

Conference Report

34th Annual CDE Conference, Prague (Czech Republic), 4-7 June 2026

Theatre and Resilience

Ondřej Pilný and Clare Wallace opened the conference by introducing the topic of “Theatre and Resilience.” Afterwards, the president of CDE, Kerstin Schmidt, welcomed the conference delegates: she noted the ubiquity of resilience as a term in environmental studies, politics, and psychology, and suggested that theatre practitioners and institutions are veterans of resilience with potential to enrich public debate on this issue.

Schmidt then announced the winner of CDE’s biennial PhD Award: Lesego Thabang Chauke for her dissertation titled *Mnemonic Sketches: Utopias of Mourning in Contemporary South African Performances of Tragedy*. Thabang Chauke joined the meeting online to thank CDE for the conferral of this prestigious award.

The opening ceremony was followed by Alice Koubová’s keynote address on “After Resistance, before Resignation: The Genealogy of Resilience.” This paper offered an historical contextualization of resilience in the fields of psychology, ecology, and civil engineering. Koubová noted the binary assumptions that often prevail in discussions of resilience and, instead, positioned the concept as a neologism for ‘life’ and relationality – one that has vital implications for ailing democracies and the subaltern experience of being ‘dead-alive’.

On the second day of the conference, the first panel, which was chaired by Kerstin Schmidt, focused on “Resources and Ecologies.” Robert Lublin explored Quiara Alegria Hudes’s *Water by the Spoonful* as a dramatic exploration of human resilience to survive addiction. Arguing that the play presents tragedy as an opportunity for resilience, Lublin showed how the play inspires hope in audiences. In her paper on Erika Dickerson-Despenza’s *Cullud Wattah* and Rob Florence’s *Katrina: Mother-in-Law of ‘Em All*, Nicole Schneider argued that water is used as a symbol for resilience in 21st-century American drama that deals with recent ecological catastrophes. The panel closed with Harriet Carnevale’s examination of the site-specific production *Stranger Beasts* as an example of ecological and feminist resilience that resists neoliberal framings of resilience as individual adaptability and creates instead a space for collectivity.

The second panel on “Radical Stages, Contemporary UK Theatre” was chaired by Martin Riedelsheimer. Ruud van den Beuken studied resilience as a form of radical hope in Roy Williams and Clint Dyer’s *Death of England* Trilogy. Eva Ries’s paper drew on Judith Butler’s concept of ‘promiscuous obedience’ to analyse resilient resistance in Alice Birch’s *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*. Ries argued that Birch’s play proposes a dynamic resilience that resists normative closure and engenders new forms of connection. Muammer Özoltulular examined relational resilience in Flora Wilson Brown’s *The Beautiful Future Is Coming* in which pregnancy is used as a symbol of hope in the context of ecological crisis.

The third panel focused on “Asserting Agency in Contemporary American Theater” and was chaired by Ilka Lensen-Saal. Ahlam Jodat Maodah drew on Black feminist theories to explore resilience in African American playwright Cesi Davidson’s *Voice Lesson*, in which silence emerges as a catalyst for hope and agency. Michael Jaros’s paper examined Kirsten Greenridge’s *Feeding Beatrice* through the notion of haunted history, asking if and how human resilience can overcome histories of racial violence, displacement and migration.

The second day concluded with an interview with playwright Louise Lowe conducted by Miriam Houghton. In a wide-ranging conversation, Lowe discussed her background in theatre, her varied

processes of collaborative working and negotiating actors' creativity, the agency of the audience, the neuroscience of audience response, the focus of her work on the theatrical reconstruction of historical narratives of the Irish state at the micro-level, and her sustained engagement with issues of economic struggle, the care economy, and tenement life across a range of theatre productions and contexts.

In the evening, conference delegates were invited to join a theatre performance at Divadlo Komedie.

The third day opened with a panel on "Spaces of Performance, Spaces of Neoliberalism," chaired by Anette Pankratz. Departing from an understanding of home as a key factor for fostering resilience, Sarah Heinz's analysis of Geoff Sobelle's *Home* showed that home is envisioned as both an illusion and an aspiration. Charlotte Farrell explored the resilience of queer performance in fringe theatre venues in Sydney, with a particular attention to the impact of the shift to mainstream spaces on queer performance's radical potentiality. The panel concluded with a paper by Eamonn Jordan, who examined characters' resilience in Conor McPherson's *The Brightening Air*.

The third keynote address was given by Tony Fisher on "Necro Theatre: Staging Resilience in the Age of Capitalist Melancholia." Focusing on Tim Crouch's *Truth's A Dog Must to Kennel*, Fisher explored Alice Koubová's invitation to think democratic resilience in relation to 'radical pessimism' and 'radical optimism' as they apply to the form of survivance that emerges within Crouch's hauntological necro theatre as 'radical sadness' and 'radical hope' – around which a new theatrical community is nonetheless constructed. He argued that this community prefigures, by implication, the possibility of a new democracy founded on an existential community.

The afternoon began with the fifth panel of the conference on "Contested Histories and Alternative Networks" and was chaired by Julia Rössler. Kristýna Ilek examined dramaturgy as a practice that facilitates resilience through relationality in Irish and Northern Irish theatre. Her analysis was based on interviews with a range of theatre-practitioners. Chengyao (Michael) Ye focused on theatrical representations of Hitler in contemporary British theatre, analysing aesthetic and ethical issues and interrogating the thin line between repetition of and resistance against fascist ideologies in the plays. The panel concluded with a paper by Tomáš Kačer on manifestations of resilience in Tracy Letts's satirical play *The Minutes*.

This panel was followed by a conversation with playwright Deirdre Kinahan, chaired by Clare Wallace. Kinahan discussed her early theatre experiences; the development of key works such as *Halcyon Days*, *The Saviour*, and *The Unmanageable Sisters*; her interest in 'detailed moving pictures of lives that often exist in the shadows'; the combination of the political and the instinctive that motivates her playwriting; and the dignity and resilience of women. She also introduced her upcoming productions of *Refuge* and *The Homecoming of Joseph Grace*.

The day concluded with the AGM. The AGM included elections for CDE offices: Kerstin Schmidt and Anette Pankratz stood down from their roles as, respectively, President and General Editor of CDE; Dorothee Birke and Ilka Saal were elected in their place; all other Board members were re-elected and continue in role.

The final day of the conference opened with a keynote by Miriam Haughton on "What Is Happening to Art? Theatre Finance, Funding, and Policy in the Twenty-First Century", chaired by Clare Wallace. Haughton documented the changing and challenging landscape of arts funding in Ireland since the financial crash/crisis of 2008. She noted the severe consequences of the crisis on arts practitioners and companies – reduced budgets, downsizing, fewer productions, reduced

rehearsal times, many closures – and the emergence of so-called ‘skinny theatre’ and ‘show in a bag’. Haughton gave a defence of public subsidy for the arts and explored alternative economic models – as put forward in emergent Economic Humanities – and developed this part of the discussion with reference to the case study of Rough Magic theatre company.

The last panel of the conference on “Disenfranchisement and Resistance” was chaired by Merle Tönnies. Edyta Lorek-Jezińska approached the concept of resilience from the perspective of disability studies and disability drama in her analysis of Rob Drummond’s *Don’t. Make. Tea.* Douglas Basford’s talk examined performances of resilience in *Public Enemy: Flint*, an adaptation of Henric Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*.

The conference ended with closing remarks by Ondřej Pilný and Clare Wallace, and Chris Megson thanked the organisers and their team on behalf of CDE.

The next conference, on the topic of ‘Ugly Feelings: Theatre, Hope, Anger’, will be organized by the University of Frankfurt and will take place 27-29 May 2027.