

Editorial: On Collaboration

SILVIJA JESTROVIC

At the onset of the latest Israeli–Palestinian war in October 2023, Daniel Barenboim reflected on the West–East Divan Orchestra that he had co-founded with Edward Said in 1999, where Arab and Israeli musicians shared a podium to make music together. In his urgent call for peace, the famous conductor pointed out his friendship with Said and their spirit of collaboration: ‘We found in each other a counterpart that could take us further, help us to see the supposed other more clearly, and understand them better. We recognised and found each other in our common humanity. For me, our joint work with the West–East Divan ... is probably the most important activity of my life.’¹ At the cost, to his own admission, of sounding politically naïve, he mentioned that: ‘through this commonality of music-making, but also through our countless, sometimes heated discussions, we have learned to better understand the supposed other, to approach them and to find common ground’.² Barenboim’s article foregrounds two key aspects – collaboration and art-making (in this case music, but it could also be theatre, film, visual arts) – against the backdrop of the very bleak landscape of international politics and an almost cynical refusal of those with most power to pursue diplomatic routes and strategies of urgently putting a stop to violence and destruction. In a climate where calls for peace have been ignored, even held suspect, to write about collaboration and finding common ground, as naïve as it might seem, is an act of dissent.

My daughter and I took part in public protests – urging our government (UK) – to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. We stood in the crowd as names of all the children killed from Hamas’s attack on 7 October 2023 in Kfar Aza to Israel’s relentless bombing of Gaza – the United Nations’ figure at the time was over 4,000 children in Gaza alone (this was early November 2023) – were read out. Listening to the chanting of names of dead children, coming through loudspeakers, we were trying to translate the names and numbers into the mundane reality of our small lives: this is as if all the children of all the primary schools in our small English town of Leamington Spa were killed; or this is as if all the pupils in my daughter’s old secondary school were killed ten times over in less than a month. A devastating and infuriating mathematics. Yet this gathering itself, this act of revolt, cry for help and gesture of solidarity was a joint public effort – a form of collaboration of people from different backgrounds, who, as probability would have it, would not necessarily always have agreed on everything. On that rainy Saturday morning, we were bodies gathered to claim a platform from which the names of the dead children could be heard loud and far, like an amateur version of the Divan Orchestra if it was to perform a lament. Here, the street was the platform; there, it might have been a concert hall.

This journal of international theatre research too, is a platform to voice what needs to be voiced though epistemologies and methods of our discipline, a place of sharing research and knowledge, and above all a space mapped through collaborations. While various forms and processes in our field from theatre-making to journal editing, from research network projects to authoring edited collections, are obviously and inevitably collaborative, article and book writing has by and large been perceived as an individual pursuit. Books and articles have been viewed as single-handed accomplishments – and as such easily quantifiable. While in Sciences this might not be the case, in Arts and Humanities jointly written monographs and articles are somewhat hard to place when it comes to various metrics of quantifying collaborative labour. Academic authors are often asked to attach a percentage to the amount of labour and intellectual vigour they have contributed individually to the collective effort. Who has contributed a higher word count to the essay? Whose ideas dominate the co-authored book? Who was the lead and who was the follower in the process? This is the impossible mathematics of collaboration. Informal conversations, ideas that occur serendipitously, disagreements, negotiations, finding common ground through difference – that is the labour of collaboration. It is a process, a specific kind of backstage action, and there are no metrics sophisticated enough to measure this; not yet. Collaborations unfold in time and space, horizontally, rather than hierarchically. Expanding the vocabulary – the playing field and the imagination of what collaboration is and what it might become – is needed to enrich ways in which we engage in and value collaborative processes.

Various, *space* and *collaboration* are the common denominators for the articles featured in this issue. The collaborative aspect refers to writing processes and forms of the contributions that have been co-authored. Alex Vickery-Howe and Lisa Harper Campbell's "Looking at the Wider World": Global Engagement, Political Activism & Polemical Storytelling in *Watchlist*, *Prima Facie* and *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America* explores the political impact of storytelling in the context of Australian new writing. Placing their own experiment in writing and staging the political polemic: *Watchlist* (in which also Covid looms large) at the centre, the co-authors discuss a theatrical response to the climate emergency. Exploring the ascendant genre of climate fiction (cli-fi), the article dramatizes the present dilemmas and the future marked by the climate crisis as a means to articulate the response and agency of globally responsible citizens.

Yair Lipshitz and Naphtaly Shem-Tov's historiographical piece, "Why Were Our Yemenite Brothers Insulted?": *Love as Strong as Death* as a Prequel to Mizrahi Presence in Israeli Theatre', takes the reader to the theatrical past that has anticipated the future. The article covers the production of *Love as Strong as Death*, a dramatization of the Song of Songs that was performed in Mandatory Palestine in the years 1940–42 by a group of Yemenite Jewish actors. By exploring both Yemenite and Ashkenazi voices in and around the production, the co-authors analyse how the stage, the theatre hall and the written press all served as contested sites regarding the participation of non-European Jews in Hebrew theatre and culture. They point out that the play and its reception capture the ongoing negotiation of the circumscribed

place of Yemenite Jews, as actors and spectators, in both the theatrical world and the political-cultural context of Mandatory Palestine and anticipate the ethnic identity politics in Israeli theatre that would fully occupy centre stage only a few decades later.

Space as a scenographical entity is at the heart of Olga Nikolaeva's 'Scenography of the Unimaginable: Exploring Trauma of Others in *872 days. Voices of the besieged city*'. Nikolaeva proposes the notion of 'scenographic ecology' as she examines the site-specific Saint Petersburg performance *872 days* about the Leningrad siege (1941–44), whereby scenographic rendering of the events is seen as an entryway into the past trauma. Through this approach the everydayness of the siege is foregrounded against the backdrop of Soviet narratives that depict instances of heroism, without addressing the trauma. Moreover, the article contextualizes the performance of the Leningrad siege against the backdrop of contemporary Russia – whereby, one might argue, Nikolaeva approaches empathy as a form of resistance to unfreedoms in the society.

In the article 'Queer Street Scenes: Interruption, Exception, Orientation', David Calder asks 'how might we think queerly about the politics of performance in public space?'. Moving from Bertolt Brecht's 'street scene' and Walter Benjamin's account of epic theatre to the walking performances of two queer migrant artists – South Korean-born Jisoo Yoo, now based in France, and Mozambican-born Jupiter Child, now based in Denmark – the article brings together two different approaches to the notion of politics of performance in public space. The 'surprisingly busy intersection' of the Brechtian 'street scene' and the work of these two artists, who interrogate the disorientation of the queer migrant body in Western European public spaces, reveals a politics of performance that favours orientation over rupture. Yet, the author turns to Sara Ahmed's notion of disorientation as bodies being 'out of place'. The Brechtian notion of making the familiar strange is juxtaposed here with Ahmed's notion of orientation which, as Calder points out, 'is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space', while disorientation happens 'when that extension fails' – when some spaces 'do not leave room for others'.

Finally, the dossier 'Negotiating Urban Spaces: Access, Care and Confinement in Contemporary Gendered Performance' brings the two keywords – *collaboration* and *space* – together. The collaborative aspect is clearly epitomized in the labour of the dossier's curators, Indu Jain and Trina Nileena Banerjee, and its contributors Kornélia Deres, Kelley Holley, Christina Banalopoulou, Carla Lever, and the collaborative/collective effort in the contribution of Ahvana Paul, Tamalika Roy, Sumit Mondal and Shrinjita Biswas. The dossier is in dialogue with the TRI special issue *Presence and Precarity in (Post-)Pandemic Theatre and Performance*,³ extending the geographical scope to locations as diverse as Hungary, Turkey, South Africa, India and the United States of America. Thematically, the dossier focuses on how the pandemic has changed the experience and access to public spaces. The curators and contributors ask how the pandemic affected the traditionally gendered divisions between the public and the private, especially concerning women, non-man and marginalized sexual identities. The dossier explores the ways in which theatre and performance practitioners in different geographical and socio-cultural contexts addressed 'the deeply gendered modes of differential access to public spaces,

institutional support, and resources through their creative as well as activist work, during the pandemic and its aftermath’.

Spaces of collaboration have been variously explored here – through methods and processes of scholarship, as sites of contested identity politics, as extensions of bodies into spaces, as failures of those extensions that not only bring disorientation, but perpetuate otherness. Spaces have been interrogated here as sites of reckoning with collective traumas past and present, and as platforms of civic and artistic activism against the backdrop of various big fires burning everywhere – from wars to climate emergency. What gets represented, performed, unfolded, unmasked, foregrounded, confronted, grappled with, negotiated, reckoned with, reconciled with, and revolted against – is complex rather than naïve, made complicated and ambivalent rather than resolved in simple binaries. Spaces of collaboration – whether these be theatre stages, music podiums, streets or pages of a journal – are neither utopian nor safe. Yet, if spaces of collaboration are to be represented as a cartography of binaries, then they are formulated in opposition to the territory. Conflicts chart territories; territories bring terror. Collaborations open spaces, the busy intersections of hope and dissensus, where one can find the common humanity in the other – ‘a counterpart that can take us further’.

NOTES

- 1 Daniel Barenboim, ‘In our Orchestra, Israelis and Palestinians Found Common Ground. Our Hearts are Broken by this Conflict’, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/daniel-barenboim> (accessed 6 November 2023).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The special issue was published in February 2023 and guest edited by Monika Pietrzak-Franger, Heidi Lucja Liedke and Tamara Radak.