

## Editorial

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### Notes on contributors

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James Hudson is Senior Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Lincoln. He has published work on Edward Bond, Sarah Kane, Howard Barker, David Greig and Chris Thorpe in journals and books. He is the author of the forthcoming monograph *Contemporary British Theatre and Reactionary Politics* which will be published with Routledge in 2022.

### Abstract

An introduction to the Special Issue, this editorial highlights the changes (or otherwise) in the global socio-political landscape since the Special Issue was first proposed in late 2018. It offers a brief introduction to each article, a rationale for the structure of this issue, and advocates for the importance of scholarship that examines the relationship between performance and right-wing politics.

### Keywords

right-wing politics, performance

### Performance and the Right: Strategies and Subterfuges

Theatre and performance scholarship has exhaustively theorised the political dimensions of

drama: its strategies, capacities and materiality, with its inherent potential as a site of collision with existing assumptions and values being repeatedly emphasised. Yet, while the recent rise in right-wing nationalisms across the globe has been analysed from a variety of perspectives, and by a number of disciplines – sociology, media studies, international relations, economics, and cultural studies – little substantive attention has heretofore been given to the relationships between theatre and performance and these reactionary forces, which are often themselves presented and packaged as colliding with a liberal, mainstream consensus. And while scholarship on political theatre acknowledges that there are plays and performances that may be reactionary through a combination of form and content, comparatively little recent work has treated this notion to sustained interrogation, examined specific work in the light of it, or analysed the mechanics of its functioning in detail. This special issue stakes a claim for a scholarly appreciation of the operation of right-wing and reactionary ideological forces in relation to theatre and performance, as well as their imbrication with the very notions of ‘mainstream’ and ‘liberal’, articulating a critical appraisal of the performative appeal of the right, its strategies and subterfuges.

We had set out, in the remote past that was late 2018, to situate an appreciation of the balance of political forces within an analytical framework broaching new understandings of the modes of expression, performative dimensions and affective capacities of right-wing politics as it is manifested in global theatrical, performance and performative cultures, often subsumed within capitalist value-systems. We sought to reflect on where the left had failed: how socially liberal artists and theatre makers have been incorporated into right-wing, capitalist modes of production, exhibition and consumption, presenting supposedly ‘radical’ work in venues and environments, and making use of forms that are fundamentally exclusionary, therefore mapping a terrain in which the reactionary may be perceived not only in terms of form and content, but also context. And we asked in which ways have theatre and performance

ostensibly appropriated right-wing discourse in order to critique it, while at the same time offering a platform for reactionary views, through forms like parody, pastiche and overidentification.

Inevitably, the period of time that elapses between proposing a special issue on a particular topic and its final publication results in something of a disparity between the world that the articles discuss and the world in which they appear. In this instance the difference could hardly be more pronounced. The COVID-19 pandemic has utterly changed the reality of daily lived existence for a huge proportion of the global population and created a set of unprecedented challenges for nation states, to which some countries are responding more capably than others. Yet, as ever, even in such a consuming crisis that threatens public health and the economies of so many countries even to their very foundations, there appears to be little appetite for abandoning old nostrums about neoliberal capitalism's continued operation as the dominant mode of production and social organisation. In fact, and predictably, large corporations and rich individuals at the top of the capitalist system have used the crisis as an opportunity to enhance their profitability, even as the whole edifice becomes increasingly dependent on life support from central banks. In the US stock market, the Dow and the S&P 500 ended 2020 at all-time highs as the virus surged and millions went hungry (Tappe 2020). The UK government's catastrophic and mendacious response to the pandemic has been to prioritise capital accumulation and labour discipline, with schools and universities kept open and the population encouraged to continue to go to work, while the furlough scheme kept people dependent on employers; small services – not to mention the creative industries, live arts in particular – were rescinded in importance in favour of industrial landlords and mortgage, rather than rent, freezes. The Conservative government has also used the pandemic as an opportunity for graft, using anti-competitive practices that favour their associates; as the British Medical Journal notes, 'Covid-19 has unleashed state corruption on a grand scale, and it is

harmful to public health' (Abbasi 2020). Moreover, even as large corporations increase their profits during the pandemic, the uncertainty affords governments the opportunity to introduce extreme political agendas and economic policies that would not be tolerated under normal circumstances – the 'disaster capitalism' of Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine*. Now, more than ever, Klein's 'disaster capitalism' is dyadically conjoined with Mark Fisher's 'capitalist realism', a foreclosure of the ability to imagine, let alone enact, alternate forms of social and political organisation. This attack on the collective public imagination has been most recently compounded by the cutting of 50% of the grant awarded by the Office for Students to support arts subjects in Higher Education. One notable exception in terms of progressive political mobilisation and social organisation gaining traction in the period between our original call for papers and the publication of this Special Issue is the ascendancy of the Black Lives Matter movement, its elevation to a global phenomenon igniting the imaginations of many across the world.

Still, we are once again witnessing capitalism's ability to attenuate and appropriate crises for its own perpetuation, and so the topics surrounding right-wing politics that we originally wished this special issue to examine have become even more salient. In this age of what is now called 'reactionary populism', where right-wing political leaders thrive on performative rejections of the status quo, and, as Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter inform us (2020), the liberal mainstream are willing accomplices to the far right over punitive and illiberal racial policy, the forces of right-populism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism continue to enjoy success in electoral politics, extra-parliamentary activism, and in the cultural sphere. Donald Trump's Presidential Election loss of 2020 seems only to have set the stage for a Democrat party with a transactional governmentality, content to give lip service to progressive change with empty gestures about liberal identity politics while continuing neoliberal policies and attempting to maintain imperialist hegemony. In an era where politics

is ever more spectacularised, Trump's performative appeal as a celebrity president ensured a massive increase in vote share, up on the previous election. If he chooses not to run again, it merely raises the spectre of a competent, more concertedly authoritarian and detail-oriented successor running on the same 'angrynomics' electoral ticket, to use economist and politics theorist Mark Blythe's recent coinage (2020). The confused and incompetent storming of the US Capitol by Trump supporters convinced the election had been stolen was a fitting end for the Trump presidency, where an amalgamation of largely white and relatively economically comfortable republicans bypassed token policing and security measures in what was less an actual revolt and more a grand scale performance of collectively asking to speak to the manager.

In the UK, the Conservative party saw Brexit snowball from an internal party management issue relevant only to a rump of backbench Europhobic MPs to a chaotic miasma that completely dominated the domestic political agenda for four years. Incalculable economic damage resulted even before a deal was struck, but this mattered little next to the prize of mobilising nationwide reactionary resentment that saw the party reach over a 40% vote share in successive General Elections. This recrudescence of the UK political right is, of course, in concert with recent transformative gains for far-right political figures throughout the world, from India's Narendra Modi to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, while far-right parties in Europe have prospered with related political projects coalescing around retrograde racist and exclusionary discourses tied to immigration, globalisation and national identity.

Unsurprisingly, the articles in this special issue reflect these trends and events. Julia Peetz's 'The Counter-Theatricality of Right-wing Populist Performance' examines Donald Trump's performative style as a type of spectacle running contrary to established theatrical conventions associated with the American Presidency. Peetz locates the disruption to the constructed theatricality of professionally written speeches in a mediatized spectacle of right-

wing populism that speaks directly to a mythologised invocation of ‘the people’. ‘The people’ are again addressed in ‘Truth’, Technology and Transmedial Theatre in Europe’, where Siobhán O’Gorman and Anna Scheer tackle spectacles of populism in the continent, examining two transmedial performances, from Austria and Estonia: Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *Please Love Austria—first European coalition week!* (2000) and Theatre NO99’s *Unified Estonia* (2010). These pieces employed tactics of overidentification to offer a critique of nationalist tropes, with a deliberate blurring of the lines between fictional performance and real politics, which O’Gorman and Scheer problematize. Overidentification is further examined and discussed in Pedro de Senna, Foivos Doussos, Fil Ieropoulos and Richrd Pfütenreuter’s *The Garden of Dystopian Pleasures*, a collage piece that reflects on their curation of (Doussos and Ieropulos) and performances in (de Senna and Pfütenreuter) a festival of the same name at the Athens School of Fine Arts in 2018. Highlighting queerness as a curatorial praxis, Doussos and Ieropoulos make the case that ambiguity as a political and poetical tool must not be surrendered to the right. Pfütenreuter’s critique of the fetishisation of ‘objective’ science in the service of ethno-nationalist agendas further contributes to this argument<sup>1</sup>, and de Senna’s discussion of his ambiguous international nationalist alter-ego highlights the continuities and inconsistencies of right-wing discourses in Brazil and in Greece. Festivals, and the appropriation of tactics associated with the left by the right are again discussed in Aparna Mahiyaria’s ‘Right Wing and Street-theatre: From Censure to Co-option’: the article looks at the Indian Hindu Nationalists’ use of their organisational capacity to occupy and dominate the traditionally left-leaning street festival scene in New Delhi. Mahiyaria argues that understanding the right’s methods of popular mobilisation is a fundamental step in building resistance against such encroachment. In turn, James Hudson in ‘Right from the centre: The dramaturgy of right-wing politics in Chris Hannan’s *What Shadows* (2016), Chris Bush’s *The Assassination of Katie Hopkins* (2018), and Rob Drummond’s *The Majority* (2017)’ suggests that the left-of-centre

British theatre's preoccupation with a notion of impartiality, along with the general non-committalism of the UK theatre industry have in fact facilitated the entry of far-right discourses into the mainstream stage. Hudson examines the three aforementioned plays as case-studies in building a critique of disinterested objectivity. The UK theatre scene is visited again in Joseph Dunne-Howrie's 'Networked Audience Participation: The Futurity of Post-Brexit Democracy in *One Day, Maybe* (2017) and *Operation Black Antler* (2017)', an analysis of the political possibilities afforded by immersive theatre practices – often critiqued as inherently proscriptive, while offering the illusion of choice. Dunne-Howrie theorises the possibility of the audiences' 'networked participation' in such performance events, a mode of engagement that mimics the complex networks of digital environments in order to counter hegemonic meta-narratives.

Indeed, even theatre that might be described as post-dramatic has taken as a principle a destabilising of logocentrism that is inherently disruptive. However, this destabilising has been appropriated by the right; distrust of authority, once the preserve of the left, has been instrumentalised by reactionary forces to divest hard-fought human rights gains and even scientific consensus from their centrality in societal discourse. It is perhaps no coincidence that, at the time of writing this editorial, the right-wing politics of four out of the top five countries in number of Covid-19 cases are discussed in the articles present in this issue (Worldometer 2021).<sup>2</sup> The stakes could not be higher. Here, the keen reader will have observed that the last section of this editorial started by discussing not the first, but the second article in this volume. We deliberately introduce the opening piece of the special issue last, as a nod to the circularity and interconnection between all articles presented: Emma Willis's 'White supremacist performance and its refusal: a reflection on the mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand' posits questions around free speech, digital performativity, and the construction of national identities and myths through political discourses and action. Moreover, it shows us

that even in the country whose leadership is often held as a model in terms of how it dealt with the current pandemic, the threat posed by extreme right-wing ideology spread online (this ever-expanding space) is painfully real. Finally, and more poignantly, Willis's short reflection on the appalling events of March 2019 serves as a stark reminder that for all our theorising and discussion of right-wing performance, for all our hand-wringing around the ethics of platforming heinous ideas or representing discourses, academic enquiry matters. Understanding what we as societies perform; what we say and what we don't, and on what stages; how we organise and interact with the theatrical and the performative; what strategies and subterfuges we employ – understanding all this – matters, and this is why the cuts to funding arts subjects in UK Higher Education are so pernicious. It is clear to us that while each article in this issue has inherent value in its own right, their operation in contrapuntal relation to one another is truly illuminating, helping delineate the critical parameters concerning global right-wing politics and performance. We hope that *Performance and the Right: Strategies and Subterfuges*, with its strong international focus, exploring theatre and performance across cultures, and entering epistemological fields that cross disciplinary boundaries, will serve as a catalyst for further discussion of the complex ways we engage with and perform our personal, social, artistic and political lives.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> His critique presciently points towards of the British government's claims to be 'following "the science"' in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic; these are of course the same people who not too long ago had 'had enough of experts'.
- <sup>2</sup> 1. United States; 2. India; 3. Brazil; and 5. United Kingdom. Russia, at number 4, is also alluded to in O'Gorman and Scheer's discussion of Estonian politics.