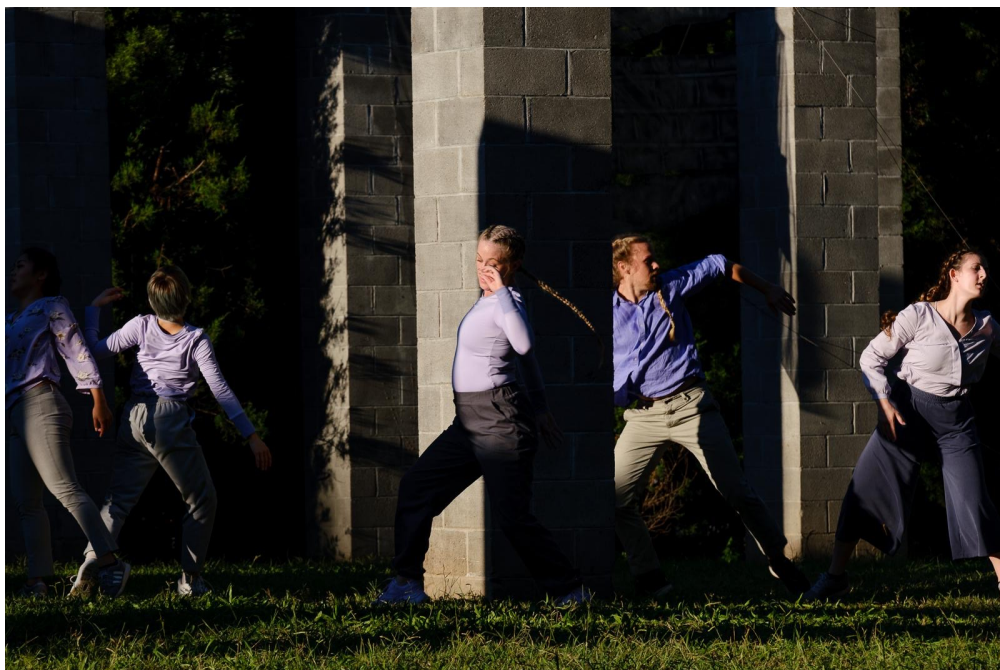


Fig. 1: Amber Kirchner, Porter Grubbs, Julianna Feracota, Jenna Latham, and Ellie Tsuchiya in *Body Guarding* at *54 Columns*. Photo by Arvin Temkar.

*Body Guarding* is a site-specific dance theatre performance created and performed by the Atlanta-based company Bautanzt Here at *54 Columns*, the Sol Lewitt art installation occupying a corner of the city's Old Fourth Ward neighborhood. The company's artistic director Nadya Zeitlin conceptualised and choreographed the piece and dancers Jenna Latham, Julianna Feracota, Porter Grubbs, Amber Kirchner, and Ellie Tsuchiya performed it on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> September, and again on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2021. For a company whose name in German means

‘building dances’, the Stonehenge-like *54 Columns* seems like a natural, though temporary, home: cinder block columns of various heights rise up from an open field and are often mistaken for a construction site; a building in progress. Sol Lewitt designed the piece to suggest a city skyline, taking inspiration from its urban surroundings.

I, too, am inspired by cities: I’ve intentionally made myself a resident of truly beautiful and exciting metropolitan areas whose density of both people and opportunity far exceeds that of my hometown in rural Tennessee. The past two years, however, have seen COVID-19 turn living in close proximity to others into a health liability. The livable sphere of cities shrunk as lockdowns, establishment closures, and curb-side services took effect. Instead of embracing the vibrancy of interconnected communities, residents isolated, sanitised, and protected themselves as best they could, or as privilege would allow. Through *Body Guarding*, Bautanzt Here explores the emphasis placed on the health of our bodies due to the pandemic and the effects of isolation, as well as the joy of cautiously reopening and reconnecting to community. The piece aims to investigate a post-lockdown city while addressing the inevitable life-style changes brought on by COVID-19.

As the performance begins, a lone dancer, Jenna Latham, wanders out in front of the columns, examining the sculptures, the sky, and the wonder of a gathering outside. As Latham observes, the four other dancers begin to walk truncated lines between columns. With their initial movements, I find myself in a simultaneous past and present: I recall the abrupt isolation at the start of the global outbreak, apart from others like the initial dancer, who then watches the movements of the others from afar, not dissimilar from my own voyeurism via internet newscasts and meetings. I am also in the present. Latham emerges into the world and cautiously encounters others, much like all of us now emerging, tentatively planning and communing once again. Simply by naming the piece *Body Guarding*, the company evokes my own reflection on the precautions I now take to literally guard my body. As we learned more information about the virus, of course, some precautions have been abandoned. I don’t wipe down all

of my groceries after shopping anymore. I'm willing to meet in small crowds outdoors, much like the crowd waiting for the performance to begin. I do, however, wear masks indoors or in large outdoor crowds, I avoid indoor crowds, and I use hand-sanitiser after touching literally anything, but I no longer feel an obligation to move through my days in physical isolation. In his description of the piece on Bautanzt Here's website, Sergey Medvedev describes *Body Guarding* as a reunion. It's an opportunity for the artists to finally gather and practice together after many months of uncertainty.

Once the dancers have entered the space, the percussive soundscape created by Ptar Flamming/Rogue Jury gets louder. The beat pulses steadily, encouraging the dancers to move with purpose and urgency. While Latham moves slowly and delicately, staying low to the ground, the others take turns emerging from behind the columns, leaning out momentarily before hiding again. I see the tension between isolation and participation as Latham occupies the space between aloneness and togetherness: they are physically separate from the other four but watch them, moving cautiously in response to their bold movements. All five wear gray trousers and lavender long-sleeve tops, and all but Latham wear their hair in braids. The dancers capitalise on their uniformity as a head peeks out stage left while a leg visibly points to the ground several feet away stage right. They play with imagery that dissects the body between the columns, each one a magic door or portal. At one point, Latham continues to look on while the other four clasp hands and emerge from a central column like a row of paper dolls. The dancers embody an extreme togetherness, tethering themselves to each other. I see the movements as a metaphor for our interconnectedness and the notion that the actions of one affects us all. After pushing and pulling one another for a brief 8-count, they break apart and begin to move into open spaces to frantically test their ranges of motion. One whips their arm around like a windmill. Two dancers simultaneously stretch their upper back, rocking their chests open and closed. The columns isolate each dancer and frame their movements, much like a window or a Zoom screen. I think of my graduate housing in London:



rows of windows in a high rise that act like mini TV-screens showing similar yet distinct routines side-by-side. The dancers' desperation for movement mirrors my own hunger for it at the onset of the pandemic in my own compartment of that building. Movement became more essential as my geographic range of motion shrank.

As the beat rages on, Latham joins the rest of the company and I notice my eyes fixating on all of the dancers' hands. In the performance I saw on 24<sup>th</sup> October, there were many instances in which the dancers waved their fingers as their arms swept through the air or before they touched a column or before they touched another dancer. With such a renewed emphasis placed on hand-washing, it was impossible to miss. Hands carry. They carry physical goods, meaning through gestures, and they carry disease. In the performance, dancers fan their fingers as they move their hands about the space, visually mapping the spread of a virus. I'm also struck by the scenes of work and productivity that play out. One dancer squats with her back against a column, ankle crossed over the opposite knee, as she types away on an invisible laptop. It seems to move away from them, asking the dancer to stretch desperately before giving up. I realise that the dancers are no longer in constant motion. They've all found a column to cling to in a display of exhaustion and listlessness. The pandemic buzzword 'languishing' comes to mind. As they mimic work and productivity in isolation, I see them trapped in a world that speaks the phrases 'unprecedented times' and 'business as usual' in the same breath.

As the second half of the performance unfolds, the dancers experiment with rigidity and regimented movements that synchronise and break down, allowing for each dancer to showcase athleticism and grace. Then, in the climax of the piece, Feracota steps forward and draws a square in the air with their fist. They start to form a line facing stage left. A second dancer steps forward, faces Feracota and repeats the motion before joining them in the line. All five move into the line this way, conforming to the agreed upon motion. The dancers then move back into the rest of the space continuing to draw squares in the air. Four move around a central column, marking with the squares as if to



sanitise the structure. Whereas earlier in the performance the dancers interacted with each other with frantic and asynchronous movements, they now work as a team with a purpose, shifting from chaos to stability. A sense of teamwork and community is restored.

Finally, Amber Kirchner breaks apart from the team and moves into the same space initially occupied by Latham. They observe the space as Latham did, now carrying the weight of the past 20 minutes. The other dancers follow and line up with their chests facing the audience. They embody stillness for a moment. This stillness is different from the languishing seen earlier. It is confident and calm. *Body Guarding* approaches its conclusion when Julianna Feracota connects back to the music. A smile spreads across the dancer's face as they bob their head, bring movement into their chest, and move their hips and legs as the dance flows freely. The end is joyful as they all start to move as if in a nightclub. I think of the explosion of freedom documented over the summer. Concerts, sweat, bodies reaching for each other after months starved of touch. The dancers mimic a world moving back into a natural rhythm, all while Kirchner cautiously explores their own range of motion. Observing both styles of movement is cathartic—I feel myself delighting in Latham, Feracota, Grubbs, and Tsuchiya celebrating together, their bodies moving relaxed and loosely, and yet my eyes gravitate towards Kirchner's serenity and calm, hoping to steal some of it for myself. Eventually Tsuchiya, Grubbs, Latham, and Feracota move out of sight behind the columns. The piece ends with a solitary Kirchner who, like us, is left to make meaning for themselves of their recent lived experience.

*Body Guarding* grapples with some of the questions emphasised during the pandemic: in what ways must we protect and care for our physical body? Where are the boundaries, if any, between physical and mental health? How do we balance a necessity to isolate ourselves with our intrinsic human need for community? The scenes in *Body Guarding* continually oscillate between rigidity and freedom, isolation and community, calm and hysteria, and search for answers in those extremes. As I walked toward the *54 Columns* ahead of the

performance, I realised that I hadn't seen a live performance since the start of the pandemic. I wondered how many spectators would show up and how close together we'd be. But my need for art and community overrode my instinct to avoid risk. Like the dancers, I'm finding what is essential to my well-being: freedom of movement, community, and the precautions that allow me to return to them.

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## *Book Reviews*

edited by Grace Joseph

### *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* edited by Leanna Keyes, Lindsey Mantoan, and Angela Farr Schiller

London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 456 pp. (ebook)

By Robyn Dudić

*The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* joins a growing corpus of queer drama anthologies that include trans plays in their selection. The editors differentiate this anthology from other collections—such as those by Oberon Books, Mark Gatiss, or Fintan Walsh—through their exclusive focus on trans plays. The anthology spans an intersectional and stylistically diverse collection of eight plays by trans playwrights, with an introduction for each play, in most cases by a trans writer. In each, the play is situated in its theatrical and historical context: its themes analysed in relation to a broader societal background. The plays and their respective introductions are organised into three thematic sections: ‘Disembodied Articulations’, ‘Fraught Spaces’, and ‘Familiar/Familial’. This organisational choice stands as a challenge to Western colonial chrononormativity, engaging with discourses surrounding queer temporality—after Jack Halberstam, Jaclyn Pryor, and Julian Carter—and thus challenging both linguistic and theatrical limitations regarding gender and identity (2-5). The plays themselves continue, and are in conversation with, a developing body of work—including plays by Olivia Dufault (2013), Aziza Barnes (2020), and Taylor Mac (2016)—that engages playfully with language, location, and temporal nonlinearity (3).

The strength of *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* lies in its reflection on positionality, voice, agency, and representation. The anthology constitutes an important step in a continuing effort for

more inclusive, diverse, and nuanced trans representation: on stage, in publishing, and within academia, too. In the general introduction, the editors reflect on the history of trans performance, marked by the predominance of cis playwrights, actors, and audiences. They present a shift of focus towards trans artists and audiences, together with an emphasis on the complexity of transness, moving beyond a central focus on the transition or death of trans characters (1-2). Both the collection and the individual plays, which ask specifically for the casting of trans actors, share the objective of changing the theatrical landscape. The introduction writers and playwrights have been curated in such a way as to promote critical reflections from within different communities, and the book itself is set up as a stage for these diverse voices. The editors facilitate this opportunity, stepping back to hold space for trans voices. Remarking that only one of three identifies as trans, the editors advocate for amplification of trans voices within the publishing industry, too (2). Thus, while the composition of the editorial team can be read as a disadvantage, it is also reflective of the present reality within publishing and academia.

Another strength of this anthology is in the varied nature of its introductory texts, which compare theoretical and practical approaches, giving insight into the benefits and drawbacks of each. The introductions are respectful in their tone and powerful in their challenge to normative readings, as well as being accessible and comprehensive. They range from academic analysis to informal conversation and personal reflection, while consistently discussing how the plays reflect and challenge social realities and dominant theatrical representation of trans characters. Through this critical framework, the book gives access to both academic and general audiences, as well as serving as a basis for the production of trans plays. A conversation between academic theorist Stephanie Hsu and playwright Mashuq Mushtaq Deen on Deen's play, *The Betterment Society*, is especially insightful. Hsu and Deen reflect on the productivity of academic discussions of transness within a practical context, offering insight into casting policies and institutional biases (55-57).

Their challenge to gender normativity is echoed in the other introductions, which all present guides, in various forms, on how to approach a reading of these plays. This is important, as a majority of the anthology's readership can be expected to have been educated by, and are positioned within, a white cis-heteronormative society. The introduction by Courtney Mohler to Ty Defoe's *Firebird Tattoo* is especially powerful in its argument for the play's decolonisation of gender and identity through nonlinear genealogy, and its presentation of two-spirit characters against a settler colonialist background (347). The anthology, on various levels, continuously challenges how to approach the practice of reading these plays, and gender in general, and is adamant about the need for reform; the collection thus reflects the broader societal necessity for challenging normativity and power structures.

The plays themselves share a participatory style, prompting direct engagement from their audiences by asking them to engage in shared risk-taking (61) in order actively to change the outcome of the play, as, for example, in *The Betterment Society* by Mashuq Mushtaq Deen. Another approach is presented in *She He Me* by Raphaël Amahl Khouri, in which the audience is included in the story-telling process through interactions between actor and audience before the narrative begins, encouraging active involvement in learning about trans experiences (184). In this way, the plays transgress the boundary between actor and audience, play and reality, thus asserting that advocacy for trans representation concerns everyone.

The anthology offers a starting point in this discussion; its openness is reflective of the need for future conversations. The collection does not provide an answer to all the questions one might have, and neither does it aspire to do so. While this openness may invite criticism—for example, some of the introductions might have included a more critical reflection on internalised biases—it also presents the need for further discussion. To this end, an afterword may have been beneficial, in order to collate general reflections, as well as questions for future activism and research.

Overall, *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* delivers an intersectional and diverse collection of trans plays, and self-reflexively advocates for the need to amplify trans voices. Both the openness and absences in this collection hold exactly to that provocation: the trans community has more to say, and their voices require more stages on which to be heard.

***A Companion to British-Jewish Theatre since the 1950s***

edited by Jeanette R. Malkin, Eckart Voigts, and Sarah Jane Ablett

London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 272 pp. (ebook)

By Rou-Ni Pan

*A Companion to British-Jewish Theatre since the 1950s* is a response to the growing number of British-Jewish playwrights asserting their identity through theatre. Significantly, it is the first collection devoted to case studies of contemporary British-Jewish playwrights and plays. There has been considerable effort in the academic field to push British-Jewish theatre towards the centre stage since 2017, and a number of international conferences have been organised, such as 'Shakespeare and the Jews' (UCL 2017).

The book is divided into five parts: an investigation into the artistic styles of the first generation of prominent British-Jewish playwrights, including Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter; the factors (the Holocaust, antisemitism and Israel's occupation of Palestine) that shape the liminality of British-Jewish identity; the new narratives of younger generation British-Jewish writers; and the progression of Jewish characters in television drama. The book concludes with interviews with Nicholas Hytner, Julia Pascal, Patrick Marber, Ryan Craig, and John Nathan.



Peter Lawson indicates that Wesker dramatises overlapping utopian and messianic visions in his plays, which are related to his portrayal of the 'Good Jew' in the historical process. In the turmoil of the 1960s, this utopian vision was generated by a disillusionment with human goodness. Turning to 'empowerment and hope beyond worldly experience' (37), he grasps for a saviour figure to provide his readers with hope. Lawson concludes by implying that differing religious views are the primary reason Jews are an excluded group in the Christian world, leading directly to persistent antisemitism (43).

Jeremy Solomons writes about the Jewish East End as a narrative strategy for Bernard Kops and Steven Berkoff. Kops inserts actual East End locations into the geography of his plays, while Berkoff blends Cockney dialect into his characters' speech. The plays' dramaturgies combine, separate, and transpose English cultural icons, in order to 'connect with the wider British theatre and culture' (55). Postmodern London, as articulated by Kops and Berkoff, has lost the certainty of its identity, a sense generated by the writers through multiple discourses. In light of this, the East End becomes a base that enables them to redefine themselves and affirm their belonging in Britain.

Peter Lawson suggests that indefinability is a Jewish cultural aspect in Pinter's plays, just like linguistic identity, postmemory, and trauma. Pinter's early plays are characterised by loneliness and terror; in his later plays, ugly confrontations between victims and aggressors become more explicit. In *One for the Road* (1984), Victor is interrogated by Nicholas, who represents the force of the state. Victor is initially unwilling to submit, but ultimately becomes docile and compliant. Nicholas' apparent absolute authority, on the other hand, is undermined by his commitment to the regime, which in turn reveals his own vulnerability. Through Lawson's analysis, Pinter's characters, in resisting structural power dynamics, engage with their oppressing institutions. This traumatic relationship goes some way towards explaining the dissociative identity of Pinter's characters.

Mark Taylor-Batty writes about the profound impact of post-war British society on Pinter's worldview and dramaturgy. According to

Taylor-Batty, the apathetic, neglectful attitude that Britain maintained towards the Jewish community led Pinter to question the stability of British-Jewish identity. In his analysis of *The Room* (1957), Taylor-Batty interweaves issues of ethnicity and belonging to expose traumas suffered by the Jewish community. He suggests that, in *The Birthday Party* (1957), Goldberg represents orthodoxy and tradition, connecting the character to an overarching theme of belonging. By extension, the play can be read as being to some degree about the misuse of authority. When analysing *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), Taylor-Batty asserts that Rebecca's personal trauma is derived from the collective memory of the Holocaust. Historical revisionism as a theatrical device in *Ashes to Ashes* requires the reader to make ethical judgements about the manipulation of discourse and distortion of historical fact.

Similarly, Phyllis Lassner suggests that the British mainstream sidesteps the history of the Holocaust, and that Eva Hoffman's play, *The Ceremony* (2016), serves as a reminder of it. In the play, Hoffman dramatises her memory of the Holocaust in Poland, exploring 'the ethical and cultural role of historical memory in any nation's identity' (97). A sense of 'borderlessness' is engendered by Hoffman's careful blending of Jewishness and universality. Location, in *The Ceremony*, is ambiguous, as remembrance of the Holocaust in Poland is applied to other nations' cultural memory.

Axel Stähler draws attention to the existence of many antisemitic calumnies, with blood libel among the most pernicious. Stähler first traces historical allegations of blood libel, continuing by citing Wesker's and Berkoff's plays to excavate both the source of this antisemitic canard, and the lasting harm done to the Jewish people. The unreliability of judicial machinery is implicit in both plays, as judicial discourse is manipulated by interest groups.

Mike Witcombe focusses on plays by Mike Leigh, Ryan Craig, and Julia Pascal, in order to examine the dilemmas that the Israeli occupation of Palestine poses for the Jewish community. He describes the way in which the conflict is a source of increasing friction amongst British Jews, sowing discord within communities as issues on each side

appear irreconcilable. Witcombe notes that the domestic setting of plays by Craig and Leigh reveals clashes of opinion within the British-Jewish community, whereas Pascal—by locating her play in Israel and featuring diverse characters—exposes a range of viewpoints. This includes the perspective of a younger generation of Jews, dealing with its own issues of identity.

Eckart Voigts and Sarah Ablett observe that, as a result of not having been sufficiently valued, many female British-Jewish playwrights have redirected their careers away from theatre. Plays by Shelley Silas and Nina Raine address themes that are specific to the Jewish experience, alongside ‘issues of subjectivities as well as questions of affiliation and belonging’ (147). In *Calcutta Kosher* (2004), Silas presents a range of perspectives that are not limited to a specific ethnic background. Raine’s *Tribes* (2010) exposes sentiments that are symptomatic of modern society in general. These writers thus transcend the particularities of the individual ethnic experience.

Björn Kraus defines ‘lifeworld’ as ‘a person’s subjective construction of reality’ (156). Jeanette Malkin adopts this concept to explore the way in which the personal circumstances of playwrights’ lives influence their writing. For example, Patrick Marber’s plays expose the intersection of his English and Jewish identities; Ryan Craig’s explore the Jewish diasporic experience; and Tom Stoppard’s plays do not exhibit his Jewishness, with the exception of his last.

Cyrielle Garson describes the significant contribution of Jewish practitioners to the success of contemporary British theatre, and yet, wary of the political and social fallout, many have tended not to indicate their identity. While Garson points out a historical lack of critical attention to these playwrights, from the 2000s, theatres have begun to stage Jewish plays with increasing regularity. Next, Sue Vice lays bare the persistence of reductionist Jewish characters in television drama from 1970 onward. The medium has both constructed and perpetuated a repertoire of stereotypical Jewish figures, framed in the context of British spiritual and material struggles. This dramatised Jewishness exposes the unidirectional control held by British television

producers over the screen representation of Jews, and 'the "Jewishing" of hegemonic Britishness' (198).

By contrast with the clichéd portrayals that populated television dramas until the last decade, Nathan Abrams claims that, increasingly, Jewish television characters are indistinguishable from their non-Jewish counterparts. Today, as Abrams evidences, there are Jewish police, and Jewish gangsters and criminals on our screens. However, Abrams asserts that, for the most part, non-Jews create and play these complex and developed Jewish characters. He presents a call to action: that Jewish artists should engage more actively in promoting diverse and truthful images of Jewishness.

The book concludes with interviews with five theatre artists, each expressing contrasting and overlapping views of themselves as Jews living in Britain, as well as reflections on the Jewish diasporic experience. Nicholas Hytner believes that the British-Jewish community is somewhat protected, by contrast with the Jewish community in France. This runs counter to the experiences articulated by Julia Pascal, who obtained a French passport as a result of her perceived insecurity in British society. Pascal expresses that 'to be a Jew in England has been a state of low-level anxiety' (223): an anxiety implicit in Patrick Marber's mention of 'passing' as a non-Jew (236). Both John Nathan and Pascal imply that America allows for a more uninhibited expression of Jewishness.

This is a comprehensive book on British-Jewish theatre, providing a view of how Jewish identity is conveyed through the work of playwrights and via television drama, as well as how that identity has been shaped by the mechanisms of cultural change. As an immigrant culture, the Jewish community has both a symbiotic and conflicted relationship with its British host. British Jews' hyphenated identity indicates inclusion and acceptance, as well as its own particular characteristics. In this sense, British-Jewish theatre has the opportunity to provide rich, complex representation, and to add a new dimension to the British stage.