Peripeteia

Rehearsing Against the End of the World

Branislav Jakovljević and Diana Looser

As we write this introduction in California in June of 2021, the hills around us are bound to go up in flames at any moment, as they have done for the previous two years; other parts of the world are experiencing epic droughts and floods of mythical proportions, sinking islands, melting polar caps, mountaintops bereft of glaciers, bleached coral reefs, *smoldering permafrost*. This is not just climate change; rather, these are symptoms of much deeper processes transforming the planet. Crucially, these processes are not only geological or atmospheric, but social. *This*, climate activists are warning, has an expiration date. 2020? 2050? Next century? How does all of this map onto predominant Western master narratives based on the Aristotelian beginning-middle-end schema, beyond hurtling toward an inevitable catastrophe?

The segment of this narrative structure that appears most relevant right now is *peripeteia*, commonly translated as a reversal of fortune. In the language of climate science, that would be the tipping point. In this term, which is very well known to students of Western theatre, we recognized the capacity to capture the present moment. We chose it not to reinforce this model, but rather to pay critical attention to how the Aristotelian paradigm subtends and enables the ideology of Western industrial capitalism, and to posit *peripeteia* as a recognition of the need for deep structural change. Since the early 19th century, appropriations of Aristotelian narrative have preferred to understand *peripeteia* in properly capitalist terms of the climax: that of rise, ascendance, and growth. It is this climax-obsessed social climate that has brought about the climate crisis. Our take on *peripeteia*, then, is that the change in circumstances that we are experiencing and the recognition that accompanies it diverges from the classic Aristotelian trajectory whereby *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* work together to amplify the protagonist's tragic downfall. Instead, the reversal of fortunes stimulates recognition of the need for profound action that might help to avert the tragic outcome. This dramatic analogy, significantly, draws attention to some of the ethical concerns and obligations that such action would involve. Aristotle's theory of tragic drama here highlights how those who would posit themselves as the world's protagonists (members of wealthy, industrialized centers of power in the Global North) are in fact the cause of the problem, responsible for the very crisis they seek to resolve. Consequently, how might we avert a tragic outcome in a way that doesn't simply benefit the groups who brought

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about these problems in the first place (resulting in other tragedies)? What deeper turns and changes are necessary in order for us to genuinely face up to our responsibilities, to unsettle entrenched hierarchies, and to encourage a less Western-centered, solipsistic, and anthropocentric discourse and praxis? And what role might performance play in those processes?

In working on this issue of *TDR*, therefore, our aim is not to produce yet another collection of articles about ecological performance in the Anthropocene. Instead, we want to take stock of where performance is in relation to the overarching problem of climate change and its integral relationships to social and political frameworks, and to look ahead and explore directions that societies and arts need to take in order to forge different futures. Since the 1960s, both alternative and mainstream theatre and performance have been trying to engage ecological questions, with varying degrees of success and intensity. This time, however, things are different. Global warming is delivering on the major ecological warnings and anxieties that have arisen over the past half century, and then some. One of the first things we have learned in editing this issue of *TDR* is that theatre, dance, and performance art, as participants in larger cultural production, can no longer rest in their role of witness to the climate crisis that is increasingly engulfing the world, or as interpreters of ideas that come from other sources, such as earth and climate sciences. We have also seen the limitations of performances that appeal to audience members to become heroes themselves and to "do something" about the crisis, thus displacing problems that require sustained, collective engagement onto the individual to solve. Already sidelined within the so-called culture industry, live arts seem further marginalized in a climate struggle that, at this point, plays out as a game of numbers—from rising temperatures, to cubic tons of glaciers lost every minute, to square miles lost to deforestation, to millions of people whose livelihoods and lives are threatened. Performance is therefore faced with the challenge to transform itself in order to stage a redress in this social drama of planetary proportions.

While we started conceptualizing this issue by focusing on the position of performance in relation to climate disaster, it quickly became clear that this anthropogenic crisis had to be thought through in regard to social upheavals that are related to it in ways that are not always obvious, including the coronavirus pandemic and antiracist uprisings in the US and across the world. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement questioned the radicalism of the UK-based Extinction Rebellion as still a predominantly white and middle-class movement. If climate change is the outcome, in large part, of racial capitalism, then any serious reckoning with this problem needs to take into consideration not only climate justice, but also critiques of the very idea of the Anthropocene undertaken from a diverse range of ethnic and cultural vantage points: Who is the *anthropos* who brought the planet to the brink of collapse? Why? And for what purpose? Is the very idea of a universal anthropos shifting the responsibility to the societies that are suffering the most from a centuries-old cycle of extraction of raw material and labor, and dumping of industrial and consumer waste? What is at stake in the notion of an (avoidable) apocalypse-to-come when many global communities experience the climate crisis as an extension of the historical destruction wrought by colonialism? What is the potential of alternative epistemologies and different models of temporality and futurity for encouraging more plural and intersectional engagements with climate challenges?

On a more local scale, as we worked on this issue, *TDR* moved from its long-time publisher MIT Press to Cambridge University Press. Part of the rationale for this move was that the new publisher would, in Richard Schechner's words, "expand access to *TDR*, especially in the global south" (2021:8). We see *Peripeteia* not only as our consortium issue, but as a platform for questioning precisely the idea of "access": who takes part in the production and consumption of Western scholarly publications? What does having or gaining that access entail? What does the symbolic economy that we are engaged in consist of, and what is the cost of exclusion from that economy? In other words, who from the "Global South" would want to publish in *TDR* and for what purpose? Correspondingly, what is the cost of inclusion, and on what terms? How do we guard against an additive model of inclusion that fails to interrogate undergirding disciplinary

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assumptions and (US) paradigms of knowledge-making? How do we reverse the imperialist practice of imposing knowledge produced in the West onto non-Western cultures, and instead listen and learn? As Western-trained scholars coming from the edges of the West (the Balkans and New Zealand), working with our editorial assistant Rishika Mehrishi (from India), we are keenly aware of the necessity and relevance of non-Western ways of knowing the world. To that end, we have tried to develop a conversation that solicits contributions from artists, scholars, and activists working and writing from indigenous perspectives and from sites in the Global South, alongside those written from European and US American viewpoints, not in order to extract knowledge from them, but to take their lead.

The difficulty of reaching out across linguistic, economic, and cultural boundaries highlighted the central challenge we are facing with *Peripeteia*. Special issues of scholarly journals tend to survey artistic practices and scholarly investigations that are already present in the field. Despite the valuable and flourishing critical discourse on performance and climate change, when it comes to the specific set of questions we are addressing, this is not the case. We are very much aware that we are engaging in a process that the field is still learning how to navigate. One of the key insights that has emerged from this process is that performance cannot produce narratives, images, situations, and actions that engage this crisis effectively while its own social, cultural, economic, intellectual, and political positions remain unexamined. This goes for its discursive positions as well: the ways we talk and write about performance. Accordingly, we decided to build on another format that has been tried in *TDR*, that of the thematic issue staged over several installments. The goal of *Peripeteia* is not to offer a comprehensive survey of a problem and offer categorical answers, but to initiate a conversation that will continue in forthcoming issue(s) of *TDR*. Some of these conversations have already begun. Pursuing the direction announced in the first Cambridge University Press issue, *TDR* has offered its full support to our efforts.

The contributions collected in this first installment include a manifesto, academic essays, a performance script, practitioner reflections, and artists' interventions. Kickstarting the conversation, US American theatre historian Elizabeth A. Osborne presents a manifesto for a "Green Federal Theatre." Looking back to the lessons learned from the Federal Theatre Project (1935–1939) instituted as part of former US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, Osborne calls for a Federal Theatre Project that is reimagined for this contemporary moment and conceived of as part of the Green New Deal. Her vision of a Green Federal Theatre addresses the connected crises of climate, equity, and the arts, and proposes numerous ways in which participants could work with intention toward sustainable solutions. Osborne articulates a starting point from which to consider the principles, priorities, and systems that could create a sustainable national organization. She suggests that such an organization would be administered through a decentralized network committed to social and economic equity in its employment structures, focused on community building, and invested in creative solutions to national crises. Crucially, it would embed the participation and uplift of marginalized voices and underserved communities in all aspects of its programming, funding, and leadership frameworks, with awareness of the deep structural and cultural change that this reality would itself entail. Osborne's call is purposefully designed as a springboard for robust, ongoing dialogue and debate.

Raqs Media Collective's response to the question of the "global" is in their focus on the local. Further, if the paradigm of the "New Deal" speaks of a massive overhaul, they suggest that real change starts from the micropolitical. Their image-text assemblage "Salt" offers a further view of *peripeteia* through the question of the "turn" that resonates with their concept of "kinetic contemplation." They ask what happens when we "turn," or when the world "turns" around us, and how these turns are accompanied by a "flash" of *anagnorisis*, a kind of revelation or discovery. The ensemble's visually striking, incisive, and lyrical meditation focuses on the marine/terrestrial environment of the Rann of Kutch, a vast salt marsh in western India that, during the monsoon season, becomes covered by the Arabian Sea. They think through the many histories of salt

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as taxable commodity, as register of social value, as measure of and impetus for labor, and of its complicity with colonial rule and state structures of power, reminding us poignantly that "landscapes remember the labor lost in them." Connecting these conceptual turns and recognitions to other geological and mineral traces, objects from the fossil record, and enigmatic objects, Raqs traces entwined social, material, and environmental histories that indicate forays backwards, forwards, and sideways in time.

It seems not at all coincidental that both Annelies Van Assche and Lindsay Goss, in their engagements with contemporary performances in the United States and Western Europe (Belgium), take up Lauren Berlant's theorization of the present as impasse. Van Assche and Goss discuss experimental performance pieces in terms of time/temporality, excess, and expenditure, and assess how theatrical performance can help us find a way to live within our current climate of precarity. In her close reading of the "political science fiction fantasy musical" *Meyoucycle* (2016), Van Assche explores the work's performative and dramaturgical tactics for addressing the pathologies occasioned by neoliberal semiocapitalism (technological acceleration, exploitation of private and public labor, pessimism) through frivolity, irony, and wit. Ultimately, through recognition/enactment of these challenges as being part of a cycle—one that constitutes an impasse—performance helps us to recognize these problems as collective, and to construct new human alliances. Lindsay Goss invites us to sit with the notion of theatre as impasse in a different way: as a means to rehearse for an ending. Goss argues that the Western paradigm of theatre provides a useful model for being in relation to crisis by presenting audiences with a certain mode of existential temporality. The world of contemporary metatheatricality (or hypertheatricality) is one marked by a particular kind of finitude—a world that expires. This prompts us to respond to the reality of a collective endpoint, facing the experience of mortality "not *through* theatre, but *as* it." Unlike Aristotelian protagonists, the characters realize that they are finite; theatre teaches us to be in a present that withholds the promise of a future, contradicting the fantasies of continuity and sustainability underpinning contemporary climate discourse.

Silence of the World, a "scenic experiment script" created by Brazilian actor, director, and curator Andreia Duarte in collaboration with indigenous Krenak political and intellectual leader Ailton Krenak and Yanomani leader and shaman Davi Kopenawa, offers a powerful alternative to the sense of impasse and inevitability that is pervasive among Western scholars and artists. If, as we have noted, contemporary artists in the West use theatre as a means to rehearse for an ending, in his reflections and actions Krenak presents a vision of performance as a rehearsal against the end of the world. Translated beautifully into English by Miro Spinelli, *Silence of the World* pursues a set of philosophical and dramaturgical questions to engage indigenous epistemologies that interleave human and more-than-human worlds. Foregrounding Krenak's voice, the performance reaches beyond the European concept of humanity and attendant measures of spatio-temporality, advancing ideas that seek to decenter and deconstruct anthropocentric discourse and dilute the boundaries between the human and nonhuman in order to restore our more consubstantial relationship with the Earth. It likewise diverges from linear models of history and the tick of Western industrial time, which posit the climate collapse as an anticipated future event; here, the Anthropocene exists as an extension of the extractivism and cultural erosion caused by colonialism. In their advocacy for indigenous rights, Duarte and Krenak call on us to embrace uncertainty and to face up to our common responsibilities; they also, vitally, refuse an ending by reinforcing ancestral connections as a foundation for an indigenous futurity.

Read together, these contributions offer an array of perspectives on the potential of performance to intervene in the integrated ecologies of the environment, politics, and society, while also pushing us to consider performance's structural limitations and the need to rethink our assumptions about what it is and can do. At the same time, and just as importantly, they open a whole new host of questions that venture far beyond the limited range of viewpoints gathered in this collection. Here are only some of the queries that arise immediately for us—and, of course, we welcome many others. It is clearer than ever that the industrialized world needs

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to learn from those communities that are not founded on extractive principles. What does that mean for performance? How to rehearse against the end of the world? Can we think of planetary cultural policies? Or, conversely, will this crisis lead to new regionalisms and even to new parochialisms? For instance, what kinds of structural changes could a Green New Deal bring to performing arts in the US? If the (Green) New Deal presents as a fundamentally US American paradigm, then what are other workable models of addressing a crisis of this proportion in other global locations? To what extent are these approaches to crisis-solving transferable, and what is the role of performance in their transfer? Further, if the climate crisis requires strategies on a massive scale as well as action on the micropolitical level, how can performance intervene in these micropolitical struggles? How can it negotiate the macro and the micro effectively? Are extant aesthetic parameters sufficient? If not, how are we going to develop new ones?

More specifically, if, as some climate and social justice organizers suggest, activists should consult with artists about the design of their public actions and protests, what is it that we, performance-makers and scholars, have to offer? What kind of public action is most effective in addressing this crisis? Are there new forms of public protests and actions that can engage and highlight specific issues that emerge from the climate crisis? And are there already existing, half-forgotten strategies, that can be retooled and reinvented for this new purpose? How can performance position itself relative to dominant discourses that frame the debate of the climate crisis, such as science, politics, demography, and urbanism, to name only a few? What is performance's unique and indispensable contribution to this debate? What can art do to temper the arrogance of corporate industries that have brought the world to the precipice, and, indeed, of sciences that have been serving them from the very beginning? And (once again) how can performance and performance studies continue to create room—properly and sincerely—for hitherto unheard voices? How might those voices productively extend and reconfigure our field's disciplinary assumptions, interpretive paradigms, and guiding questions? It is with a view to this ongoing dialogue that we anticipate the subsequent installment(s) of our *TDR* Consortium issue.

As we write this introduction, it is impossible to imagine what the world will look like when it reaches the readers a few months from now, in the winter of 2021. Is it going to find them in the midst of the new wave of the pandemic? If not, what will the recovery of theatre and performance look like? It has been announced that another climate summit of world leaders will take place by the end of this year. Will they agree on any real solution, or merely continue to implement half-measures? It is only June, and record-breaking temperatures have been recorded in such disparate places as the American northwest and Siberia. How many records do we have to break before we discover the true meaning of solidarity and common action?

Reference

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