

## Editorial: Scenes of Political Crisis

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Addressing a gathering in Indianapolis in 1959, then Senator John F. Kennedy remarked that ‘When written in Chinese, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters—one represents danger and one represents opportunity.’<sup>1</sup> The comment was made as part of a speech to the ‘United Negro College Fund’ that argued for the need to provide educational opportunities for African Americans in the United States in the context of the growing power of the Soviet Union and China. JFK’s explication of the characters, which likely preceded him, sought not only to highlight perceived threats facing the world, but their potential to generate positive change.

Those more adept at translation have since pointed out that the Chinese characters for crisis more precisely indicate danger without the optimistic upstroke, though the elaboration provided by JFK has endured, popping up in everything from political orations, to motivational speeches, to an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer renames it ‘crisitivity’!<sup>2</sup> The definition even makes its way into the work of Augusto Boal, where he describes a ‘Chinese crisis’ as a protagonist’s encounter with danger and opportunity.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the technical inaccuracy of the translation, we might agree that it at least communicates a more desirable truth: that something good should emerge from disarray.

It may well be true that crisis sometimes involves elements of danger and opportunity, but what does it mean to speak of political crisis when the world appears to be in a state of perpetual emergency? Indeed, crisis seems to have become the norm rather than the exception, describing ongoing waves of near-global instability and not just a localized or time-bound period of breakdown. Is crisis a discernible moment of rupture and reorganization, or an intrinsic feature of political ontology? And what ripples outwards between countries and cultures; what’s lost or embellished in translation? Perhaps the age of extremes, as Eric Hobsbawm described the twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> also spawned the age of crises.

Articles in this issue are all concerned with scenes of political crisis, inviting us to look more closely at their performative dimensions, social impact and cultural effects. Authors track how political crisis—often in the form of volatile governance—negatively affects swathes of people and artistic practices; but also how theatre and performance function as key tools in the interrogation of broken systems and unstable conditions, and in the provision of relative security, understanding or hope. Throughout the issue we find ourselves facing the double-headed proposition, implicit in our opening mistranslation: on the one hand, political crisis endangers people and cultures, and on the other, it supplies the pre-conditions for regeneration and renewal.

Charlotte McIvor's article 'When Social Policy Meets Performance Practice: Interculturalism, the European Union and the "Migratory and Refugee Crisis"' is concerned with the European migration and refugee crisis since the late 2000s. McIvor examines how the arts have been prioritized in EU social policy as an effective response to this crisis, particularly in cultivating belonging and promoting interculturalism. The relationship between policy and practice is explored by McIvor in light of the work of three contemporary theatre companies who are actively engaged in theatrical interculturalism: Kloppend Hert (Belgium), Terra Nova Productions (Northern Ireland), and Outlandish Theatre Platform (Republic of Ireland).

Questions of displacement and cultural erasure are also a concern of Naphtaly Shem-Tov's 'Performing Iraqi-Jewish History on the Israeli Stage'. Shem-Tov is interested in how the experiences of Jewish communities from the Middle East and North Africa—in particular Iraqi Jews—were overshadowed following the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, which failed to include them in its Zionist narrative. The article focuses on the Farhud, a pogrom which took place in Bagdad in 1941 following the collapse of the pro-Nazi government, during which 200 Iraqi-Jews were massacred by an Iraqi nationalist mob. Shem-Tov examines how this traumatic event has been represented by Sami Michael's *Ghosts in the Cellar* (1983) and Gilit Itzhaki's *The Father's Daughters* (2015), arguing that these plays offer important perspectives on marginalized Jewish experience and this period of political vulnerability.

The complexities of post-independence Zimbabwe are a concern of Naila Keleta-Mae's article. In 'Workshop Negative: Political Theatre in Zimbabwe in the 1980s' Keleta-Mae explores the effect of the shift from white minority to black majority rule which characterized the period, and the failure of promises of racial reconciliation and equality. Centralizing the play *Workshop Negative*, which Keleta-Mae maintains exemplifies political theatre of the period, the article charts how the play critiques the new government which preached socialism while amassing wealth, and the implications for artistic practice more broadly.

'Contemporary Theatre and Performance in Turkey' is a dossier of writings on theatre and performance practice in contemporary Turkey, with a focus on the political and artistic climate surrounding the Gezi Park protests of 2013. We begin with an article by Pieter Verstraete, which is an adapted version of a text originally published in Turkish in the journal *PRAKSIS*, here translated by the author. With 'In Search of a New Performativity after Gezi: On Symbolic Politics and New Dramaturgies in Turkey', Verstraete analyses the performativity of Gezi protest acts, arguing that they spurred larger cultural transformations in the theatre that are discernible in new writing and performance aesthetics.

Shorter reflections follow, curated and with an introduction by Seda Ilter. In 'Reflections on Turkish Theatre', artists and academics respond to the contemporary scene by viewing it from different disciplinary and cultural perspectives. Özlem Hemiş offers a brief history of westernized theatre in Turkey that takes us from the foundation of the municipal theatres to the Gezi protests. Verstraete returns with an original article that assesses the position of state theatres in Turkey, while Zeynep Günsür Yücel offers a perspective on theatre training and how it interacts with

production. Müge Olacak provides insights on dance in contemporary Turkey, while Ayşe Draz addresses the problem of a lack of collective memory among younger generations in responding to the work of her theatre company. Mirza Metin draws the section to a close discussing the fiery imagery of Kurdish theatre.

In *Crises of the Republic*, Hannah Arendt considers problems facing US politics in the 1960s and 70s, across essays that explore disobedience, revolution and violence; themes as relevant now, to many cultures, as they were then. Echoing sentiments expressed in these articles, in the chapter 'Civil Disobedience' Arendt suggests that 'Man's urge for change and his need for stability have always balanced and checked each other'.<sup>5</sup> But Arendt also reminds us that while 'law can indeed stabilize and legalize change once it has occurred [...] the change itself is always result of extra-legal action'.<sup>6</sup> With this issue we are reminded of how theatre and performance are not just affected by political crises, but operate as vital extra-legal actions, instrumental to the ignition and processing of change.

## NOTES

- 1 John F. Kennedy, 'Remarks at the Convocation of the United Negro College Fund, Indianapolis, Indiana, April 12, 1959', *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum* (online archive), [www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/indianapolis-in-19590412](http://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/indianapolis-in-19590412), accessed 10 July 2019.
- 2 For a useful discussion of characters, see Mark Swofford's blog *Pinyin*, <http://www.pinyin.info/index.html>, accessed 10 July 2019.
- 3 Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 59.
- 4 See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).
- 5 Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), p. 79.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 80.