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EDITORS' NOTE

Crises on Stage: Imagining New Worlds

This special issue was set up to examine the ways in which North American theater and performance have responded to conditions of crisis in contemporaneity, and the essays selected have risen to the challenge. The volume maps a variety of practices, themes, and aesthetics employed by theater and performance artists and companies in their multi-faceted explorations of crisis, through interdisciplinary lenses drawing from cultural and literary studies, theater and performance studies, ethnic studies, migration studies, gender studies, sociology, political philosophy, and related fields. The contributors have clearly worked with an awareness of the growing body of research dedicated to this phenomenon as well as to the Greek origins of the term crisis *and its evolution in time, from its traditional denomination as a crux of decision that forces an outcome to a more comprehensive understanding that includes the productive ambivalence between crisis as a* moment of rupture *and crisis as an* ongoing condition. *The topic is still relevant as the global struggles with the economic, political, social, psychological and other effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue while the Russia-Ukraine war has not reached its end, these being only the most recent crises that preoccupy the world now.*

Some of the central questions this issue proposed initially have been addressed as the essays included here have reflected on the ways in which theater productions represent states of continued insecurity, precariousness, and vulnerability – or, in Rob Nixon's words, processes of "slow violence" – in a way that makes full use of the medium's strengths while acknowledging its inherent spatial and temporal limitations. Embracing Bertolt Brecht's dictum, "new times need new forms of theatre," the contributors have considered the representational modes and aesthetic strategies employed in the staging and performance of crisis,

insisting on the effects of using specific theatrical formats. Several pieces have sought answers in connection to the functions of theater in (post-)crisis contexts, illuminating theater's role as an arena for public debate or site of individual and collective empowerment.

The case studies featured in this special issue reflect the richness of contemporary US theater practices, including a diversity of voices (from established to recently rediscovered to lesser-known playwrights and productions) and formats (from scripted plays to dance and interdisciplinary works based on oral histories). Testifying not only to the wide array of theater practices, the essays also speak to the diversity of environments in which contemporary US theater is presented today, from Broadway, off-Broadway, and off-off-Broadway, to regional stages and college settings. Furthermore, contributing to the emerging critical discourse on "theaters of lockdown" (Fuchs) and the virtualization of the medium in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, several essays delve into the possibilities of digital formats and online production archives.

One notable strength of this issue lies in the diverse methodologies employed by the authors, from text-based to production-oriented approaches, and from intersections of scholarship and practice to applied exercises with a strong pedagogical focus. The contributors themselves, based in various parts of Europe and North America, illustrate the richness of the dialogue between various culturally located perspectives and testify to the editors' commitment to inclusiveness and scholarly exchange beyond borders.

Demonstrating that Native theater deserves more critical attention, Cathy C. Waegner's "Staging (during) Crisis: Indigenous Zoomlets in the Pandemic" studies the stimulating combinations of tradition and innovation that characterized (some of) the "Monday night Zoomlets," a San Francisco Playhouse Project in 2020-2021. More specifically, Waegner discusses DeLanna Studi's Flight*, Claude Jackson Jr.'s* Cashed Out*, and Lee Cataluna's* Funeral Attire*, illustrating their engagement with decolonization and their capacity to adapt to the (technical) challenges of the latest pandemic. Entering a vibrant conversation with other recent theoretical and critical developments, the essay testifies to the fact that "Current Native theatre is a significant indicator . . . that Native culture, drawing*

on inherited stories and skills, can simultaneously weave them into latter-day narratives and lifeways" (Waegner).

Reinforcing our special issue's interest in the virtualization of theater in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru's piece considers some of the recent productions of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company, with a particular focus on the Ailey All Access online project. Her essay draws on Thomas F. DeFrantz's analysis of the "embodiment of African American culture" and Rosi Braidotti's understanding of posthuman embodiedness to illuminate an emerging critical conversation on the challenges and opportunities of rethinking dance practice within digitally-enhanced environments. The final section zooms in on the various "applied dancing" programs developed by the company in both virtual and in-person formats and delineates their specific contributions to educational and community-building agendas, and, ultimately, to a much-needed process of democratizing the (dance) arts.

Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija embraces a diachronic perspective on crisis, surveying twentieth and twenty-first-century turning points and their echoes in the American theater, including those of the recent pandemic and its refashioning of in praesentia *practices. She highlights the staging of race and gender through the work of African American women playwrights and chooses two plays as case studies: Alice Childress's* Trouble in Mind *and Lynn Nottage's* By the Way, Meet Vera Stark. *Both emblematic plays are analyzed as representations of the intersectional oppression that Black actresses have fought for decades, even as they have entered the theater world or the film industry.*

Tanya Long Bennett's essay also delves into the complexities of African American women's theater, as she makes a case for the timeliness of Childress's recently rediscovered Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*, and its possible contributions to shaping conversations about race in the Black Lives Matter era. Through an in-depth analysis of the complex functions of the N-word in the play, Bennett emphasizes the importance of contextual factors in re-examining racially-loaded language, while showing how recent legal suits and disciplinary actions in connection with the use of this word are similarly contingent on their wider contexts. Moving from text to production, the final section of the essay offers an insightful discussion of recent approaches to Childress's* Wedding

Band *and* Trouble in Mind*, with a focus on the ways in which strategic preparatory conversations – held both in the rehearsal room as well as online due to COVID-19 restrictions – might create a fruitful context for an understanding of the dramatist's subtle treatment of race.*

Araceli González Crespán shines a spotlight on another lesser-known play whose relevance for one of the most acute crises of our time – the refugee crisis – is indisputable. In "The Cuban Rafter Crisis on Stage: Humanizing the Experience of Refugees in María Irene Fornés' Manual for a Desperate Crossing*," González Crespán uses her knowledge of the entire Fornesian body of work to place this particular play in relation to others that engage with the issues of exile and migration. After providing details about the sea exodus of large numbers of people from Cuba to Florida in the mid-1990s and its media coverage, González Crespán focuses on the play's strategies such as intertextuality and collage as well as their effects upon the audience. She concludes convincingly that besides bearing witness to a humanitarian crisis, Fornés paves the way for viewers to develop a palpable connection to the refugees and lends her theatrical vision to a worthwhile cause.*

Interested in the long and productive tradition of American family plays, Raluca Moldovan investigates the representation of "a family in crisis, and of a nation in crisis" in Tracy Letts's Pulitzer-awarded August: Osage County*. She discusses this work with reference to classic writers such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, or Arthur Miller. While the first section engages in close textual analysis of the multi-layered crises experienced by the protagonists, the second part proposes an inquiry into the play's social and political undertones. Thus, Moldovan shows how the personal crises mirror, to some extent, larger crises in US society, while gesturing towards the decline of a contemporary version of the American dream.*

Drawing on her own experience as a cultural consultant, oral historian, and performance storyteller in the productions to be analyzed, Theresa L. Burriss discusses three dance/theater pieces developed in collaboration with choreographer and Radford University Professor of Dance Deborah McLaughlin. Burriss situates the works in the rich tradition of Appalachian community theater (Roadside Theater, Higher Ground, Appalachian Women Rising) and explores

the modes in which the three interdisciplinary productions engage with some of the most pressing social and environmental crises of the region, such as mountaintop removal coalmining, outmigration due to single-industry domination, and black lung disease. Through close analysis of the artistic media incorporated into their fabric (dance, poetry, the spoken word, and the visual arts, as well as contemporary and traditional music), Burriss reveals how the shows defy constructs of Appalachia as "a land and people in crisis, perpetual crisis," by envisioning alternative "mirrors" and more sustainable futures for its human and more-than-human, beyond reductive cultural stereotypes.

Concluding the volume, Cătălina Florina Florescu bridges playwriting with teaching, as she shares parts of her recent play Mia *interwoven with a series of applied exercises for educators to use with their students and trainees. While allowing a glimpse into "the world's first breast cancer trilogy" (Florescu), the Romanian American playwright explodes genre conventions, as she explores autobiographical material with the same ease and confidence with which she develops methodological approaches to her creative text. Hers is a final testimony to the need for courage, imagination, innovation and astuteness when confronted with personal or collective crises.*

Notwithstanding the diversity of primary sources under scrutiny in this special issue, all the contributions are informed by a similar vision of theater as a productive space for critical reflection on the interrelatedness of the urgent crises of our times and, importantly, as a potential vehicle for social change. Echoing Brechtian notions of theater as a platform for imagining how the world might be rather than reinforcing images of the world as it is, the essays gathered here are thus predicated on an underlying belief in the socially transformative powers of theater. For Burriss, theater serves as nothing less than an "antidote to crisis," creating a space that promotes "individual and collective agency," while Waegner underscores its decolonizing potential as "a powerful tool to counter adverse perceptions and even unjust conditions." Bennett's piece concludes that "[c]ourageous drama can guide society through honest consideration of its history," whereas González Crespán shows how it might excavate and recover almost-forgotten historical events, in an effort to "give voice to the victims [and] amplify their unheard dramas."

Importantly, all the essays are grounded in the need to establish connections between theater and the social world beyond its boundaries, highlighting what Jan Cohen-Cruz has fittingly described as "an ethos and aesthetics of call and response" (1). While speaking truth to power and engaging in a critique of the systemic oppression and injustice perpetrated against various marginalized groups, the contributions show the ways in which theater nonetheless gestures toward a more hopeful future, in line with Jill Dolan's understanding of the "utopian performative," i.e., those "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like" (5). Thus, theater – without necessarily relinquishing its intrinsically aesthetic nature – functions as an "empathy machine" (Waegner), creating "opportunities for empowerment and successful community building" (Draga Alexandru) and "invit[ing] us all to imagine different, life-affirming ways of being" (Burriss).

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