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Back to the future of theatre studies

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In this special issue, *Theatre Research International* marks its thirty-five years of existence. This time span equals the approximate length of an academic career or, at least in my case, it happens to coincide with my participation in the activities of the International Federation for Theatre Research. In order to locate the present position and the future direction of theatre studies, I begin with a brief retrospective overview of the decades that I have experienced with IFTR/FIRT.

The first world congress I attended took place in Munich in 1977, followed by Leipzig in 1981 and Glasgow in 1985. The themes at these congresses were, respectively, theatrical space and architecture, acting and actors, and the art of the director. Especially at the Glasgow congress, my memory is of an endless series of presentations, each describing a magnificent director from this or that country, but hardly ever with any critical framing. Despite my reservations about the levels of scholarship at that time, the congress was rewarding in another way: it was my first-time encounter with a number of (young) people, who were willing to engage in the future of the Federation. Among them were Erika Fischer-Lichte, Josette Féral, Janelle Reinelt (all later presidents of IFTR), David Whitton (present secretary-general), and also some colleagues already known to me, including Pirkko Koski and Christina Nygren (both were elected vice-presidents later on). When my own department, under the leadership of Kirsten Gram Holmström, accepted to arrange the next world congress in Stockholm in 1989, we felt the strong support of a new generation of theatre researchers. We decided to devote this congress to the 'state of the art', or – to use that wonderful German expression *Bestandsaufnahme* – to explore the diversity and future potential of theatre research.

For the Stockholm congress, we organized nine strands of study. Three of these focused on historical issues, while the others were as follows: Integration of Dance and Music in Dramatic Performance, Performance Theory, Reception and Audience Research, Ethnic Studies of Performing Arts, Theatre Education for the Artist and/or the Audience, and Theatre in Society: Organization and Distribution. I am naming these in full in order to illustrate the idiom of the time. Some of the terms used in these titles were severely questioned during the congress, others became dated, gender was missing, but some topics survived the theoretical expansion that has since taken place. Each congress strand was organized as a working group in which participants discussed their papers in the afternoon, while, in the morning, conveners presented keynote lectures concerning the directions of various issues. The congress hosted a final round-table session in which the hope that we might repeat such a 'state-of-the-art' conference in twenty years time was expressed. Those twenty years have now passed and no such conference has been arranged. Perhaps this is because it is simply no longer necessary given the self-confidence that now characterizes the discipline of theatre studies, coupled with the emergence of performance studies in the 1990s.

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What is the basis of this new-found self-confidence in our scholarship and conferences? The move into theory has had an enormous impact on our studies. The place of drama, theatre and performance in society has been theoretically framed through gender studies, postcolonial studies and (lately, again) Marxist studies. The area of performance studies has broadened the field, though at the same time, I would argue, has not given us new methodological approaches. Performance analysis and theatre historiography – the first IFTR working groups set up after Stockholm – established firm methodological bases from which to work. But these change over time. Semiotics is gone, cognitive science is approaching. Like any other discipline, that of theatre studies is constantly evolving and in that flux new scholarly tasks emerge. Let me illustrate this with a recent example.

For the last couple of years, the Metropolitan Opera in New York has offered digital performances of their productions. While the local audience enjoys a classical opera matinée, fifteen cameras transmit the performance to digital cinemas in, to date, forty-four countries. In Sweden, no less than ninety such digital movie theatres and other venues are now technologically enabled to receive these electronic broadcasts. In the 2009–10 season, 68,000 spectators in Sweden alone watched nine operas, while *Carmen* was viewed worldwide by an audience of 400,000 people.

In traditional theatre studies these digital transmissions of Met-operas would not qualify as theatre. Out of the *hic et nunc* (here and now), only the latter part is fulfilled: the audiences are there at the time when the performance takes place, but they are not in the same place. Gone is the co-presence of performer and spectator that has been considered the condition *sine qua non* of theatre. Nevertheless, people in those cinemas are behaving 'as if' they were attending a real performance. They are nicely dressed, drink champagne in the intermission and applaud each aria as if they were in a real opera house. Occasionally they even offer a standing ovation, irrespective of the fact that the singers cannot see them – though saying that, the technology (fibre optic cables) is now there for simultaneous, two-way transmission so that performers and spectators can see and interact with each other.

In order to deal with this new phenomenon of simultaneous, interactive, albeit dislocated communication between stage and auditorium, theatre scholars will have to revise their theoretical concepts about what constitutes a theatrical performance and respond to the technologically revised position of the audience as a constitutive component of the theatrical event. They will need to engage with a renewed idea of collective experience, the erasure of the distinction between theatre and performance, and the emergence of other kinds of performances consequent on these new techniques that also reposition the performer in relation to the digital presence of spectators.

New phenomena require us to be open and receptive to rethinking our theories, methodologies or paradigms. In this particular instance, this means searching for how we might understand and analyse the creative and experiential processes of an ever-expanding idea of the theatrical event. This is just one of the many challenges that I see ahead as I look back to the future of theatre studies.

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