

Editorial

‘The moments of magic ... are to be fully realized as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion—which means it’s OK if the wires show, and maybe it’s good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing.’

Magic in the theatre often presents itself as a negotiation between the miraculous and the technological. Whereas special effects in film ideally enable audiences’ complete absorption in fantasy, the interest in theatrical magic tends to be less about whether a seamless evocation of the impossible is achieved. It is much more about the friction between the often readily apparent craftsmanship that facilitates live performance and the imperative to nevertheless produce illusions that are fantastic enough to enable audiences to suspend their disbelief in the action unfolding on stage. Tony Kushner’s playwright’s notes for *Angels in America*, quoted above, exemplify this. *Angels in America*’s theatrical magic provided an initial point of inspiration for this edition of *Platform*, since magic, as manifested in the imposing figure of Kushner’s Angel of America, is the play’s fulcrum, binding together its narrative, stagecraft, and philosophical force.

Much like stage technology, story, and theory intersect in Kushner’s Angel, this issue of *Platform* is interested in how magic—though often regarded as straightforwardly fantastical or merely frivolous—can serve as a point of focus for academic inquiry. The contributions to this issue use the material appearance of magic in live performance as a springboard to explore aspects of philosophy (Corrieri, Manuel), ideology (Young, Solakidi), faith (Bloomfield), and history (Wetzler). As such, they demonstrate how the tension between stagecraft and wonder that theatrical magic provokes can prompt much wider and more far-reaching questions that get to the heart of how performance operates both in the theatre and outside of it.

In the opening provocation, Augusto Corrieri asks what we mean by ‘magic’ and questions why theatre and performance studies,

despite having devoted considerable attention to other forms of popular entertainment, has seldom engaged with the work of magicians and illusionists. Corrieri argues that sleight-of-hand magic is fundamentally about the tension between the audience's awareness that what they are witnessing is a trick and the nevertheless inexplicable magic taking place right in front their eyes. As such, for Corrieri, magic is a kind of 'meta-theatre' that prompts philosophical reflection on the nature of perception.

Martin Young's article, 'Abnormal Personages and Substantial Lumps: Theatre's Dialectic of Fairy Magic and Human Work', reflects on nineteenth-century antitheatricity as manifested in reviews of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For Young, theatrical magic—and the figure of the fairy in all her 'sequined, gauzy glory' in particular—serves to explore an ideological tension inherent in bourgeois thought. While reviewers have generally regarded *Midsummer's* ethereal characters and pastoral setting as unstageable, they effusively praised Samuel Phelps's 1853 production at Sadler's Wells. Praise was heaped on this production not only because it rendered the work of stagehands in producing the magic on stage all but invisible, but because it successfully used gaslight and green gauze to soften even the appearance of the fairies. Young argues that the critics' enthusiasm for the creation of 'insubstantial illusion' on stage points to an unacknowledged anxiety about the bodily work of both stagehands and performers in the industrialised capitalist society; paradoxically, theatrical magic reveals this anxiety precisely when it is most successful in masking its own connection to human work.

The next article takes this focus on the material conditions that enable the production of magic in performance one step further. Eleanor Bloomfield's 'Sacred Staging: Dramatic Magic in the Medieval Mass' considers how the deliberate, dramatic staging of the late medieval Mass shaped the congregation's, or audience's, experience of the miraculous. While medieval passion plays served to commemorate Christ's crucifixion, Bloomfield argues that the Mass used similar

dramatic elements as the plays, but to more magical ends: the Mass was the literal renewal of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary, not its mere remembrance. For Bloomfield, the material elements of theatrical performance—the architectural playing spaces of medieval churches, their scenographic arrangements of light and space, and treatises like the *Lay Folks Mass Book*, which directed audience participation—should be seen as of central importance in enabling the magic of faith that was at the centre of the medieval Mass.

In Sylvia Solakidi's article, the theme of magic is explored through the alchemical transformation enacted in the dance piece *Drugs Kept Me Alive* by the controversial Belgian choreographer Jan Fabre.¹ Performed by Antony Rizzi, to whom it is dedicated, Fabre's piece is a meditation on the biomedical politics of HIV-infection as well as on Rizzi's experience of confronting his own HIV-positive status. Solakidi's analysis focuses on the material elements present on stage—table, bubbles, hat, and pills—that facilitate Rizzi's transformation from the despair of diagnosis into the artist-warrior he eventually becomes. Arguing that *Drugs Kept Me Alive* should be interpreted as a statement on problematic and exclusionary aspects of HIV biomedical politics, this article also draws on Solakidi's personal experience of working in an HIV laboratory and reflects on the ways in which *Drugs Kept Me Alive* changed her perspective on the virus.

Opening the creative pieces section, Pedro Manuel takes the reader on a journey to discover invisibility and where and how it appears. His poetic text, 'If I Return Will You Remember', guides us from phantasmagorical performances, pantomime, and the traditional Japanese puppet theatre of Bunraku all the way to the idea of an 'Invisible Theatre' which Manuel is yet to discover. His performative writing directs the reader's attention to nonmaterial and nonhuman

1 As of September 2018, Fabre has been accused by twenty of his former performers of bullying, misogyny, and sexual harassment. The accusations remain under investigation at the time of writing. (see the open letter: (Former) employees and apprentices at Troubleyn).

things that we might otherwise fail to notice. Manuel's key image is a block of marble; just as light only becomes visible when it is reflected in something, Manuel posits that marble only truly shifts into the visible realm once it embodies the shape of a figure.

'Sieving Wax with Oil', an experimental piece of speculative non-fiction by Graydon Wetzler, engages with the invention of kerosene in the nineteenth century. Drawing together discourses of experimental biology, colloidal suspension, industrial synthetics, and anthropology, Wetzler suggests that kerosene is of particular value for a theoretical investigation of performance magic because its invention poses questions concerning the ontology of materials and prompts us to ask whether history itself might be considered a magical material.

This issue of *Platform* also includes two performance responses. Emma Chapman playfully engages with Lauren Barri Holstein's *Notorious* at Birmingham Repertory Theatre, while Clio Unger's response to *Jack and the Beanstalk*, performed at the Lyric Hammersmith, provides an outsider's view of British panto, as Unger looks at the genre's tradition from the perspective of a German native. In the book review section, Linford Butler reflects on *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art: The British Community Arts Movement* (edited by Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty), Karen Morash reviews *New Playwriting at Shakespeare's Globe* (by Vera Cantoni), and Jemima Hubberstey examines *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now* (edited by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage).

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on magic in diverse cultural performance spaces have made this edition of *Platform* what we hope to be an illuminating intervention on the magic of theatre and performance.

Lisa Moravec and Julia Peetz, Editors

Works Cited

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