

Editorial

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Last April, at the 15th annual Forum: Performance as Activism, I was heartened to meet practitioners, artists, educators and scholars from around the globe who were enthusiastically engaged in using the art form of theatre to address pressing social and cultural issues. This edition of *ArtsPraxis* includes fourteen inspiring and pertinent articles that report on activist theories and practices that have been initiated, explored and successfully implemented in communities and classrooms.

At the Forum, we asked, “How is activism defined or redefined in 2018?” Through panel discussions, workshops, performances and paper presentations we explored how activism can disrupt, subvert and transform dominant and social political narratives. More than sixty presenters from twelve different countries relayed inspirational and revelatory methods towards the goal of promoting enduring social change through aesthetic expression. In this global space of open dialogue and exchange, we, as activists learned about organizational methods, pedagogical tools, aesthetic devices that, in responding to the complexities of our time, push past boundaries and binaries to redefine cultural innovation.

FORUM HIGHLIGHTS

This volume begins with some of the highlights of the Forum, including the inspirational keynote speech from award-winning director and activist, **Ping Chong**, who discusses the complicated role of the artist as agent of social change. Encompassing puppetry, dance, documentary theater, sound, media and other experimental theater forms, his works have explored a wide variety of subjects from hidden genocide in Africa, to modernization in China, to the experiences of Muslim youth in post-9/11 America. Chong offers his unique artistic vision in reflecting on major historical issues of our times, and the need to focus on bringing unheard voices and under-represented stories to the stage, while maintaining a commitment to artistic innovation and social responsibility.

As one of the expert speakers on the Plenary Panel at the Forum, **James Guido** shares his thoughts and perspectives on the forum's guiding questions. Guido advocates for providing artistic theatre opportunities for Deaf students and emerging theatre artists, in order to promote and provide awareness and understanding of Deaf culture to the larger theatrical community. The next editorial discusses one of the outstanding and unique moments at the Forum—the colorful performance of *Ximonik*, an original play by the all-female Maya troupe Ajchowen. **Chelsea Hackett**, who organized and oversaw the company's trip to New York City, traces her relationship to Ajchowen, which then led to their involvement in the Forum. Hackett contextualizes Ajchowen's unique approach to performance as activism in Guatemala, examining the history of their company and their experiences as Maya actresses.

The following articles encompass examples of theoretical proposals, civic engagement, community activism, and performance as protest in various communities and classroom settings. While the themes in this volume overlap and intersect, I have organized them into four sections: Identity, Youth, Protest, and Resilience, with the hope of representing the great complexity and innovative variety of Performance as Activism.

IDENTITY

How can performance have an enduring cultural influence on the identity of a community? **Bridget Foreman** describes how the participation of 200 actors in a devised performance about suffrage inspired community activism in both the participants and the audience in York (UK). She discusses how the historical themes of the performance, such as female enfranchisement, democratic engagement and violent protest, resonated with and were framed by the contemporary cultural landscape and redefined identity in the community. In the United States, **Penelope Cole** reports on the remarkable transformation of a Colorado professional theatre company that was producing socially aware plays, into a social justice organization that now uses theatre as a platform, making ground breaking administrative and artistic changes in the community. Describing a process of creative democratization, **Giulia Innocenti Malini** explains how theatrical experiences in Milan are offering incentives for local educational policies. Through her analysis of the Franco Agostino Teatro Festival in Crema, and the Monteverlino “school without boundaries,” Innocenti Malini discusses how different representations of performative practices have promoted forms of active involvement of the local community and inspired changes in curriculum, educational systems and community identity.

YOUTH

How can performance be used to spark dialogue and encourage pedagogical and critical exchange? Offering a new way of thinking through multimodality in scholarship and pedagogy, **Gus Weltsek and Clare Hammoor** suggest an innovative possibility for understanding activism and self-formation in the drama classroom—dissociation. Using academic scaffolding and a playful graphic novel, the authors invite teachers, researchers, practitioners and learners to delve into a theoretical moment of disconnect, which they believe can hold hope for the development of individual agency, social justice and equity for young individuals on paths of self-discovery and creation. In a very different approach, **Matthew Reason** explores the experience of asking students to become, if only temporarily, political activists. Offering a variety of arts activist projects to undergraduate students in St. John’s University in the UK, such as “dialogical activism,” “culture jamming” and “quiet activism,”

Reason describes how the students articulated the impact of the module on their sense of social consciousness and relationship to political issues, thus revealing opportunities for “authentic learning.” Discussing how ethnodramatic performance with youth can engender a sense of hope and capacity to conceptualize and enact political agency and courageous resistance, **Rachel Rhoades** reports on her work with the Youth Artists for Justice program in Toronto, Canada, wherein socio-economically under-resourced, racialized youth conducted research and created an original play.

PROTEST

How can performance as activism be powerful and effective in creating social change? Reflecting upon the creation and implementation of a giant puppet performance and festival at the US/Mexico border in 2017, with community members on both sides, **Ana Diaz Barriga** describes her work with Jess Kaufman and their attempt to reframe the politically charged border wall. Barriga relates compelling details regarding the expansion of the festival via the inclusion of community leaders, to the actual event and performance with fifteen foot puppets built and operated by volunteers from various segments of the community. Exploring the notion of “communitas,” **Jisun Kim** analyzes the Ewha Protest and Candlelight Protest in Korea, wherein the performative and aesthetic power of the protests naturally altered the modalities of the community. Kim posits that the non-violent protest provided a space of creativity, whereby individuals were transformed through their solidarity, and were thus able to experiment with a new form of community and self-representation. Through his discussion of Mem Morrison’s *Silencer* and LaBeouf, Rönnkö & Turner’s *#HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS*, **Tom Drayton** examines the emerging concept of the metamodern in political and cultural spheres and how performance as activism can be (re)defined within the current political landscape. Drayton posits that these cases of politically engaged art may point the way for future performative engagement in contemporary culture due to their compelling metamodern oscillation between sincerity and irony, hopelessness and hope.

RESILIENCE

How can performative engagement engender resilience, promote trust and deepen understanding in the community? **Bridie Moore** reflects on age and aging, analyzing her one-on-one performance work in Sheffield, UK, using masks, proximity and subtle exchange as forms of quiet activism, thus challenging perceptions of the old person as “other.” Moore suggests that the contact facilitated in these sensitive performances can reduce prejudice against the “old,” as well as other marginalized individuals and groups. Also examining work with a vulnerable population, **Rosalie Zerrudo and Dennis Gupa** investigate the politics of freedom, space and body in an overcrowded woman’s prison in the Philippines. Zerrudo’s study examines the Iloilo women’s resilience, discovering compassion and community as they created stories, body lullabies and art, in the communal making of Inday dolls. **Jackie Kauli and Verena Thomas** explore the way in which indigenous knowledge systems and performances can be harnessed to co-create narratives and performances for community audiences. Using the model of Theatre in Conversation (TiC,), Kauli and Thomas discuss their work in Papua New Guinea around gender-based violence and sorcery accusation related violence, illustrating how narratives of strength and resilience can highlight challenges, create the conversations, and deepen understanding around sensitive issues.

I hope that you will be inspired by the following theories and practices offered in this volume, ranging from the metamodern to dialogical activism to personal resilience, and surrounded by artistic innovation.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Nancy Smithner is a performer, teacher and director. She has been teaching Physical Theatre, Acting, Mime and Directing for the Program in Educational Theatre since 1986. She has also taught at many other venues such as Tisch School of the Arts; Playwrights Horizons, Circle in

the Square Theatre School, School for Movement Research, the New York Dance Intensive, the Berkshire Theatre Festival and Soongsil University in Seoul, Korea.

Recent directing credits include *Hear Them Roar*, a devised theatre piece about women's suffrage, *Tale of the Lost Formicans*, by Constance Congdon, *The Triangle Project*, a devised theatre piece about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, *Sonia Flew* by Melinda Lopez, *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus, *Mad Forest* by Caryl Churchill, *(m)body: Provocative Acts*, an original performance work on cultural interpretations of the body, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Godspell*. Her company, The Ensemble of Movement Theatre, performs original works, most recently "...suddenly there came a tapping...", a retelling of Poe's "The Raven" at the Storytelling Series at the Provincetown Playhouse. Since 2003 she also curated, and directed three productions of "Voices of Women," original works by women on culture and identity.

Dr. Smithner chaired the 2018 and 2009 forums for the Program in Educational Theatre, "Performance as Activism" and "Theatre Pedagogy: Teaching the Art Form." She received the Steinhardt Teaching Excellence Award in 2005. Smithner has been a member of the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit since 1989, performing for children in pediatric settings, and giving workshops on clowning and physical comedy. For Steinhardt, she is the Director of Undergraduate Studies for the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions. For the Program in Educational Theatre, she oversees the placement of student teachers in public and private schools throughout the city.