

# Experiments in Time

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‘I’ve seen the future, and I’m not going,’<sup>1</sup> says David McDermott of McDermott and McGough, an artistic duo committed to living in and making work about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Operating mainly between New York and Dublin since the 1980s, McDermott and his collaborator Peter McGough have conjured an aesthetic universe which is not only preoccupied with Victorian subjects, but also uses the period’s design, architecture, materials and techniques. The Oscar Wilde Temple, which opened in New York in 2017 and London in 2018, is among the pair’s most immersive artwork to date. It transforms Clapham’s Studio Voltaire into a secular space dedicated to Wilde, whose luminescent form beams bright from an altar.<sup>2</sup> Covering the papered walls are scenes from Wilde’s life and trial for gross indecency, with smaller depictions of other historical LGBTQ pioneers and activists – including Alan Turing and Harvey Milk – and lesser-known figures including Marsha P. Johnson, an African American transwoman, sex worker and gay liberation activist involved in the Stonewall uprising, and Sakia Gunn, a fifteen-year-old African American lesbian who was murdered in a homophobic attack in 2015.

McDermott and McGough have described their work as ‘experimenting in time’,<sup>3</sup> challenging ideas of linear chronology often by investing in homoerotic aspects of the past. This approach resembles what Elizabeth Freeman elaborates as erotohistoriography – a mode of desirous historical investigation that ‘indexes how queer relations complexly exceed the present’.<sup>4</sup> But while the artists typically appeal to the past for comfort, with this project it’s an unaccommodating destination, that both anticipates and is haunted by its violent future. Despite its persistent hostilities, the present emerges as an unusually welcome vantage point for McDermott and McGough, one that threatens to unsettle their broader temporal fixation. For this temple is not just a memorial site, but a functioning centre for LGBTQ community events and ceremonies, unavailable to its documented forebears.

This issue of *Theatre Research International* is similarly concerned with the past, and authors turn to understand some of its peculiarities and legacies. In H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), another product of the Victorian era, time is the unrecognized but crucial fourth dimension no different to the spatial planes, ‘except that our consciousness moves along it.’<sup>5</sup> While a sci-fi invention makes time travel possible in Wells’s novella, with this issue theatre is our time machine of choice, the spatial and temporal practice around which all thoughts and bodies orbit.

Of course, there is no escaping the past in theatre and performance research: all theatre is an experiment in time as well as space, and even engaging with ostensibly contemporary practice is an exercise in historical inquiry. But articles in this issue are

particularly focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which variously appear both distant and oddly close. In contributors' subjects and approaches, time switches, leaps, drags, reverses and repeats, always moving and rarely stalling.

In 'An Eye for an Eye: the Hapticality of Collaborative Photo-Performance in *Native Women of South India*', Sharanya examines how photo-performance invites us to take a second look at the use of photography as an ethnographic tool in nineteenth-century colonial India. Focusing on *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs (2000–2004)*, created by Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni, Sharanya considers how the conscious performativity of the project's image sets, featuring temporal flips and improvisation, draws attention to the theatricality of colonial historiography. Sharanya also finds in the project's transnational engagement with the 'native woman' subject the seeds of a form of feminist solidarity which stretches across time and cultures.

Staying within a turn-of-the-century colonial context, Richard Fotheringham's article examines Alfred Dampier's 'Shakespearean Fridays'. Dampier was a British actor, playwright and theatre manager who made his career in Australia and New Zealand. He became one of the leading exponents of Shakespeare before 1900, even though his career has been given uneven attention to date. Fotheringham assembles a range of biographical and archival material to try and construct a sense of the Dampier company's performance style, and consider how its productions of Shakespeare allowed the troupe to perform cultural progressiveness and eminence, often affirmed and repeated by reviewers of the time.

In Maria De Simone's article, questions of cultural hierarchy and privilege are even more complicated. De Simone examines the racialized performances of early twentieth-century American vaudeville performer Sophie Tucker, grappling with how the performer's female and Jewish identity informed or may even excuse some of her choices. In 'Sophie Tucker, Racial Hybridity and Interracial Relations in American Vaudeville', De Simone discusses the racial references of Tucker's performances, and the professional contexts in which they took place, to suggest that she drew upon black culture to advance her own career, in a way which cannot easily dodge accusations of exploitation and appropriation. Tucker is a woman both of her time and ahead of it, we discover, and De Simone's article invites us to consider if, for her too, time's up.

Second chances concern Shouhua Qi and Wei Zhang's article, which examines an adaptation of Sartre's *The Victors* for the Chinese stage. In 'Total Heroism: Rinterpreting Sartre's *Morts sans sépulture (The Victors)* for the Chinese Stage', Qi and Zhang track some of the lives of Jean-Paul Sartre's Resistance play, which was considered a relative failure upon its premier in 1946. But the authors argue that the drama's interest in cruelty and heroism found a much more favourable reception in 1990s China, in a production directed by Zha Mingzhe, where the play's themes seemed to chime with the culture's changing sociopolitical and economic landscape.

In *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, Carlo Rovelli claims that there is only a detectable difference between the past and the future 'when there is flow of heat'.<sup>6</sup> Leading a series of provocations in a dossier on the role of the theatre historian, David Wiles takes the

fluctuating temperature of the profession, broaching the issue's preoccupation with time from a disciplinary perspective. Wiles's article recounts a meeting of IFTR's Theatre Historiography Working Group in London in 2018, and reflects upon the theatre historian's changing epistemological, institutional and existential position, with the original [report](#) appearing online as part of our new supplemental material feature. Wiles's contribution is followed by responses from scholars working in or on different regions, which challenge and extend his Western focus, including perspectives by Oscar Tantoco Serquiña, Jr (the Philippines), Lorena Verzero (Latin America) and Promona Sengupta (India).

With the new 'Double Take' feature of the Book Reviews section, we begin a series dedicated to looking back at publications already reviewed in the journal, to assess them in light of their afterlives. With this first instalment, Sarah Gorman considers the impact of Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, first published in 1988 and reissued in 2012, tracking its place within shifting discourses of identity and affect. Readers are invited to visit the original review, and to explore our vast online archive.

For Wilde in *De Profundis*, written from his Reading Gaol cell in 1897, what immobilizes time is the experience of suffering: 'in the sphere of thought', he writes, 'no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more'.<sup>7</sup> But this issue presents us with a much more dynamic portrait of time, as indeed McDermott and McGough provide of Wilde. For although contributors turn to the past, they do not find worlds paralysed by pain and stasis, but pulsing with imminence, and the forward-motion rumble of change on the horizon line.

## NOTES

- 1 Quoted on the artists' website at [www.mcdermottandmcgough.com](http://www.mcdermottandmcgough.com), accessed 8 March 2019.
- 2 The Oscar Wilde Temple was presented at Studio Voltaire, Clapham, London, from October 2018 to April 2019.
- 3 Quoted on the artists' website at [www.mcdermottandmcgough.com](http://www.mcdermottandmcgough.com), accessed 8 March 2019.
- 4 Elizabeth Freeman, 'Time Binds, or Erotohistoriography,' *Social Text*, 23, 3–4, 84–5 (Fall–Winter 2005), pp. 57–68, here p. 59.
- 5 H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Penguin Books, 2005; first published 1895), p. 4. Italics in the original.
- 6 Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016; first published 2014), p. 62.
- 7 Oscar Wilde, 'De Profundis' (1905), in Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), pp. 45–161, here p. 89.