

## Editorial: On Censorship, Political Correctness, the Diagnostic and Community Building

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‘Silent Voices/Forbidden Lives: Censorship and Performance’ was the topic of IFTR’s annual conference held in Lisbon, Portugal, in July 2009. Introducing the theme of the conference, the organizers signalled the importance of censorship for Portugal and other countries with histories of governmental dictatorship, given the ways in which this has made an impact or left its mark on the cultural, social and political fabric of the nation.<sup>1</sup> The first two articles in this issue, by Jean Graham-Jones and Paul Rae, arose out of papers presented at the Lisbon conference. Both authors open up the censorship debate to argue for more subtle accounts of how the term is conceptualized. In brief, both are mindful of the cautionary note sounded in an earlier *TRI* article on ‘the limits of censorship’ by Janelle Reinelt where she writes, “‘Censorship’ has become a common-sense catchword; since everyone knows what it means, merely to name it is to proclaim it.”<sup>2</sup>

To name and to proclaim censorship, Graham-Jones argues, ‘does not necessarily help us to fully appreciate and document the implications and functions of these acts’. Seeking a more complexly layered understanding of censorship and its application to theatre produced in Argentina during the last thirty-five years, she deploys and interrogates the Spanish-language term *censura*. Invoking and scrutinizing a taxonomy of the ‘censored, self-censored, and/or counter-censorial’, Graham-Jones looks back to two 1977 productions to query why and how it was that one treatment of domestic family violence as an evocation of the violence and repression experienced on a national scale should be censored (*Telarañas* (Spiderwebs/Cobwebs), Eduardo Pavlovsky) and the other not (*La nona* (The Granny), Roberto Mario Cossa). Teasing out the critical complexities of *censura*, her analysis moves forward to more recent performances, including two productions of *Eva Perón* (Buenos Aires, 2004), and leads her to conclude with her own cautionary note of how mindful scholarship needs to be if it is to resist ‘the simplistic overapplication of the term [*censura*] as an umbrella’, which ‘obscures more than it illuminates’.

From Argentina we move to Singapore, as Paul Rae mobilizes the idea of ‘freedom of repression’ to sharpen analysis of what he, in a similar vein, argues is ‘censorship’ wielded oftentimes as a ‘blunt instrument’. Drawing on Foucault’s critical assessment of the ‘repressive hypothesis’ in the *History of Sexuality*, Rae adopts and adapts Foucault’s more nuanced account of ‘forbidden lives’ in respect to the regulation of sexual behaviour to an understanding of the local specificities of the processes of censorship. This he undertakes in order to argue ‘the importance of careful attention both to what is at stake

in any given act of censorship, and to its interpretation as such'. Accompanying Rae's exposition of the 'dramaturgy' of censorship situations in Singapore are several apposite recent theatre productions, most significantly an all-male production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Wilde Rice theatre company that in 2009 attracted various censorious attentions.

The concept of censorship is closely allied to that of political correctness, with which it is often conflated, as Janelle Reinelt argues in 'The Performance of Political Correctness' (an article also developed out of a Lisbon conference paper). Thinking back to the arguments she made in her earlier *TRI* article on censorship, as previously cited, she looks to adopt a similar interventionist strategy with regard to the concept of political correctness. Akin to Graham-Jones and Rae, her primary objective resides in eschewing 'the rhetorical juxtaposition of "political correctness" and "free expression" [that] sets up a binary which can prejudice a nuanced analysis of complex cultural negotiations in and around particular theatrical performances'. Taking flashpoints of political correctness, moving back and forth between political correctness as a concept and as an embodied practice, examining 'PC' as cultural performance and assessing its appearance in theatre contexts, she advocates 'careful attention to the uses of the concept in the arts'. At once a 'touchy' subject for those working in the performing arts, a move away from the usage of the term as one of 'derision' is, she argues in the final analysis, a step towards a more 'considered articulation of engaged argument'.

From censorship and political correctness, James Frieze's article takes us to a consideration of theatrical performance in relation to a perceived diagnostic turn in contemporary culture. Looking back to late nineteenth-century theatre naturalism to root theatre's engagement with medical diagnosis as drama concerned with identifying and treating the symptoms of a malfunctioning social body, Frieze also sees naturalism as a point of departure for the turn in contemporary performance towards the forensic recovery of the real. His scholarly diagnosis of theatre's long-standing obsession with 'unmasking the truth' takes in a range of genres and performance examples and comes to rest on two productions: Inspector Sands's *If That's All There Is and Must*, performed by Peggy Shaw in collaboration with the Clod Ensemble. While other performances under consideration (Blast Theory's *Desert Rain*, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*) go some way towards 'jamming' theatre's diagnostic turn, in these last two shows Frieze detects strategies and aesthetics that begin to break the 'diagnostic machinery'.

Testimony-based theatre that is touched upon in Frieze's article comes under close scrutiny in Dani Snyder-Young's 'Stop Staring, Start Seeing: Housed Spectatorship of Homeless Performers'. Here, working through a framework of theatrical event theory, Snyder-Young's principle concern is to understand how, in the context of community-based theatre, the social divide between housed (spectators) and homeless (performers) might be crossed. Taking three performances of zAmya Theatre Project's *Housed and the Homeless (From the Very Same Cup)* staged in different sites for different kinds of audience in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the article traces the community-building potential of the show. Importantly in this regard, Snyder-Young attends not just to moments of *communitas*, but also to the *limits* of community, giving an account of the social and

cultural factors that localize and condition the spectator–performer dynamics to occasion distance rather than proximity.

These treatments of censorship, political correctness, the diagnostic and community building variously serve to remind us of the critical care needed with respect to concepts, theories, ideas or approaches as adopted and practised in our field of scholarship. Brought together in this issue of *TRI*, the articles evidence the vital signs of a healthy, diagnostic (problem-solving) body of theatre and performance criticism.

## NOTES

- 1 See the book of conference abstracts, *Silent Voices Forbidden Lives*, 'Theme' (2009), p. 7.
- 2 Janelle Reinelt, 'The Limits of Censorship', *Theatre Research International*, 32, 1 (March 2007), pp. 3–15, here p. 3.