

On Fast and Slow Editing

SILVIJA JESTROVIC

This issue marks the end of my custodianship of *Theatre Research International*, so it is time to look back and reflect. It feels as if I have been in this role for a long time, yet the time has passed quickly. It was a joy to read the submissions, to work with authors from different parts of the world, to see the articles develop and to learn along the way. And when an issue is complete and articles seemingly unrelated to one another enter into a dialogue, the editor's pleasure is akin to finishing a creative journey.

Yet it has also, in many ways, been a time out of joint. My tenure started as we were slowly emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, very fragile, but perhaps with a faint hope that the virus might have been 'a portal', as Arundati Roy intimated, to finding a better way to be in this world. This glimmer of hope soon diminished with the war in Ukraine, followed by the genocide in Gaza – both ongoing as I write these lines in the shade of yet another unusually scorching summer in various parts of the world, while the ecological costs of wars for entire ecosystems – human and non-human – are not even on the agenda. And these are just the biggest catastrophes of the moment, with the smaller unfolding on the peripheries. In Serbia, where I was born, people all over the country, with several theatre and film actors at the forefront, are taking to the streets to protect their land from the deal the government has made with Rio Tinto to open lithium mines – a company known for labour-rights and environmental violations worldwide. While the extraction of lithium spells ecological disaster for a large part of a small country on the margins of Europe (not currently accepted in the European Union), its export deals with Western Europe will no doubt benefit the green goals of those most powerful countries. It is the old capitalist extractive logic in its many neocolonial variations. The question is, how to do, teach and research theatre and performance in the time of extreme ethical relativism, where corporations, billionaires and political and economic interests are placed above human life (the environment being part of it too)? How to edit a theatre journal in the time of genocide and ecocide? These have become vexing questions for me, to which I do not have satisfactory answers.

As the articles for a *TRI* issue came together, whatever their historical, thematic and methodological varieties might have been, I often could not resist a journalistic impulse to frame them within the contemporary moment, despite knowing very well that a few months will pass between signing the issue off for production and its publication. This impulse comes, I believe, from two sources: one being theatre itself – from its paradox of always unfolding in a here and now and of always already being in the past. Theatre and performance are strongly linked to space and time; they always take place in someone's here and now – and as we research and write we look into that past (long gone or just a

few hours away), not only to understand what used to be someone else's present, but often also to see our own better. It is the constant interplay of synchrony and diachrony in theatre and performance (making, teaching, research) that renders the wider context not only relevant, but also necessary, even when the work itself seems unrelated to it.

The other source of this journalistic impulse to frame international theatre research in the here and now (locally, nationally or planetarily) comes from a very personal-political experience of coming of age in my professional life amidst the breakdown of my country – Yugoslavia. Against the backdrop of Serbia's warmongering regime at the time, it felt unethical to be silent, to continue with one's daily life as if nothing was happening while the civil war was raging. Today, sadly, it feels very much the same – unethical to go on with our business of theatre research as usual while children in Gaza are being killed or starving to death. The need to mention that, to at least look in that direction, feels like resisting normalization of the genocide unfolding in front of our eyes. Yet how far can the mentioning go before it becomes tokenistic? After all, how can a theatre journal, with its much-needed, yet inevitably slow, editorial, peer review, production process, ever be topical in a sense of being situated in the here and now? Which here and now? Whose here and now? While I still do not have good answers, I do not want these questions to linger in despair either.

There is something akin to the perpetual race of Achilles and the Tortoise (also known as the race of the Hare and the Tortoise) that the ancient philosopher Zeno of Elea formulated, in the *wordliness* (Ardent) of making and researching theatre and performance. This is not necessarily in the repetition of Zeno's paradox, nor in how speed and slowness cancel each other out *ad infinitum* – but rather in the way they co-create the paradox of time, space and motion, in the way they enable the coalescing of synchrony and diachrony. However, for authors and editors the slowness is also of a banal, quotidian kind as one waits for peer reviews and decision letters, while the other waits for revised articles and for the moment when things fall into place and a journal issue is ready to be signed off to production. Who is fast and who is slow is often hard to tell. Still, the process is always slow not only compared to world events, but also in relation to the speed with which events in our small, daily lives sometimes unfold. At times, though, slow academic editing catches up with the fast journalistic mode. This has happened even literally in situations when we had to anonymize artists interviewed and quoted in an article due to increased political repression in their country, or when an author requested last-minute changes to their article due to unexpected changes in the regime structures shifting the context of their case studies. And, most telling of them all perhaps, was the case of an author of ours who ended up in jail due to their political activism but was adamant about continuing to work with us. These are just some of the most striking instances when the academic Tortoise not only caught up with the speedy information-crunching journalistic Achilles, but overtook him.

The world of the academic Tortoise is slower and seemingly smaller – yet when we look at it through the lens of international theatre research, the opposite is true. Take just

this one journal, all the geographies, theatrical, cultural and linguistic contexts it has covered thus far, and all still left untapped – her world is vast. In the years that I have had the privilege of taking care of *TRI*, I found myself grappling with questions of language(s); different academic styles and cultures; different manifestations, views and needs of what theatre research means in specific societal and cultural contexts and how this translates internationally. The slowness of the Tortoise is at times needed to figure out various ways in which historiographic and conceptual frameworks, at the same time malleable to translations and culture-specific, shape an article. And this learning process is something to take away and continue with beyond my *TRI* tenure. What I have learnt thus far, however, is the value of asking what academic excellence is and why we need to expand its frames. How to do international theatre research in the spirit of solidarity and cooperation. How to find and maintain excellence in differences: methodological, stylistic, conceptual, linguistic, but also cultural and even political. This often requires slowness – not necessarily of the same linear kind that we experience in the long journey an academic article takes from submission to publication. This is a deeper slowness – the slowness of the Tortoise that suggests a different relation to time that favours process over product to make space for different positionalities. With the risk of stretching the initial paradox infinitely, I propose to end the story of the journalistic Achilles and the academic Tortoise with questions of a less gloomy kind: does the journey (even if it takes exactly the same path) feel differently for the speedy Achilles and the slow Tortoise? Do they perceive different things on the way? And how do their experiences come together in their sameness and in their difference at the point when slowness and speediness could no longer be distinguished?

In this issue the editing has been both fast and slow to bring together a range of different voices and approaches. Analola Santana's article 'The Freak Onstage' explores how Mexican Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes's show *El Gallo*, which turns actors into opera singers and delivers the entire piece in an invented language, exposes the discriminatory powers of social normativity. Santana approaches theatre as a space for the observation of the social construction of difference, but also as a site of talking back, where an act of deviance becomes an act of defiance, forcing us 'to recognize the ideological complexities of belonging and the participation of the common citizen'. In her article 'Okinawan Absence: *Ma* in Kumiodori', Sylwia Dobkowska discusses the concept of a purposeful empty space in the Kumiodori genre of Japanese theatre traditionally belonging to the Okinawan region. The article focuses on the aesthetics of *ma* whereby absence is an integral part of the composition. The article examines ways in which *ma* manifests in Kumiodori, while situating this traditional form in the context of discrimination that many Okinawans still suffer in Japan and within a form of colonialism that tends to use this indigenous culture and brand it as an exotic product. Mehdi Tajeddin's 'Flying in the Cage' also talks about absence onstage but of a very different kind. His article offers a substantive account of censorship in Iranian theatre and how directors invent creative means to represent onstage what is not allowed to be shown. The article also lists directors whose works cannot be analysed because censors cut it short before it could

go in front of the audience – hence this article rectifies, in a small way, some of the works and authors who have been absented from public view due to censorship. ‘Honour and Reputation as Gender Politics in Ali Abdel-Nabi Al Zaidi’s *Rubbish* (1995), and Amir Al-Azraki’s *The Widow* (2014)’ by Alyaa A. Naser and Majeed Mohammed Midhin examines two plays that grapple with categories of honour, chastity and reputation – categories that still loom large in shaping gender norms and inequalities in Iraq. Situated in different moments of crisis and against the backdrop of the US invasions of Iraq, the article examines how two male playwrights offer a harsh critique of these norms as they highlight the need for solidarity with women in the struggle against patriarchal oppression. The selection of articles in this issue concludes with the first-hand insight into the creative process by Indian theatre director and scholar Anuradha Kapur. Drawing from her production notes written while she was co-directing the show *Dark Things* with Deepan Sivaraman, based on Ari Sitas’s oratorio on the Silk Road, Kapur’s piece foregrounds collaboration as ‘the performance’s explicit grammar [that] has been shaped by a sensuous give-and-take between the practitioner and the material’. *Dark Things* explores labour migration, exploitations and precarity. The article, retaining the stylistic features of production notes, offers the unique perspective of the theatre-maker in analysing how the objects and tools used in *Dark Things* leave their imprint on the production. Kapur’s reflection views authorship as a plural, distributive, improvisational and collective process.

To conclude this final issue of my editorship I wish to offer my many thanks to all the authors for choosing *TRI*, to peer reviewers for their often invisible labour, to wonderful members of the editorial board for their dedication and ideas, and to the International Federation for Theatre Research for ongoing support. Most special thanks of course go to my excellent editorial team – Lisa Fitzpatrick as associate editor, Nesreen Nabil Hussein as assistant editor, and the book review editors, first led by Caoimhe Mader McGuinness and currently by Nobuko Anan (during my entire time with *TRI*, the book reviews have just materialized on time and in perfect shape). Finally, big thanks to Craig Baxter, Chris and Diana Bedford and the production team – for their great professionalism and patience.

I am excited about passing the editorship baton to the brilliant Lisa Fitzpatrick and her team, and I am very much looking forward to opening the next issue of *TRI* with the simple pleasure of a reader.