INTRODUCTION:
DIALOGUE, PERFORMANCE AND THE BODY POLITIC IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

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How does contemporary theatre practice propose creative modes of critique, resilience, and solidarity in times of precarity, violence, and antagonism? Florian Malzacher argues that "[t]heatre is the space where things are real and not real at the same time. Where we can observe ourselves from the outside whilst also being part of the performance. It is a paradox that creates situations and practices that are symbolic and actual at the same time."[1] What can we learn from a focus on the forms that paradox takes and the meanings that emerge from it? The articles collected in this special issue are the outcome of a conference at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in 2021 under the auspices of the European Regional Development Fund Project "Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World." The focus of that online meeting on performance, polarisation, dissensus, and dialogue was, inevitably, inflected by the Covid-19 pandemic which throughout 2020 and 2021 concentrated global attention on the politics of precarity and the body in ways previously difficult to imagine. Indeed, amid increasingly heated disputes over personal freedoms and public spaces, Judith Butler's 2012 observation that "unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence […] as well as the basis of our obligations"[2] seems even more keenly pertinent.

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[1]   Florian Malzacher, "No Organum to Follow: The Possibilities of Political Theatre Today," *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre Today*, ed. Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2015) 30.

[2]   Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 145.

The notion of the people forming a social organism is, of course, intrinsic to the body politic, an ancient metaphor for collective socio-political relations. As a conceit it seeks to represent and control the plurality of bodies that contribute to it and to marshal them into a unified common sense. Why reanimate a (dead) metaphor with all its inherited hierarchies, artificiality, and numerous shortcomings? First, while medieval and early modern usages of this conceit to describe/prescribe the nature and composition of power and civic roles are archaic, clearly the figure of the social and political body in some form or other still acts on the scene of modern politics – as was starkly illustrated during the Covid-19 pandemic disputes over the management of public health. Second, we would like to recover what is arguably the most enduring and resonant quality of the body politic metaphor – the agonism it attempts to repress. And third, we wish to turn away from exhausted debates about nature, and towards the body politic as a scene of agonistic, pluralistic interaction. Exchanging the unworkable, singular anatomical understanding of the body politic for a plural, dissensual body politics signals a crucial shift in representational economy – a turn to embodiment, co-habitation, and assembly – that we suggest necessitates a consideration of disagreement, dialogue, and performance.

One influential route towards rethinking body politics lies in the work of political scientist Chantal Mouffe, who proposes agonism, rather than consensus, as the central mechanism of the political.[3] Though Mouffe's term "agonistic pluralism"[4] intervenes in a discourse of democracy, she also reflects on the potential of "critical artistic practices" to "contribute to the creation of a multiplicity of sites where the dominant hegemony can be questioned."[5] This chimes with a key idea that overtly influences a number of the articles here – Jacques Rancière's dissensus. In different ways, Mouffe and Rancière are careful not to conflate different modes of representation – political and aesthetic. Rancière insists on their parallel, but nevertheless distinct, spaces. He sees dissensus as not just a disagreement about the in/equity of specific social arrangements, but rather as revelatory of the ways such arrangements constitute a system that is taken for granted and, therefore, unseen.[6] Like politics, art practices engage in "distribution

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3   Chantal Mouffe develops this terminology throughout numerous publications; see *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), *On the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

4   Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745-58.

5   Mouffe, *Agonistics* 104.

6   Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010) 38.

of the sensible," "contribut[ing] to the constitution of a form of commonsense that is 'polemical', to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable."[7]

Such emphasis on seeing, speaking, and acting is intimately connected with embodied, and collective appearance, both theatrical and non-theatrical. In *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler returns to Hannah Arendt to argue that

> to rethink the space of appearance in order to understand the power and effect of public demonstrations for our time, we will need to consider more closely the bodily dimensions of action, what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies together in a historical space that undergoes a historical transformation by virtue of their collective action: What holds them together there, and what are their conditions of persistence and of power in relation to their precarity and exposure?[8]

While Butler's focus is on demonstrations and protest, her provocative points of the dynamics of assembly and appearance are moot for ongoing discussion of the value and meaning of theatrical gathering – made acutely relevant in a fresh way by the exigencies of a global pandemic. In his reflections on performance and agon, Tony Fisher also alludes to Arendt noting that "[t]he space of appearance – that wherein social and political life is both *formed* and *performed* – finds its condition of possibility in the relational mode of our being together; in the conjoining of action and deed that stands at the basis of every mutual endeavour."[9] Space, relationality, and agency as they intersect with difference and disagreement are dominant motifs throughout the articles that follow. In diverse ways they consider how contemporary theatre performances incite, invite, or enable dialogue via dramaturgies of struggle.

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[7]   Rancière, *Dissensus* 149.

[8]   Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) 73-74.

[9]   Tony Fisher, "Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*," *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy*, ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 19. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt suggests that "the space of appearance comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms […] in which the public realm may be organized." (2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 199.

The contributions here are grouped to facilitate a sense of conversation among their associated concerns. Martin Riedelsheimer's article "Revolution, Satire and Staging Dissensus" opens with the paradox of dissensual art, and how a work of theatre "might take a principled political stance," a manoeuvre that might itself be seen to close off dialogue. Riedelsheimer acknowledges Liz Tomlin's recent critique in *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* of spectatorial autonomy,[10] before exploring Ranciere's disruptive "dissensual commonsense."[11] He highlights the challenge of presenting dissensus in an aesthetic and institutionally dissensual way, and suggests that Alice Birch's *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* and Marlene Streeruwitz's *Mar-a-Lago. oder. Neuschwanstein.* deploy satire, hyperbole and self-reflexivity to produce discomforting and "genuinely political dialogue."

Also concerned with dissensus and debate, Clare Wallace's article turns "to the polarised, gendered, antagonistic scenes of encounter" in Lucy Kirkwood's recent plays. Focusing on *Mosquitos* and *The Welkin*, Wallace unpacks the ways in which Kirkwood's feminist theatre engages in what Fisher calls "a critical politics of the visible."[12] Both dramas present debate scenes of topical political relevance hinged to explorations of agency, social reproduction, and gendered body politics. *Mosquitos* juxtaposes themes of scepticism and vaccine hesitancy with scientific knowledge, mixed forms of intelligence, and intractable familial misunderstandings. *The Welkin*, a history play set in the mid-eighteenth century, weighs diverse female experiences of sexuality, labour, marriage, violence, and childbirth positioned within the confining frame of patriarchal order. As Wallace demonstrates, in both plays Kirkwood's dramaturgy is disruptive – splicing incommensurate attitudes and experiences and bending temporality to disclose perspectives on gendered relationality and "agonistic pluralism."[13]

Tom Maguire and Michał Lachman in contrasting ways both examine the politics of *communitas* and collectives. Maguire's article considers two works directed by Zoe Seaton of Big Telly Theatre Company. Initially planned as live performances, *The Tempest* and *Operation Elsewhere* were adapted for online transmission due to the Covid-19 crisis. Maguire explores the processes of transforming these works for a ZOOM format and in doing so revisits debates about liveness launched by Philip Auslander in his 1999 book *Liveness: Performance*

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[10] Liz Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship: Provocations for Change* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019).

[11] Rancière, *Dissensus* 30.

[12] Fisher, "Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*" 17.

[13] Mouffe, *Agonistics* 1.

in a Mediatized Culture.[14] Maguire argues, following Auslander, that "liveness might be experienced and conceptualised less as a binary between live and non-live and rather as a continuum." The ZOOM versions of *The Tempest* and *Operation Elsewhere* performed live, generated, he argues, a form of *communitas*, despite the forced isolation of audience members and performers. Consequently, Maguire proposes "an extension of Judith Butler's proposition of the political potential of assembly" that would appreciate forms of online gathering as gestures of resistant solidarity.

By contrast Michał Lachman takes an expansive approach to community in his analysis of the ways recent British drama has critically exposed the "the decomposition of European identity." Using Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Credible Witness*, Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, and Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*, Lachman reflects on how these plays communicate modes of "exclusion and crisis of solidarity." Wertenbaker and Lustgarten depict precarious outsiders – be they exploited workers or refugees – as systemically disenfranchised and dehumanised by European mechanism of citizenship and belonging. Butterworth, Lachman contends, reproduces this dynamic in the heartlands of England. What emerges is an impulse to form alternative collectives, as a space of resistant appearance but also of ambivalence.

The last pair of articles attend to body politics and representation. Recalling the ways Brechtian dialectical theatre problematised and critiqued the conventions of theatrical representation through estrangement and self-reflection, the plays discussed here solicit a nuanced political awareness and response. Ondřej Pilný's reading of Enda Walsh's *Medicine* illuminates the play's multi-layered engagement with therapeutic confinement. Referencing the shameful systemic institutionalisation of those suffering from mental illness in the recent history of modern Ireland, Walsh's play exposes the violent dramaturgy of normalisation. As Pilný describes, Walsh's artistic methods are distortive and metatheatrical, enabling a complex, oblique interpellation that "puts on display the injustice perpetrated by society on those who are deemed abnormal, ending up confined in mental institutions, and invites the spectators to witness." Pivotal in this arrangement, Pilný contends, is the affective charge of the grotesque that produces a rearrangement of what is usually perceived; however, as he points out, the puzzling nature of the grotesque simultaneously diffuses the play's political intervention.

Finally, Ondřej Polák focuses on theatrical interventions in "the narrativization of blackness" in an American context. Polák launches his enquiry from Judith

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[14]   Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Butler's observation that any designation of "the people" is always "constituted by the lines of demarcation that we implicitly and explicitly establish."[15] Such demarcations and exclusions have been foundational issues throughout the history of African American theatre, and the challenge of how to deconstruct them remains. Polák uses Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings*[16] to examine the role of animatedness in works by Amiri Baraka and Jackie Sibblies Drury, identifying a shift in theatrical performances of the racially overdetermined black body. He maintains that in Baraka's 1960s work, "[a]nimatedness […] remains confined to the stage reality and does not consider the lines of demarcation in the audience"; however, by the twenty-first century, alternative critical methods can be discovered. Jackie Sibblies Drury's drama *Fairview* furnishes a vivid and provocative intervention in the agonistic discourse of representation, race, and appropriation. In its three-part structure, *Fairview* first delivers an apparently commonplace African American scene, then goes on to expose the orchestration of such a scene in the white imagination, before finally turning the questions of how to appear over to the audience in an open-ended dialogue. In contrast to Baraka's confrontational dramas of rupture and retaliation, Sibblies Drury amplifies "the metatheatrical dimension of animatedness" to extend a critical politics of the visible to the audience in order to awaken a consciousness of the co-production of racialised narratives of difference and exclusion. Positioned in relation to the antagonisms of racial discrimination and inequality articulated forcefully by the Black Lives Matter movement, *Fairview* testifies once more to how "[t]heatre is the space where things are real and not real at the same time. Where we can observe ourselves from the outside whilst also being part of the performance."[17]

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[15]   Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) 3.

[16]   Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[17]   Malzacher, "No Organum to Follow" 30.

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