

Conference Report

28th CDE Conference

"Theatre of Crisis. Aesthetic Responses to a Cross-Sectional Condition"

June 20-23, 2019, University of Graz, Austria

The 2019 CDE conference officially opened with the welcoming words by the conference organiser Nassim Balestrini (University of Graz), Maria Löschnigg (University of Graz), and Leo Lippert (University of Vienna). The President of the society Ute Berns thanked the conference organisers for their work and commitment. The conference organisers then introduced the conference theme, followed by a welcome by Martin Löschnigg, the deputy head of the Institute of English Studies at the University of Graz.

After dinner, the conference participants made their way into Graz city centre to attend a performance of Ayad Akhtar's *The Who and the What* at Schauspielhaus Graz, followed by a roundtable discussion with dramaturgs and other representatives of the theatre.

The second day started with the conference's first keynote: Erin Hurley (McGill University, Montréal), "Community Vitality and Minority-language Theatre: English-language Drama and Theatre in Modern Québec" (chaired by Nassim Balestrini). Hurley traced English-language theatre's status as a minority theatre in francophone Québec, arguing that the crisis of anglophone theatre in Québec does not register as a crisis.

Hurley's keynote was followed by the second keynote: Lynette Goddard (University of London) spoke on "The Aesthetics of Global Politics: Short and Solo Black Women's Plays as Responses to Historical Trauma and Contemporary Crisis" (chaired by Maria Löschnigg). Goddard argued that the short play aesthetic, especially in the case of several plays being presented in one night, offers something raw and immediate in response to the/a crisis and can constitute a very effective response to the contemporary political climate. She referred to Suzan-Lori Parks' 2018 anthology *100 Plays for the First Hundred Days*, the multi-authored series *Black Lives Black Words*, which ran across the US and the UK, Mojisola Adebayo's 2017 play *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland*, and – as a counter-example by a playwright otherwise known for shorter plays – debbie tucker green's long play *ear for eye* (2018).

The two keynotes were followed by the conference's first panel, "Permanent Crisis" (chaired by Ilka Saal). Eckart Voigts (TU Braunschweig) and Merle Tönnies (University of Paderborn) spoke on "Posthuman Dystopia: Surrealism and Permanent Crisis in Contemporary British Theatre". Their paper used Ulrich Beck's theory of a world risk society and the theatre of the absurd as theoretical background for several recent plays on the climate crisis. Karoline Gritzner (University of Graz) then spoke on "Permanent Crisis in Howard Barker's Recent Drama", touching on the quality of crisis in Barker's recent work and the process of becoming other.

The second panel, "Crisis and Social Class", was chaired by Juliann Knaus. Gemma Edwards (University of Nottingham) spoke on "Looking Local: Rural-Touring Theatre and Its Response to Rural Crises", discussing the way in which the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum revealed a disjuncture or even rupture between metropolitan centres and rural areas in Britain. She referred to Rufus Norris's and Carol Ann Duffy's *My Country: a Work in Progress* (2017), the local Shropshire production *Here I Belong* (by Matt Hartley, 2016), and Dan Rebellato's distinctions of "anywhere" and "somewhere" as raised during his keynote at CDE 2017 in Reading. Thierry Dubost (Univ. of Caen Normandie) then spoke on "A fallen-Soufflé-crisis in *Dinner with Friends*", giving an overview of Donald Marguiles 1998 play and reading it through the symbolism of the food that is being prepared, presented and consumed throughout the play.

The third panel, "Queer Crisis" (chaired by Silvia Schultermandl), brought together Joseph Cermatori (Skidmore College) and Mary Luckhurst (Bristol University). Cermatori spoke on how to think and act in response to states of crisis in "Reza Abdoh's Crisis Dramaturgy: Radical Gesture and the Apocalyptic Everyday in Postdramatic Theater Practice" and the post-dramatic body as a body of (fragmented) gestures. He examined how in Abdoh's theatre, the call for revolutionary action is always accompanied by grief for the ultimate futility of this action. In her paper "Comedy and the Aesthetics of Self-Detonation: The Case of Hannah Gadsby", Luckhurst argued for stand-up comedy to be recognised as theatrical performance. She traces Gadsby's realisation of how unethical and destructive comedy shows could be, leading to the destruction of her on-stage persona in her 2017 touring show *Nanette*. Questioning the "contract" between audience and comedian, Luckhurst examined whether this differed from the one between audience and performers in a "conventional" theatre play.

In the afternoon, London-based playwright Mojisola Adebayo gave an overview of her work and its rootedness in Ubuntuism in a performance lecture on "Afriquia Theatre and the Art of *ubuntu*: Scenes and Stories from Twenty Years" (chaired by Lynette Goddard). Adebayo outlined the future-oriented concept of a shared humanity that forms the basis of Ubuntuism and explained how this relates to her own body of work (amongst which, *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* [2006, dir. Sheron Ama Wray]; *Muhammad Ali and Me* [2008]; *I Stand Corrected* [2012-2014, with Mamela Nyamza]; *The Interrogation of Sarah Bland* [2017]; *STARS* [2019, with Candice Purwin]) and to the concept of crisis as defined by Augusto Boal, who (in *Categories of Popular Theater* [1971/1990]) read crisis as both danger and opportunity for reinvention. Adebayo suggested that this understanding of crisis provides an opportunity to regard blackness and queerness as interconnected, and to understand reinvention as a quintessentially queer quality.

The reading was followed by a reception at Graz City Hall.

The second day began with a keynote by Wendy Arons (Carnegie Mellon University) on "Climate Change and the Capitalocene in Colleen Murphy's *The Breathing Hole* (2017)" (chaired by Leopold Lippert). Arons read the play on the colonial, imperialist destruction of nature and the play's non-human main character, a polar ice bear, alongside theories of the anthropocene and capitalocene.

The keynote was followed by the fourth panel, chaired by Ralph Poole: "Ecologies of Crisis and the Post/Human". Verónica Rodríguez (CBT Barcelona) spoke on "Crisis Ecology: Migratory Aesthetics in *The Container*, *The Suppliant Women*, and *Dear Home Office*". Pushing against the common tendency to read crisis as something clinically clear-cut, contained, unrelated to other circumstances and other crises, Rodríguez advocated to read crisis as something uncontained, as an ecology. Julia Hoydis (University of Cologne) then spoke on "A Slow Unfolding 'Fault Sequence': Risk and Responsibility in Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*", outlining the way the concept of risk, and insurance against it, is tied to notions of agency and choice, to Western culture and the Enlightenment idea of being in control, and in this way, to the capitalocene.

The afternoon saw the conference's second playwright lecture: Chantal Bilodeau (New York) spoke on "Climate Change Theatre Action: Modeling our Way Out of a Crisis" (chaired by Wendy Arons). Bilodeau reported on the Climate Change Theatre Action project, consisting of more than 150 five-minute plays commissioned from over 100 playwrights worldwide (50 of which are collected in Chantal Bilodeau [ed.] *Where Is the Hope? An Anthology of Short Climate Change Plays* [York UP 2017]). She explained that over the course of the project, the most successful plays were those emphasising the aspect of community and togetherness, often using an interactive approach, but also de-centering humans.

The afternoon saw the conference's fifth and last panel, on "Crisis and Racialized Difference" (chaired by Kerstin Schmidt). Ilka Saal (University of Erfurt) spoke on "The Disappearing Black Body: Two Plays by Jonathan Payne and Jackie Sibblies Drury", comparing Jonathan Payne's *The Revolving Cycles Truly and Steadily Roll'd* (2018) and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as South-West Africa, from the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915* (2012). Elisabeth Knittelfelder (University of Graz) then spoke on "The 'Ordinary' Cruelty and the Theatre as Witness". She examined how storytelling worked through national and personal trauma in South-African playwriting, specifically in Yaël Farber's plays *A Woman in Waiting* (1999) and *Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise* (2000), and Lara Foot Newton's *Tshepang: The Third Testament* (2003). Ryan Hatch (California Polytechnic State University) then gave a paper on "The Frame in Crisis: Young Jean Lee and the Politics of Form", in which he outlined Lee's political work of aesthetic forms in her plays *The Appeal* (2004), *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006), *The Shipment* (2009), and *Straight White Men* (2014). Hatch proposed a possible connection between Lee's plays and visual artist Frank Stella's body of work, especially in the conception of the crisis of the frame as the crisis at the heart of both Lee's and Stella's work.

The CDE Annual General Meeting took place in the late afternoon and was followed by a reception on the premises.

The last day started with the last keynote, by Sibylle Baumbach (University of Stuttgart), who spoke on "The Fascination with Crisis and the Crisis of Perception in Contemporary British Drama". Using James Graham's 2017 play *Quiz* as illustrative example, she argued that crisis challenges the audience's sense of safe spectatorship by inducing cognitive disorientation, which leads to a crisis of perception, and this cognitive crisis of perception in turn leads to a fascination with crisis.

The keynote was followed by a collective forum performance of Mojisola Adebayo's multi-voice piece *The Interrogation of Sarah Bland* (2017) and an interactive Roundtable, featuring the keynote speakers and playwrights and chaired by Nassim Balestrini.

The conference closed on Sunday afternoon. The next conference will take place at the University of Augsburg on 21-24 May, 2020.