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Editorial: On Learning (and Not Learning) From History

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At the time this collection of essays was in selection – very early in 2025 – concerns about the rise of the far right in mainland Europe were growing, but its capacity to influence global affairs seemed to be limited and localized within national boundaries. By now – early April – this is no longer the case. With President Trump in the White House and his *consigliere* Musk performing the fascist salute, the USA is undergoing a radical shift away from the rule of law and towards autocracy. His dizzying list of targets can distract from his attacks on higher education, the arts, and freedom of expression, which resemble similar attacks in Hungary on the Central European University, or Milei's defunding of the National Scientific and Technological Research Council (CONICET) in Argentina, and the systematic destruction of the educational infrastructure in Gaza. An extensive web of international collaborations with the US academy are also casualties. Like other autocratic regimes, Trump's White House cites tackling 'anti-Semitism' as the justification for political repression that intentionally targets women, Muslims, the global South, people of colour and the LGBTQI+ population. Meanwhile, the far right embraces Netanyahu, who perpetrates – at the very least – war crimes against Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank. The abject failure of Western powers to oppose Netanyahu, to uphold international law or even common decency, and to recognize the humanness of Palestinian people is a moral abomination. It is indicative of the resurgence of European anti-Semitism that it uses the same tropes of rapacious dark-skinned men, the same cartoon images, but directs this racialized religious hatred against Muslims instead of Jews – for now.

This issue of *TRI* brings together essays on contemporary feminist performance from China; 'denunciatory criticism' and the banning of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in 1970s Hungary; historiographic studies from Palestine and Israel that emerge from the same geographic area – the city and environs of Jaffa and Tel Aviv, separated by time, culture and the Nakba; the artistic relationship of Mei Lanfang and Bertolt Brecht in the context of early cinema; and the question of the artists' stage presence in the post-COVID world. As different as these essays are in their methodologies, primary materials and theoretical frames, they are also all linked to each other by threads and themes of censorship, cultural misunderstandings and systems of ideology, power and violence. In our present moment, these aspects of power and ideology are in flux, ebbing and surging, shifting from the minor to the politically repressive to the murderous.

Noémi Herczog's essay in this issue questions why holders of absolute power do not necessarily immediately suppress all forms of critical expression, when they could

do so. Instead, they allow tame journalists – and obedient art critics – to target dissident artists and activists through the media, creating distorting narratives about their work and seeking to shift public opinion against them. Herczog argues that thereby 'the power system based solely on violence is covered up by an ideological legitimization that benignly conceals its true nature. This means that not only thoughts or art, but even everyday life, is only granted the right to exist if they comply with the requirements of the ideology.' Her essay examines a particular case study from Hungarian art and theatre history: the suppression of the neo-avant-garde artists of Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in the 1970s. She analyses the model of 'ideological denunciatory criticism' that emerged in the press during the Aczél cultural policy (a more lenient regime than the Stalinist period). Although artists were no longer officially 'banned', in practice they could be informally deprived of the right to publish, exhibit or perform. Outright bans were not necessary, because awareness of the state's power to punish enforced a level of compliance, and the publicized targeting of groups or individuals through the process of denunciatory criticism enforced compliance through fear. The case that Herczog explores was an unusual one since the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio was a small group composed of both performance and visual artists; it is better known in art history, but this essay brings it to the attention of theatre scholars. In doing this, Herczog illuminates its resonances with the suppression of free speech in Orbán's Hungary.

The Brooklyn-based Artistic Freedom Initiative issued a report in 2022 that accused Orbán's government of implementing a cultural initiative aligned with a 'single nationalist narrative' that 'define[s] alternative viewpoints as anti-Hungarian', leading to the removal of some Hungarian authors from the school curriculum and the closure of a production of *Billy Elliot* when the newspaper *Magyar* Idok described the musical as 'pointed and unrestrained gay propaganda'.[1] Orbán's censorship of the school curriculum removed work by Imre Kertész, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, and replaced his book with work by Jozsef Nyiro (a member of a fascist party) and Albert Wass ('an avowed anti-Semite and convicted war criminal').[2]

Judith Butler describes how censorship can take the form of 'implicit operations of power that rule out in unspoken ways what will remain unspeakable',[3] and which therefore can extend far beyond explicit state policy. So what is being ruled out, in our present moment, in unspoken ways that separate what is speakable from what is not? Herczog points to the suppression of artistic freedom and information in Hungary, but this process is clearly in operation across Europe, Israel and the USA, in countries that regularly applaud their commitment to free speech and democratic values.

Dia Barghouti's essay focuses on the Sufi *mawsim al-Nabi Rubin* (festival of Nabi Rubin), which took place annually near Jaffa until 1946 and was a significant part of Palestinian cultural life prior to the Nakba in 1948, when the Palestinian population was dispossessed and displaced by Israeli forces. Through her scholarship, Barghouti enacts an existential form of resistance: resisting the discursive eradication of Palestinian life by the state of Israel, the US, and Europe's old empires. Her essay argues that the *mawsim* has been ignored by scholarship on Palestinian theatre, which has predominantly focused on professional theatre in the West Bank and companies like Freedom Theatre, Al-Kasaba Theatre, Ashtar Theatre, Al-Harah Theatre and Al-Rowwad. Her

essay turns instead to indigenous Palestinian performance traditions, such as storytelling, procession, song and puppetry, to expose their theatricality and challenge their exclusion from contemporary theatre scholarship. Barghouti critiques labels like 'pre-theatrical' or 'para-theatrical', which posit a presumed end goal of European theatre, with all other performance practices mere stepping stones along the way. Instead, by understanding these performances as theatrical, we can reconfigure elements of Palestinian theatre history and so engage with the history of Palestine. The cultural richness evident in these performance events challenges colonial conceptions of Palestine and of the wider Arab world as lacking in culture and as underdeveloped, exposing the orientalist thinking and discourses that continue to shape global politics. In denouncing this way of thinking, Barghouti illustrates the devastation of the Nakba and its destruction of culture, the arts and ways of living.

'It is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar', Edward Said wrote.[4] One of these peoples, often overlooked, are the Mizrahim, who are the focus of Naphtaly Shem-Tov's essay on Theatre Workshop HaTikva Neighborhood. This community theatre emerged from an impoverished Mizrahi neighbourhood in south Tel Aviv, right beside the port city of Jaffa where the *mawsim* took place. The Theatre Workshop was established by Bezalel Aloni and was active in the 1970s; it saw the beginnings of a long collaboration between Aloni and Ofra Haza, who represented Israel in the 1983 Eurovision Song Contest. Over time, this small community theatre troupe shifted from protest theatre to musical theatre, professionalizing in the process. The essay traces the marginalization of the Mizrahi community by the ruling Ashkenazi elite from the first immigration of Yemenite Jews in the 1880s, through Britain's disastrous colonial adventures and the post-Holocaust immigration from Europe, to the 1970s. Aloni – originally an actor and social worker – first staged protest plays like other Israeli community theatres, creating work that protested against the social marginalization and impoverishment of his community, whose history and identity were largely silenced within discourses of Ashkenazi history and identity. While the turn to musical theatre is often critiqued as a move to popular entertainment under financial pressure, Shem-Tov argues convincingly that this constituted a conceptual shift from the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition, in Nancy's Fraser's formulation.[5] By weaving the history of the Mizrahi into musical entertainment, Theatre Workshop HaTikva Neighborhood was able to shoehorn a neglected community into Israeli consciousness by making their stories central to a popular commercial form of theatre.

This adaptation of forms for political purposes – and associated cultural misunderstandings and misinterpretations – echoes with Wei Feng's essay 'Early Cinema, Attraction and Estrangement'. Here, with the focus on the artistic relationship between Mei Lanfang and Bertolt Brecht, with reference also to Charlie Chaplin, the essay traces the Chinese response to Brecht's 'Verfremdung Effects in Chinese Acting' from its first introduction in China in 1951 to the critiques that emerged in the 1990s. Feng situates Mei's 1935 performance of *xiqu* in the context of the visual turn that accompanied the rise of cinema in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, and argues

that Brecht read the unfamiliar signs of *xiqu* through a cinematic lens, rather than as a Chinese spectator familiar with the conventions would have read it. The essay also explores the influence of cinema on Mei's own contributions to the development of *xiqu* performance. The essay reveals misinterpretations and misunderstandings on both sides that productively contributed to artistic creation in Chinese and Western theatre.

Linan Xian's essay tackles the recent impact of the global pandemic and the development of increasingly sophisticated forms of artificial intelligence on live performance, to return afresh to the issue of stage presence. Xian skilfully establishes the diverging definitions of 'presence' in Western and Chinese theatre, pointing to the sustained centrality of the actor in Chinese performance. In doing so, Xian draws attention to the difficulties and gaps that emerge in cross-cultural studies, where the core concept of 'presence', and its history in practice, can be so different. In this essay, she turns to traditional forms of Chinese theatre to rejuvenate Dolan's concept of the utopian performative, deploying Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology to examine presence as quality, and presence as effect. She writes, 'this research aims to explore presence by look at the body phenomenologically, in a way that can resolve the tension between claims about immediacy advanced by proponents of non-representational experience in theatre and claims about how theatre is haunted by meanings and therefore never fully immediate'. She takes the concept of 'opposition' as a strategic technique for creating 'presence' in Peking opera, critiquing Barba's understanding of the term as incomplete (in an echo of Brecht's adaptation of Mei's performance). Xian explains the process and practice of creating an audience experience where the whole body of the performer is present to the spectators, and the performer must make the performance perceivable for every spectator, in a way that fundamentally diverges from screen performance. Xian quotes Gai Jiaotian's idea of 'four sides and eight directions', so that no matter where the spectators are, 'they can clearly see your facial expression as well as the graceful gesture of your body'. This makes particular demands on the performer's physical self, and Xian concludes that the concept of presence is fundamental in performance and that 'the body is a key factor in understanding it'.

The body is also the focus for Yingjun Wei, as she draws on Eve Sedgwick's observations on the female labouring body, the textile industry, and the history of nineteenth-century mercantile imperialism to reflect upon textile objects onstage and the persistence of invisible female labour. Her adroitly argued essay juxtaposes the 'illuminated stage' and the 'concealed backstage … which, even when occasionally exposed, remains largely unarticulated and overshadowed by the spotlight', pointing out that behind the backstage are logistics of manufacture and transportation. She analyses the 2021 Chinese production *Dao Yin* (Saying Vagina) by the feminist collective Vagina Project, which premiered in Beijing, and which consciously drew upon the politics of the textile industry, including its environmental impact. The design created a 'textile vagina' through which the audience experienced the performance and were reminded of the complexity of the textile industry's place in the global marketplace where work is regularly outsourced to racialized, feminized, undervalued 'others'. The project dramatizes over sixty interviews with women about their vaginas, using similar working methods to those of Eve Ensler in the creation of the 2001 *Vagina Monologues*. Like

Ensler's work, *Dao Yin* brings to the public space a discussion of women's biology that is frequently shrouded in shame and embarrassment, coded as 'unspeakable', conjoined to silence.

These essays in diverse ways address questions of power and misunderstanding, silencing and erasure, and they examine how resistance to those repressions can be creative, productive acts of empowerment. In our present moment we increasingly see demands that we be silent as civil and human rights abuses escalate. The tactic of swooping arrests of those who speak out peacefully, with plainclothes police using unmarked vehicles taking people from public streets (as seen in the case of Rümeysa Öztürk in Massachusetts), is intended to frighten all of us into complicity with the dehumanization of swathes of people. It is natural to be afraid, but the onus is on those of us who are least at risk to speak out for the others, including for those with whom we may disagree, and those we may see as different from ourselves. We can see that a threat to art, scholarship, freedom and life is facing our world. Resisting it together is essential.

NOTES

1 'Systematic Suppression: Hungary's Arts & Culture in Crisis', issued by Artistic Freedom Initiative, at https://artisticfreedominitiative.org. See also www.npr.org/2022/03/21/1087824790/hungary-arts-freedom-suppressed.

2 Justin Spike, 'How Hungary's Orban Uses Control of the Media to Escape Public Scrutiny', at www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2024/how-hungarys-orban-uses-control-of-the-media-to-escape-scrutiny-and-keep-the-public-in-the-dark (accessed 15 April 2025).

3 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 130.

4 Edward Said, 'Orientalism Once More', *Development and Change*, 35, 5 (November 2004), pp. 869–79, here p. 871.

5 Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a Post-socialist Age', *New Left Review*, 212 (1995), pp. 68–93.