

## **Introduction**

### **There's No Place Like London: Theatrical Landscapes of a City in Recovery**

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Guest Editors

At approximately 5:30pm (GMT) on Monday March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, the West End and theaters across London and the rest of England were brought to an abrupt halt. As the public were instructed by the country's Prime minister, Boris Johnson, during what would become daily governmental briefings, to "avoid pubs, clubs, theatres and other such social venues", seemingly casual advice which plunged the country's arts and hospitality sectors into an acute and unexpected state of paralysis.<sup>1</sup> That evening, as commuters and tourists boarded buses, trains, and planes to make their journeys home, few could have predicted the sustained and brutal impact that the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 would have on these industries, and public life as we knew it, in the months and years to come.

Not since the Second World War had London's theaters suffered such unrelenting and grave difficulties. Indeed, even during the height of the Blitz, the West End had remained open – albeit severely depleted – in an attempt to bring 'some sense of normality' and 'maintain general morale' for the public.<sup>2</sup> In the early stages of the pandemic, the severity of which had not been seen for over a century, London's theaters were in complete blackout with little sign of recovery. Theatregoers, whether Londoners or visitors, were left without the source of live entertainment that the country's capital had been famously supplying for hundreds of years.

What separates the impact of COVID-19 from previous global conflicts and pandemics, however, is the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and the associated technologies that have come to provide a social lifeline to the world's population. As stay at home orders, such as England's "Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives", forced much of the world into lockdown, people turned to internet platforms and apps such as Zoom, Skype, FaceTime and Microsoft Teams as a means of maintaining contact with friends, families and colleagues. During those first weeks, quizzes and other traditional games were imaginatively reconceived for an online context to provide entertainment and a sense of social contact to a population confined to their homes.

As has often been the function of theater throughout history, the industry in Britain responded quickly and imaginatively to the urgent issues and demands of the contemporary world. With theaters closed and production on film and television also halted, the two industries looked to work together in new creative ways that were reflective of and informed by the isolation that had been enforced upon many during this time. At first production companies found themselves sending cameras, recording and production equipment into the homes of creative teams. The results included *Isolation Stories* (ITV), with four episodes aired between 4-7 May, and *Unprecedented* (BBC4), a short series of 14 dramas presented over four nights at the end of May 2020. *Unprecedented* was commissioned in the immediate aftermath of theater closures and showcased new work by playwrights including James Graham, April De Angelis and Duncan MacMillan for the BBC. The series was subtitled 'Real Time Theatre From a State of Isolation' and, as described by BBC executive Stephen James Yeoman, offered 'an intimate response to the radical way our world changed when lockdown was announced [in England] on 23 March 2020.'<sup>3</sup> This was followed in June by further original work in the form of *Staged* (BBC), a series of short comic episodes starring David Tennant and Michael Sheen which was filmed almost entirely using video-conferencing technology. The same month saw

the broadcast of a revival of *Talking Heads*, written by veteran playwright Alan Bennett and starring theatrical luminaries including Lesley Manville and Harriet Walter. The series, which had been rehearsed on Zoom and filmed using a skeleton crew on location at London's Elstree Studios, allowed for a continued sense of connection between the British theater and its loyal audience during the initial lockdown period.

The rapid restrictions placed on the theater industry and the considerable impact of this uncertainty on its workers meant that many were left unsupported, financially and otherwise, in the early months of the pandemic. Output from the theaters themselves during this time was correspondingly limited. Much of the commercial sector in London, which included the West End, had made the decision to remain closed indefinitely, terminating contracts with immediate effect, offering little financial compensation to their actors, and placing others on the Government's furlough scheme. Some shows, such as the Colosseum's revival of *Hairspray*, starring Michael Ball, optimistically announced reopening dates for the summer, only to retract these plans as solutions for an industry that relied on large crowds gathering together in enclosed and poorly ventilated spaces remained elusive. One exception to this was Ian Rickson's production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*: forced to close its run at the Harold Pinter Theatre early, the show was filmed, in the theater but without an audience, in August. It found new audiences when it was screened in re-opened cinemas in October and broadcast on the BBC in December 2020.

The UK's subsidized theater sector, made up of venues and companies in receipt of government funding, was equally - if not more - stymied in those initial months, producing limited new material in the Spring and early Summer of 2020. Instead, and in the face of financial uncertainty, some were able to blend new technologies with existing recordings of

work to entertain their audiences through streaming platforms such as Globe Player, Digital Theater, Marquee TV and Stage2View. While much of this work was viewable by subscription only, the National Theatre's 'NT at Home' scheme saw the release of recordings of some of its most popular shows for free via their YouTube channel and app. The initiative saw sixteen plays made available to view and included Richard Bean's adaptation of *One Man, Two Guvvners* and Inua Ellams's *Barber Shop Chronicles* along with productions filmed in collaboration with other subsidized theaters such as the Young Vic (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) and Donmar Warehouse (*Coriolanus*). Ironically, the enforced lockdown of much of the world had enabled productions from some of the capital's theaters to become more accessible to audiences both on a national and global scale, with the NT at Home initiative alone garnering fifteen million views from over 170 countries.<sup>4</sup> The future of other, smaller, subsidized theaters in London, unable to rely on income from extant productions and schemes, was more uncertain. An element of creativity was therefore needed to ensure that those theaters remained active, responsive and alert to the issues of the time, while also being mindful of the continued financial uncertainty, which remained even after a £1.57 billion arts bailout package was announced in July 2020.<sup>5</sup>

The summer of 2020 saw the return of some freedom in England, albeit with new restrictions around the use of face-coverings, social distancing, and large group gatherings. These restrictions, while being liberating for many, also served to further stunt the regrowth of theater in London and beyond. At the same time, the restrictions did allow for some small group activity, and with better provisions around testing some theaters in London were able to reopen at this point and facilitate the development of new work largely for streaming purposes as opposed to welcoming back physical audiences. In this time, London theaters like the Royal Court sought new ways of audience engagement with projects such as Hester Chillingworth's

durational installation *The Caretaker*, which was viewable online between May and October 2020 to those seeking an intimate experience with the Court's uninhabited stage accompanied by intermittent audio messages from Chillingworth that were witty, playful and supportive. The Court, alongside other London Theaters the Lyric Hammersmith and the Orange Tree Theatre, also took part in the Lockdown Theatre Festival, which saw plays, such as *Shoe Lady* by EV Crowe (Royal Court) and *The Mikvah Project* by Josh Azouz (Orange Tree Theatre) whose original runs had been curtailed or impacted by COVID-19, receive radio productions, aired on BBC Radio 3 in June as part of BBC Arts' Culture in Quarantine Initiative.

Elsewhere, London's theaters, unable to run sustainably due to restrictions, had begun to think about their role as civic spaces, to support community members in the midst of a pandemic. Theaters like the Kiln in northwest London dedicated their efforts during this time to supporting young people, including young asylum seekers and refugees, through initiatives such as Minding the Gap, which was aimed at upskilling young people through weekly online workshops designed to allow young people to develop their spoken English, teamwork skills and self-confidence. The Kiln's Youth Theatre groups and Young Companies also focused their activities on supporting young people, shaping their online work around the theme of 'isolation', which allowed young people to explore their pandemic-related and informed feelings and emotions in real time.<sup>6</sup> Though rendered dark by the impact of current events, London's subsidized theaters, forced to reimagine and refocus their responsibilities for new contexts, had demonstrated great resolve in the face of sustained uncertainty and unclear governmental support.

After six months of blanket closure, and following sustained pressure on government by industry leaders such as producers Nica Burns and composer Andrew Lloyd-Webber, who

worked hard to demonstrate new safety measures to maximize audience protection from virus exposure, by the Autumn of 2020 positive signs of change were appearing on the horizon for the capital's entertainment eco-system.<sup>7</sup> By October a number of West End venues had opened their doors again to a socially distanced, reduced capacity, audience, each member of which was asked to declare no symptoms or exposure to COVID in the week before and required to maintain social-distancing and wear face-coverings throughout the performance. Productions were also selected to limit cast-sizes as a way to further minimize virus-related disruption to the theaters who were already operating at a loss due to reduced audience capacity. As confidence grew in theaters' ability to operate safely, more established large cast shows such as *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* returned to the West End. The optimism was short lived however, as the impact of COVID-19's Delta Variant became apparent, and the UK was forced into what would become a further extended lockdown period which was to extend over Christmas and into the Winter of 2021.

It was not until 17 May 2021 when London's theaters would awaken once more. Bolstered by a national vaccine rollout and widely available testing, producers were able to finally plan with some certainty for the first time in over a year. As restrictions in England lifted further across the Summer, and the country celebrated its so-called 'Freedom Day' on 19<sup>th</sup> July, London's theaters embarked on their recovery and since have enjoyed some semblance of normality in the latter part of the year with all theaters able to run at full capacity. On November 15th 2021, over 20 months after the West End was unceremoniously shuttered, a new production of *Cabaret*, starring Eddie Redmayne as the Emcee and Jessie Buckley as Sally Bowles, opened at the Playhouse Theatre. As the Playhouse had remained the only theater yet to reopen since its pandemic-enforced closure, its revival as the Kit-Kat Club at the Playhouse for *Cabaret* marked the full return of all the theaters in the West End.

This special double issue of *Comparative Drama*, entitled *London's Theater: Places; Communities; Futures*, was pitched before the pandemic swept the globe. Our contributors wrote their articles over the course of one of the most challenging periods in post-war history, and the issue is published as the capital, its theaters and the rest of the world grapple with a new future; one irreparably altered and informed by the impact of a virus that, at the time of writing, has killed over five million people worldwide and infected over a quarter of billion people globally. The articles contained within this issue, while not directly concerned with the effects of COVID-19 on one of the world's truly global cities, are informed by this context and therefore may help us to understand more about the future of theater in a city that remains in recovery.

Through eight original essays, *London's Theater* brings into sharp focus the landscape of theater in contemporary London through three distinct lenses. The opening section – entitled *Places* - reflects on London's relationship with locations, cities and theaters, outside of the Capital and uses examples from the UK (Saunders), Europe (Goodling and Mark) and across the Atlantic in the USA (Ferrone, MacDonald), with articles discussing plays and musical theater to explore how London is visible and active within national and international theatrical eco- systems. *Places* opens with a piece by Graham Saunders (University of Birmingham, UK) entitled “London Fog: Metropolitanism & New Writing in British Theater”, which demonstrates the ways in which playwriting culture in the UK since the 1990s has been subject to what Saunders sees as “the gradual encroachment of London based cultural values”. Drawing on a range of new writing from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century London stage, Saunders uses examples from plays by writers such as David Eldridge and Leo Butler to take the reader on a playwriting tour of London's boroughs to explore the geographical tensions between playwriting and place and question to what extent Londoncentric plays are representative of

national social and political concerns. In “Be Yourself Inasmuch As It Suits the Job: Authenticity in Practice at Berlin’s Maxim Gorki and London’s Royal Court” Lianna Mark (Durham University, UK) and Emily Goodling (Stanford University, USA) extend the issue’s geographical parameters to explore the notion of authenticity through a comparative essay that analyses recent work from London and Berlin. Through case studies of Nicôle Lecky’s 2019 play *Superhoe* for the Royal Court, and the Gorki’s collaborative *Roma Armee* (2017), Goodling and Mark fuse play analysis and a broader evaluation of institutional language and marketing strategies to “interrogate the increasing centrality of a pragmatically oriented staging of ‘authenticity’”. The article augments existing work on authenticity to foreground the role that the theatrical institution plays in propagating notions of authenticity through its performers and playwrights, even prior to a production’s opening night.

Maintaining the focus on the relationship between Europe and London is an essay by Alex Ferrone (Duke University, USA), “Flexibility, Abstraction, Orthodoxy: *The Lehman Trilogy* and (the) British Capital”, which tracks *The Lehman Trilogy*’s transnational performance history from an Italian radio play penned by playwright Stefano Massini to its English language premiere in a translation by Ben Power, which opened at the National Theatre in London in 2018. Ferrone’s article applies his theory of “capitalist dramaturgy”, a term neologized in his monograph *Stage Business and the Neoliberal Theatre of London* (2021), to a reading of *The Lehman Trilogy*, in doing so presenting the varied ways in which the play can be analyzed as a critique of capitalism simultaneously bound by an inherently capitalist ethos. Through Ferrone’s triptych structure, the reader is guided to a conclusion that argues for the ways in which the play’s composition can be closely connected to the capitalist subject matter upon which it is built. As if in illustration of this, *The Lehman Trilogy* was part of Broadway’s post-pandemic reopening in the Fall of 2021, having closed early in March 2020 as the virus



took hold of New York City. Ferrone's coda leads us nicely to the next article, "To Remind You of My Love: London's Love Affair with the American Musical" by Laura MacDonald (Michigan State University, USA), which demonstrates London's historical reliance on the American musical, and is the sole contribution to contend with the musical – a longstanding and vital feature on London's Theatrical landscape. MacDonald's essay positions London as the fortunate recipient of a consistent flow of American musicals that have been developed by regional and off-Broadway houses across New York and the rest of the United States, many of which generate significant profit that sustain the theaters' future programming. McDonald uses New York's Public Theater - a central institution in the country's development of new musicals which have included canonical works like: *Hair* (1968), *A Chorus Line* (1975) and *Hamilton* (2015) – as a key case study through which to track the trajectory of American grown musicals in London, and her original essay illustrates the decades-long power and presence of the American musical in the capital. As British musical theater development remains significantly underfunded, despite the presence of notable work by British-born composers in the post-war musical canon, MacDonald's article offers a clear case for investment in development schemes on both sides of the Atlantic to ensure that the reputation of a vital part of the global theater eco-system can be effectively supported and sustained in the future.

The central section is concentrated more explicitly with London's *Communities*, historically diverse but, over the last three decades, pressured and frequently displaced as a result of widespread gentrification: the associated rise in housing values has seen the average house price rise in 2021 to close to \$1million, and significant interest from international investors has forced many indigenous families out of the capital. Here, an article by Katie Beswick (University of the Arts London, UK), "*High Rise eState of Mind: Love and honesty in the midst of London's neoliberal housing crisis*", draws on case-study material from the

work of theatre-makers Beats & Elements in order to assess the capacity of hip-hop-inspired performance practices to facilitate truth, love and connection within a wider cultural landscape of dishonesty. Setting her discussion in the context of London's housing crisis and the horrific Grenfell Tower fire of 2017, caused by oversights, errors and untruths which were the result of profit-maximizing neoliberal housing policies, Beswick explores how working-class Londoners have used performance practice to respond to housing precarity. Drawing parallels with Adrienne Rich's assertion of the importance of truth between women in forging a feminist alternative to the dishonesty of conventional politics, and with bell hooks's advocacy of a "love ethic" by which care, respect, knowledge, integrity and cooperation may be fostered, Beswick's searching and committed article considers how hip-hop practices can provide theatre makers and audiences with ways of bearing what they can't control.

The final part of the issue, *Futures*, is informed by a series of case studies from well-established London theatres such as the Royal Court (O'Thomas), to lesser-known but nevertheless historic fringe venues like the Finborough (Healy) to explore the impact of some of the most pressing issues facing the British theater industry today. This section concludes with a broader examination of the London theater scene through a close analysis of the recent shifts that have occurred in leadership within some of the capital's pre-eminent sites (Derbyshire). The section more broadly sets out the impact of these developments on the capital's current theatre landscape and imagines how they could shape its future. In "*Rita, Sue and #metoo – the Royal Court Theatre, London and Liberalism*", O'Thomas (University of Greenwich, UK) explores the ways in which the #metoo movement has impacted on London's theaters and the wider cultural industries despite their apparent formation in ideas steeped in so-called liberal values. The cancellation and then reinstatement of Andrea Dunbar's play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* are ultimately conceived as transformative acts that run counter to popular mythologies of a so-

called cancel culture and perhaps points towards a more optimistic future for people who have historically had little power or voice in the workplace. Healy's (University of Lincoln, UK) article considers the future from a different perspective entirely and takes on the perennial issue of funding for London's substantial but much-overlooked fringe sector. The tension between the paucity of public funding coupled with an ethical imperative to pay artists for their work are explored through a comprehensive discussion of London's Finborough theater as Healy questions and considers the reflections of its artistic director, Neil McPherson.

The issue concludes with "‘Creating change where it matters the most’: Artistic directorship and representation in the London theater" by Harry Derbyshire (University of Greenwich, UK), which responds to the significant increase in the representation of women and people of color among the leaders of London theaters in the period since 2010. Comparing the demographic make-up of the artistic directors of London's most prominent subsidized theaters in 2020 with its equivalent a decade previously, Derbyshire quantifies a significant and encouraging shift which appears to be attributable to the persistent efforts of individuals and groups determined to overcome obstacles to change. Looking back across the decades to identify how the present situation has been arrived at, the article considers two distinct struggles – for gender equality and for the representation of people of color – that are analogous but also in many ways distinct from each other. In two case studies, focusing on Emma Rice's brief tenure as Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe and Indhu Rubasingham's rebranding of the Tricycle Theatre as the Kiln, Derbyshire considers the extent to which recent advances may be endangered by the forces of cultural reaction, and in his closing section he considers how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may affect developments in the future.

What emerges, overall, is a timely and multi-faceted special issue that deploys contributions from scholars at all stages of their careers to investigate London: its role in an international, not to say global theatrical eco-system; its function as a place for artists to make work within an increasingly challenging neoliberal landscape; and its provision of leadership in cultural, social and economic policy making moving into a new, pandemic-inflicted, decade.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Lanre Bakare, 'Covid-19 prompts all major British theatres to close doors', *Guardian*, 16 March 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/covid-19-prompts-more-cultural-institutions-to-shut-doors> (accessed 2 December 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Heather Creaton, *Sources for the History of London 1939-1945: A Guide and Bibliography* (London: British Records Association, 1998), 122.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen James Yeoman, 'How Culture In Quarantine is ensuring theatre is accessible to everyone in the UK', BBC Blog, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/aboutthebbc/entries/631ab4ba-7dbf-4802-af2d-ae8f783be5e9> (accessed 2 December 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Arifa Akbar, 'The Next Act: How the Pandemic is Shaping Online Theatre's Future', *Guardian*, 21 September 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/sep/21/future-of-live-theatre-online-drama-coronavirus-lockdown> (accessed 2 December 2021).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/157-billion-investment-to-protect-britains-world-class-cultural-arts-and-heritage-institutions> (accessed 9 December 2021).

<sup>6</sup> See 'Kiln Theatre: Creative Engagement Programme for Summer 2020', *London Theatre 1*, 26 May 2020, available at <https://www.londontheatre1.com/theatre-news/kiln-theatre-creative-engagement-programme-for-summer-2020/> (accessed 2 December 2021).

<sup>7</sup> See 'Nimax to Open Six West End Venues with Social Distancing', *Guardian*, 13 September 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/sep/13/nimax-to-reopen-six-west-end-london-venues-with-social-distancing> (accessed 2 December 2021).