

EDITORIAL

## World on Fire

In her final editorial comment, outgoing Editor Marlis Schweitzer implored us collectively to “keep the light on,” to maintain space for and faith in the theatre as an enduring site of collectivity in praxis whose vitality persists despite the profound disruptions of a global pandemic that has upended our routines and, more important, resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. She composed these words in mid-May of last year. The United States had not yet crossed the devastating threshold of 100,000 lives lost to COVID-19. Lush green hillsides were slowly giving way to rolling, golden hills as temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere warmed (perhaps too quickly) with the transition from spring into summer. George Floyd was still alive, and many people outside of Louisville, Kentucky did not yet know Breonna Taylor’s name or of her murder. But by the time her words reached you, the world was quite literally on fire. The US West was experiencing history-making wildfires, leading to the displacement of thousands of coastal residents, viral images of otherworldly orange skies, and impassioned discussions about the catastrophic pace of climate change. (In fact, I am writing this note at a time when public air-quality warnings have discouraged me from opening my California windows for the past several days, and also against going outside unless strictly necessary. Even so, my circumstances in Northern California are substantially better than those of my colleagues in the Pacific Northwest.) A fire for social justice enflamed thousands across the United States and globally who had heretofore been indifferent or even averse to declarations like “Black Lives Matter,” “Defund the Police,” and “Abolish ICE” that aim to remap the distribution of resources and power, and repair centuries of systemic harm inflicted upon communities of color. I am composing this message in mid-September, while my home state smolders from top to bottom, and we are nearing 200,000 US COVID deaths. But by the time you read this comment in January, we will be days away from the swearing in of the President of the United States, one whose decisions for the next four years will substantially, though not exclusively, shape whether and how we will work together to create a more just nation and world.

Time unfolds strangely these days. It used to be the case that an editorial comment such as this could rely upon a certain elasticity of relevance, that the conditions shaping our writing, our living, and our working in the three or four months prior to publication would bear some meaningful resemblance to the conditions of the world in which the writing would circulate; what is important now would also be important then. Such confidence smacked of a privilege that was invisible to many of us who wielded it despite the multiple precarities of the Anthropocene. The fierce urgency of now is elusive, and I can’t possibly imagine what words

will rightly meet the world as it exists by the time this comment makes its way to you. I can't possibly imagine what I'll be feeling, as an African American woman, on the eve of the 2021 presidential inauguration, or as a university-affiliated academic (and further, a beneficiary of the ostensible security of tenure) preparing to embark on another term of teaching, researching, and attempting to be of service during a pandemic.

What I do know is that asking questions about the past and connecting it to the present remains a vital endeavor, one that the authors in this issue take on with great care and insight. Julia Fawcett's "Plotting the Modern City: John Dryden's *Sir Martin Mar-All* on the Dorset Garden Stage" offers strikingly relevant observations on what happens when a devastating fire follows a plague, forcing a community to rebuild and requiring that its members reorient themselves to transformed space and toward one another. Taking the Restoration comedy *Sir Martin Mar-All* as its central text, Fawcett's essay illuminates the many ways in which performance practices symbolically and literally taught "Londoners . . . how to improvise spaces for themselves within the ever-shifting geographies of the post-Fire city." The new London required that its habitués relinquish old notions of space and place, and develop an agility that not only remapped plots of land but also reconfigured social relations across lines of class and privilege, emphasizing the experiential wisdom and tactical savvy of the servant class as superior to that of the people whom they served.

Nicola Caputo also attends to performance cultures in London with her essay, "The Farcical Tragedies of King Richard III: The Nineteenth-Century Burlesques." Caputo argues that burlesque performances of Shakespearean plays and their offshoots had the counterintuitive effect of reinforcing the Bard's reputation and influence through strategies of localization, domestication, and topical allusion that maintained Shakespeare's relevance and appeal to audiences two centuries after his passing. Through close readings of three distinct burlesque treatments of *Richard III*, Caputo demonstrates the dynamic relationship between venerating and irreverent modes of performance.

Lest we uncritically romanticize the power of performance, Logan J. Connors urges that we comprehensively study the war plays of Revolution-era France and attend to their function as tools of militaristic fervor. Part of a recent movement in scholarship to take more serious consideration of the artistic merits of Revolutionary creative output, "Total Theatre for Total War: Experiences of the Military Play in Revolutionary France" examines the genre of plays that reenacted significant military events through spectacular deployments of technical skill and massive scale, designed to bolster a nascent national identity steeped in the thirst for external conquest. Connors describes these works as totalizing performance events that merged documentary dramaturgy, sophisticated production values, and affective power earned through immersion, in order to leverage an abiding reciprocity between discourses of theatricality and war, and by extension, overtly attempt to make patriotism during the period synonymous with imperialism.

Leanne Groeneveld directs our attention to a different but equally disturbing recruitment of performance into nationalist ideology, the Oberammergau Passion Play. Although the Passion Play's production history actually begins in the 1600s and extends into the present (thanks to the pandemic, its next performance has

been postponed from May 2020 to May 2022), Groeneveld is especially interested in the cultural significance assigned to performances during the eugenics movement. “Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Representations of the Oberammergau Passion Play: Heredity, Eugenic Theatre, and ‘Epic Selection’” lays bare the ways that cultural production can function as a tool of white supremacy. Groeneveld traces the evolving discourses of heredity and social psychology and the emergence of Oberammergau—a small, isolated Bavarian community—as a case study of sorts for the supposed mutually beneficial relationship between tightly controlled genetic inheritance and the moral rewards of the town’s decennial collaboration to produce the Passion Play. She notes that by the late 1800s, “the villagers’ ancestry or ‘racial’ origin became newly and increasingly important in representations of their physical and moral qualities,” and that their “physiology and even artistic ‘genius’ were more and more understood as products of natural selection enhanced by an accidental, centuries-long experiment in eugenics”—one that lent conviction to proponents of a eugenic theatre that might foster the breeding and moral cultivation of superior humans.

If eugenic interpretations of the Oberammergau Passion Play insisted on the merger of citizen performers with their morally worthwhile dramatic material, solo performer Ruth Draper’s artistry complicated that equation. In “‘That’s Not Acting’: Feminist Mimesis in the Solo Performances of Ruth Draper,” Jennifer Schmidt examines Draper’s work and its critical reception in order to explore “the remarkable verity Draper brought to an antirealist form.” Taking up the historically fraught relationship between a feminist politic of representation and the potentially oppressive constraints of realism, Schmidt argues for the importance of inserting Draper’s work within a genealogy of feminist solo performance. She then goes further to underscore the choices that Draper made, merging with her material so seamlessly that some critics failed to see her craft at work, yet simultaneously also refusing to fit her characters (through fully fleshed-out costume, prop, and setting) into the literalism associated with realist drama. Draper’s meticulous yet intentionally constrained renderings of a wide array of characters were early examples of the generative and resistant potential of feminist mimesis.

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In sum, this issue of *Theatre Survey* avows the expansive importance of performance as what Dorinne Kondo calls a “worldmaking” activity. It is also a marker of transition: though my name is now at the top of the masthead, this issue materializes my collaboration with my predecessor Marlis Schweitzer. I am deeply grateful for the generous mentorship and rigorous, graceful example she has set for the past two years in her stewardship of these pages, including several of the essays in this issue. In a similar vein, I am deeply grateful for the excellent editorial work of Copy Editor Michael Gnat, who has been supporting the journal in this capacity for some time, and whose crucial contributions are now made legible to all of you on the masthead. It is both a great honor and a great responsibility to assume the Editorship of *Theatre Survey* and to help chart its course for the future. My goal is to continue to expand the journal’s engagement with and recovery of histories that enlarge our understanding of which performances matter and deserve to be recorded in the scholarly archive. Additionally, I am eager to support the work of continually increasing access to *Theatre Survey*’s scholarship. In that regard, I

am pleased to share that the American Society for Theatre Research has taken the important step of making *Theatre Survey* a Hybrid Open Access journal, meaning that scholars whose personal commitments and/or institutional mandates lead them to publish their work as Gold Open Access will now be able to have their work appear in our journal. (Please see our website for further information about what this entails.) Lastly, I'd like to welcome La Donna L. Forsgren, incoming Associate Editor, to the *Theatre Survey* team. La Donna brings extensive authorial and editorial experience, as well as exciting ideas about how to help the journal remain at the forefront of our fields' conversations about the central role of performance cultures—even, and perhaps especially, to a world on fire.