**Conference Report**

**33rd Annual CDE Conference, Konstanz (Germany), 19-22 June 2025**

**New Stages for Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Theatre**

Leila Vaziri and Christina Wald opened the conference by introducing the theme of “New Stages for Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Theatre.” Afterwards, the president of CDE, Kerstin Schmidt, welcomed the conference delegates by giving a short glimpse into current stagings of the theme in the American context.

The opening ceremony was followed by Lynette Goddard’s (Royal Holloway London) keynote on “Performing Black Queer Joy as Activist Resistance.” In their talk, which was chaired by Leila Vaziri, they identified a joyful aesthetic in examples of Black LGBTQIA+ theatre, focusing, notably, on Travis Alabanza and Debbie Hannan’s *Sound of the Underground* and Temi Wilkie’s *Main Character Energy*.

On the second day of the conference, the first panel, which was chaired by Ralph Poole (Salzburg), focused on “Staging Queerness.” Amy Terry (Royal Holloway London) explored the category of the butch in *The Butch Monologues* and in the musical adaptation *Fun Home*. Conceptualising the butch as an identifier of both social class and gender and sexuality, Terry argued that butch figures undermine comfortable binaries of class, race and sexuality. Heidi Lucja Liedke (Frankfurt/Main) and Sarah Busch (Köln) argued that the device of characters breaking the fourth wall to directly address the audience represents an important device for queer storytelling on stage. Drawing on Jack Halberstam’s theories, they analysed different ways in which the figure of the ‘queer (re-)director’ is used in Charlie Josephine’s works *I, Joan* and *Birds and Bees* to disrupt audiences’ expectations about conventional forms of representation. The panel closed with Aloysia Rousseau (Sorbonne Paris), who showed the importance of positive emotional experiences of pleasure, happiness and joy in Charlie Josephine’s queer western *Cowbois*. Both on stage and in the audience, Josephine’s play creates synaesthetic pleasure that contributes to creating a ‘queertopia’. The acknowledgement of pleasure and hope as key elements of queer theatre is a powerful motor, Rousseau argued, of the utopian political of *Cowbois*.

The second panel on “Queer Temporalities and Spaces” was chaired by Ondřej Pilný (Prague). Eva-Maria Windberger (Luxemburg) reflected on the history of queer activism in Singapore, focusing on the 1980s and 1990s. Using Ng Yi-Sheng’s *Desert Blooms,* which looks back to this historical period, as an example, she argued that the documentary play complicates the representation of queer life on the Singaporean stage through ‘simple’ aesthetics and generic hybridity. Benjamin Poore (York) drew on Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of queer temporalities to study queer dramaturgies of historical playwriting. Analysing Phoebe Eclair-Powell’s *Shed: Exploded View*, James Fritz’s *The Flea* and Mojisola Adebayo’s *Family Tree*, he showed how the plays experiment with dramatic time to stage an ‘explosion’ of historical realism.

The afternoon began with a panel on “Bodies and Sexuality,” chaired by Gemma Edwards (Manchester). Ellen Grünkemeier (Bielefeld) critically engaged with Matthew Lopez’s *The Inheritance*, which establishes an intergenerational dialogue about community, homosexuality and the AIDS epidemic – a dialogue that is, however, undermined by the play’s conservative tendencies and contradictory constructions of sexuality. Drawing on critical disability studies, Edyta Lorek-Jezińska (Toruń) studied the representation of disability and sexuality in works by Amy Trigg, Michael Southan and Francesca Martinez, who are themselves disabled and whose plays feature young female characters with a physical disability. Sara Reimers (Bristol) critically examined the practice of authentic casting, in which key aspects of identity, such as gender, sexuality, race and disability, align between actor and role, and the problematic notion of authenticity in a range of theatrical examples, among which *Falsettos* and *I, Joan*.

The fourth panel of the day focused on “Gender, Violence and Censorship” and was chaired by Janine Hauthal (Brussels). Lesego Chauke analysed the dynamics of risk Quondiswa James’s *A Faint Patch of Light*, an adaptation of Athol Fugard’s *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*. Identifying queering as an adaptational and dramaturgical strategy, James’s play reflects on issues around oppression and liberation in post-democracy South Africa through the microcosm of a queer romantic relationship. Alex Watson (Brighton) and Kit Narey’s (Gothenburg) paper asked how the stage can be made ‘new’ by trans performers and theatre-makers. Working with a notion of space as both aesthetic and social, they analysed the stage as a contested space in *Galatea* (adapted by Emma Frankland, Subira Joy and Andy Kesson) andTravis Alabanza and Debbie Hannan’s *Sound of the Underground*. Elisabeth Knittelfelder (Vienna) concluded the panel with a paper on representations of gender-based violence in South-African theatre and performance. Reflecting a discursive shift that foregrounds and addresses not the victims of sexual violence but the perpetrators, *#JustMen*, a production by Baxter Theatre Centre, focused on male perpetrators, inviting them to acknowledge and reflect on their complicity in violence against women.

The second conference day finished with a conversation, conducted by Christina Wald, with playwright Charlie Josephine, who talked about their personal background and their career and experience as a trans\* playwright and actor.

Fintan Walsh (Birkbeck) opened the third conference day with a keynote address on “Dances with Death: Grief as a Kind of Movement,” chaired by Christina Wald. The talk asked how queer histories in contemporary British and Irish theatre guide us through the experience of grief and death in the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. Looking at a diverse range of plays and performances, Walsh identified a return to past experiences of pandemic, notably the context of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as a collision of theatrical forms and media as a characteristic feature of contemporary queer playwriting.

Afterwards, a panel on “Theatre and Trans\*” was chaired by Jonas Kellermann (Konstanz). Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s notion of the table as a structuring device in social relations and on Victor Turner’s concept of ritual, Dorothee Birke and Sarah Back (Innsbruck) analysed the symbolical significance of tables in Kama La Mackerel’s *Truth and Punishment* as a site where Christian ritual is appropriated and in Travis Alabanza’s *Burgerz and Chips with Travis Alabanza* as a place of communion between trans\* performance artists. Examining temporal discontinuities and the significance of dance, Elisabeth Massana (Barcelona) studied Charlie Josephine’s *I, Joan* as an example of gender euphoria through the lens of McKenzie Wark’s notion of trans\* rave as a political practice of becoming otherwise. The panel was completed by Xavier Lemoine’s (Gustave Eiffel Paris) talk on Ty Defoe’s *Firebird Tattoo*, which addresses the double erasure of queerness and indigeneity. Introducing the notion of indigenous queerness, Lemoine showed how the play blurs not only normative temporalities but also fixed identities.

After the AGM, which took place in the early afternoon, the conference delegates travelled to Konstanz for a roundtable discussion at the Theater Konstanz on the topic of “New Stages for Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Theatre: Practical Perspectives,” featuring dramaturg Lea Seiz (Konstanz), Rachel Hann (Northumbria), Jennie Reznek and Mark Fleishman (artistic directors of Magnet theatre, Cape Town). After the conference dinner, delegates attended an open-air performance of *The Threepenny Opera* at Theater Konstanz.

The final day of the conference began with a conversation, conducted by Leila Vaziri, with playwright Stef Smith, who shared insights about her career as a playwright and read an extract from her play *Swallow*.

The final panel on the topic of “Feminist Stages” was chaired by Anja Hartl (Innsbruck). Drawing on Lauren Berlant and Jill Dolan, Hannah Greenstreet (Liverpool) analysed the representation and retheorisation of desire in Ella Hickson’s works, focusing on *[Anna]* and *Oil*, in which desire functions as a problem because it is unruly and defies boundaries. Clare Wallace (Prague) studied the representation of women at the Abbey Theatre since 2016, focusing in particular on the aftermath of the #WakingtheFeminists protests and showing that the movement had a positive impact on institutional politics and the development of equal access. Trish Reid (Reading) focused on temporality in Zinnie Harris’s adaptations *The Duchess (of Malfi) after John Webster* and *This Restless House*, analysing how Harris reframes European tragedy in terms of sexual politics through disruptive temporal modes.

The conference ended with closing remarks by Leila Vaziri and Christina Wald, and Vice President Chris Megson thanked the organisers and their team as well as the staff of the conference venue. The next conference on the topic of Theatre and Resilience will be organized by Charles University Prague and will take place 4-7 June 2026.