Studies in Theatre and Performance 40.2

Editorial

Tom Cornford

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London

tom.cornford@cssd.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4336-7382

This editorial marks a moment of change for *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, but as I sit down to write it, all other changes seem to have been eclipsed by the unrecognizability of much of the world even from a few weeks ago, not to mention the changes that are widely anticipated for the next year. As the spring of 2020 arrives, even the UK’s departure from the European Union on 31 January – with unquestionably deep consequences for British universities – has been dwarfed into insignificance by the global COVID-19 pandemic, formally announced as such by the World Health Organisation on 11 March. As I write, on 9 April, the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation is forecasting that the UK will see over 66,000 people die of COVID-19 by early August.[[1]](#footnote-1) Measures to limit this alarming spread are creating what the economist James Meadway has described as ‘a profound dislocation of the essential components of economic and social life itself’.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a result, economic forecasts are no less alarming than their epidemiological equivalents, with – for example – unemployment predicted to rise in the United States to levels higher than those of the Great Depression.[[3]](#footnote-3) For the moment, we are living in the UK under ‘lockdown’, a penal term that has been rendered troublingly domestic by its new-found currency in our media. This stands in stark contrast to the shocking inattention its violent namesake received when it was imposed last August by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government upon Muslim citizens in Indian-administered Kashmir.[[4]](#footnote-4) The potentially horrifying consequences of the intersection between state-sanctioned religious nationalism in India and COVID-19 have yet to be made visible, but in the UK and the USA, we are already seeing Black people and people of colour disproportionately affected by the disease, which is set to run like barium dye through global economic, political and cultural systems, exposing their inequalities with brutal clarity.

The essays collected in this open issue were all published online last year, but as I re-read them now, they resonate most of all with unintentional echoes of our current crisis. As we benefit, in isolation, from theatre that has been made freely available online, Sophie Ward and Roy Connolly’s article may give us pause for thought about the rehabilitative power of theatre for those the state confines. They offer a detailed history of the emergence of Shakespeare in prisons and tensions among the discourses that have shaped its development, arguing that it may be in ‘trangressive action’ that its ‘appeal’ is to be found (XX). At a time when transgressive action has potentially deadly consequences, their article offers a troubling meditation on the consequences of its opposite, particularly for those most vulnerable to coercive authority. The now-widespread practice of government-approved daily exercise reverberates across Sarah Crews’ and P. Solomon Lennox’s twinned accounts of boxing training. Their analysis of training as a risky, social process both reminds us of the current risk for others of bodies ‘encased in a fog of action’, that are ‘liquid dripping’ and ‘vapour condensing’ (XX), and of the function of exercise as a repetitive process of negotiating selfhood not only by accepting dominant ideological narratives but perhaps by battling subversively against the shadows of symbolic power. Kélina Gotman’s reflection on the act of translating Marie NDiaye’s play *Les Serpents* – and on the attempt to translate that translation into theoretical terms – returns us to our homes, but also to the sense she finds in Ndiaye’s text of ‘never quite belonging’, to a strangeness that is now a daily experience for many of us for whom, as she puts it, ‘the space around us is shifting, alien, home, too’ (XX). Next, Teri Howson-Griffiths addresses a form of performance that currently seems impossibly illicit, termed ‘sensory labyrinth theatre’ by Iwan Brioc
(XX). Howson-Griffiths’ analysis of the corporeal experience of this form of ‘immersion’ shifts the focus of immersive theatre studies from the urban to the rural and draws upon the kinds of ‘meditative walking practices’ many of us are currently undertaking, as well as shifting attention away from the visual and aural modes and towards the poetics of touch and smell from which many have become recently disconnected by our dependence upon the mediation of the screen. Finally, Ian Farnell turns our attention to Nick Payne’s 2016 play *Elegy*, which he positions as a balancing act between ‘interrogatory’ science and ‘speculative’ science fiction in which the stage frames an ethical exploration of the near-possibility of extending life by using brain-machine interfaces (XX). All of these articles demonstrate the crucial function of theatre and performance as a site both for exploring speculative futures and examining the troubling present. We wish you health and safety as you do so in our company.

This issue marks, as I noted at the start, some significant changes for *STP*. We say farewell and thank you to Phillip Zarilli, Laurence Selenick and Patrice Pavis who are leaving our advisory board, and to Maggie Gale, Geraldine Harris, Deirdre Heddon, Elizabeth Sakellaridou, Graham Saunders, Liz Tomlin, and Andrew Wyllie who are leaving the editorial board. We also welcome Aparna Dharwadker, Osita Okagbue, Joanne Tomkins and Aylwyn Walsh to our advisory board, and Trina Banerjee and Lynette Goddard to our editorial board. Last winter also saw the departure of Kate Dorney and Jacqueline Bolton as editors of the journal, and we extend our deep thanks to both for their dedicated work. Kate’s departure is particularly significant since her tenure began back in 2008, as former editor Andrew Wyllie writes:

It was, I think, in 2008 that the first meeting of the new gang at *Studies in Theatre and Performance* took place – new gang in the sense that Kate Dorney and I were the new Deputy and Associate Editors respectively, while Peter Thomson was very much the guiding spirit as Founding Editor. The three of us found common interests in grammatical and factual accuracy, fun, and pubs. Kate and I continued as joint editors following Peter’s retirement in 2014 until my departure in 2017. Kate of course continued as Editor until her resignation earlier this year, having had the most crucial role in seeing *STP* through changes in publisher and the recruitment of new personnel. I think everybody would testify to Kate’s qualities of perceptiveness, organisation, energy and self-discipline, and I imagine that all of us who know her well would also mention her intelligence, sympathy and concern for the well-being of others. It is now over three years since I left *STP*, but Kate and I remain close friends, which is at the very least a testament to her patience and tolerance. As to our shared time at *STP*, I am unable to convey adequately how much fun it all was, and how much I looked forward to editorial meetings that began with lunch, ended in pubs, and in between constituted intellectual and literary gymnastics of a high order.

Peter Thomson concurs:

Editorial meetings spilled readily into laughter not long after Kate Dorney came into the room. Many of the great editors of literary history have been acerbic, and many have been jovial. Kate belongs with the jovial ones. A misplaced comma was unlikely to unsettle her if the sentence served its writer’s argument. Her interest was always in the bigger picture. I count long sessions – generally in admirable pubs – with Andrew Wyllie and Kate among my treasured memories.

All of us at STP would like to echo Andrew and Peter’s thanks to Kate, and wish her and Jacqueline all the very best.

1. #  Kottasová, Ivana. ‘New US model predicts much higher Covid-19 death toll in UK. But British scientists are sceptical’, CNN, April 9, 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/08/health/uk-death-toll-coronavirus-estimate-gbr-intl/index.html (accessed on April 9, 2020).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Meadway, James. ‘The Anti-Wartime Economy’, Tribune, March 19, 2020. https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/03/the-anti-wartime-economy (accessed on April 9, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tooze, Adam. Twitter Post, April 7, 2020, 12.00pm. https://twitter.com/adam\_tooze/status/1247479234265841665 (accessed on April 9, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. #  Fareed, Rifat. ‘India imposes Kashmir lockdown, puts leaders “under house arrest”’, Al Jazeera, August 4, 2019. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/india-imposes-lockdown-kashmir-puts-leaders-house-arrest-190804174841241.html (accessed on April 9, 2020).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)