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Introduction: Theater and Community. Poetics, Politics, Performances

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In the context of a series of political, epidemiological, environmental, and resource-related crises, the term *community* has frequently been evoked over the past decade in everyday language, political debate, activist discourse, and corporate communication. It has been used to appeal to an existing sense of commonality or, respectively, to bring such a sense of commonality about. It has been evoked in reference to issues of "direct common concern" as well as to "forms of common organization, which may or may not adequately express common concern" (Williams 76). For some it conveys notions of support, understanding, and belonging; for others it signals the potential for homogenization, normativity, and repression. On this score, it has functioned to bring people together, to rally them to joint action and solidarity, but also to divide and polarize them into opposing camps. The arguments over the meanings of the European Union in the context of Brexit and Russia's attack on Ukraine are cases in point, as are the numerous debates over the distribution of resources in the context of the most recent pandemic, energy crisis, and global mass migration. Particularly in the face of alleged shortage, questions of belonging and non-belonging tend to be vehemently contested, defended, and negotiated. As cultural critic Raymond Williams observes: "Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships" (76).

While *community* tends to evoke positive connotations – Williams observes that "unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (76) –, it also, as theater scholar Emine Fişek cautions, "conceals as much as it reveals" (5). Fişek therefore pertinently asks:

> Does the concept of community imply, or even demand, commonality? In what ways do communities accommodate difference? [. . .] Is community inherently liberating? How do we respond to calls for community when they are associated with corporate capitalism, for instance, and aim to cultivate certain consumer practices? (5)

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Social, political, and philosophical scholarship has approached these and related questions from a variety of angles, many of which are taken up in the contributions to this volume. The focus of this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* is, specifically, on how these questions have been engaged with in dramatic performances of the past twenty-five years and the answers that have been developed in the process.

As a medium and genre emerging from and designed for public performances in a shared space and with a long history of civic engagement behind them, theater and drama seem to be uniquely positioned to (re-)build consensus and negotiate the common ground from which constructive solutions to the increasing divisiveness and polarization between and within social groups, cultures, and nations can spring. Accordingly, in this special issue, we are interested in the various formal and performative strategies with which contemporary dramatic performances attempt to obtain the basic agreement on a sense of commonality and mutual interest required for social cohesion and collective action. Yet, since consensus and common ground are by definition exclusive and exclusionary and furthermore of a pragmatic, temporary, and unstable nature, we do not presume that theater performances are intrinsically conducive to community-building efforts (as some scholars, such as Jill Dolan, hold). Rather, we aim to inquire about the concrete politics at work in building, contesting, and negotiating senses of community in the theater. Who benefits from evocations of community, and at what cost is commonality brought about? What are its boundaries, and how do they shift? How do recent performances address the relationship between outside and inside as well as between the collective and its individuals? Moreover, how do they partake in what Jacques Rancière refers to as the "distribution of the sensible" (*Politics of Aesthetics* 8), that is, in staking out what can be said, seen, heard, and felt as well as what remains outside the field of perception? In short, the goal of this collection of essays is to examine very closely the various formal and performative ways in which contemporary dramatic performances evoke and trouble notions of community but also attempt to conceptualize alternative forms of commonality. For this purpose, we bring together an international group of scholars, artists, and practitioners who explore the complex relationship between theater and community from a variety of theoretical and analytical angles, including conceptual queries about the nature, benefits, and risks of community building; about publics, audiences, and identity politics; also extending to considerations of textual poetics and theatrical practice.

To be sure, these questions about the cultural role and social relevance of theater are not new. In her introductory study *Theatre & Community*, Fişek points out that due to its inherently communal structures of production, performance, and reception, theater has a long history of engaging with notions of community and ideals of commonality. Theater history is "filled with dramatic material that treats

collectivity as a key thematic concern," but, then again, it is also "rife with self-consciousness around the practical experience of collectivity" (47). On that note, Fişek identifies three key tensions at the heart of theater's negotiation of issues of community: the relation of sameness and difference, of collectivity and identity, and of efficacy and agency – all of which are referenced in the essays of this special issue.

Notions of community are often anchored in a sense of sameness, emphasizing shared cultural, ethnic, or religious belonging, or a shared experience of subjugation, marginalization, and violence. As Fişek points out, in particular theater work advocating for the rights and needs of marginalized groups frequently evokes the idea of "community-as-commonality" (13) in order to bring into focus the specific aspect of individuals' identities targeted by mechanisms of stigmatization and exclusion as well as to amplify the visibility of this shared experience in the public realm. And yet, while the singular focus on what individuals have in common can be politically opportune, it also tends to downplay or even ignore relevant differences between the people grouped together – differences that differentiate and amplify their experience of vulnerability in important ways. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and other scholars remind us, categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality frequently "intersect in shaping structural and political aspects of violence" for Women of Color as well as for other marginalized identities (Crenshaw 1244). In addition to inadequately representing issues of intersectionality, the notion of "community-as-commonality" risks essentializing and, concomitantly, normativizing certain representations of identity. Thanks to its performative nature, theater is uniquely positioned to foreground the constructedness of categories of sameness. Thus, as Fişek shows in a brief historical overview, theater has played an influential role in reflecting and shaping changing notions of "community-as-commonality" – at times by way of troubling dominant conceptions but at other times also by way of consolidating them (23–42).

A related set of questions pertains to the tension between the independence of the individual and the demands of the collective to which they belong. This indeed is a key concern of a number of articles collected here. With Fişek we ask: "Can an individual belong to a collective grouping yet remain self-governing? Or will the collective necessarily overwhelm the individual? At the same time, does the collective have to deny individuality?" (42). Liberal political theory and ideology posit the autonomy and freedom of the individual as a fundamental value. Yet, as critics – and, in particular, critics of neoliberal economy and culture such as Wendy Brown – have observed, this singular focus on the individual tends to foster cultures of self-sufficiency, self-interest, and market competition that are often detrimental to democratic and sustainable forms of sociality as well as to our environment. Conversely, scholars such as Jean-Luc Nancy argue that upholding the value of communal interest over that of the individual entails the risk of creating exclusive and normative

ideals of belonging to be enforced at all costs and, in this regard, also opens the door to totalitarian conceptions of collectivity. Nancy, therefore, envisions an alternative model of sociality, anchored not in demands for identity, harmony, and proximity, but in a shared awareness of one's singular, finite being in "co-appearance" with other singular, finite beings (28). This kind of community consolidates itself spontaneously; it is not the product of work towards a higher purpose or myth and cannot be instrumentalized towards one – it is "inoperative" (31).

In the theater, this push-and-pull between the individual and the collective is further amplified in the act of representation. Through embodiment, the performer can invite forms of identification that "reach beyond [. . .] the individual body on the stage and implicate larger communities" (Fişek 46). Yet, while such aesthetic strategies tend to target the audience collectively, the latter rarely respond as a collective. Some spectators flat-out resist such strategies of interpellation, particularly when they entail damaging stereotypes, and they counter them with an oppositional hermeneutics that reads the stage representation critically and against the grain (hooks). Others, again, in José Esteban Muñoz's words, elect to "disidentify" – that is, to identify only partially and transform toxic forms of representation through acts of appropriation and recycling into "powerful and seductive sites of self-identification" (4). With the term *disidentification*, Muñoz brings into focus a set of "survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). In the end, while theater-makers and theatergoers form a temporary collective by sheer virtue of coming together physically in a shared space for the duration of a performance, they do not necessarily, nor even very frequently, partake in the affective power of what Victor Turner describes as the magical "intersubjective illumination" of spontaneous *communitas*: "this moment when compatible people – friends, congeners – obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level" (48). To be sure, these rare moments can offer fleeting glimpses of utopia, "of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally luminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (Dolan 5). But more likely, so Rancière insists, a theatrical community emerges not based on a shared Elysian feeling but instead on the basis of the joint and collaborative endeavor of individuals, "plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts, and signs that confront or surround them" (*Emancipated Spectator* 16):

> The collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other. This shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals, makes them exchange their in-

> tellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot her own path. (16–17)

Finally, conceptualizations of the relationship of theater and community also entail questions about efficacy and agency. Fişek understands efficacy as a performance's political effectiveness in communicating a group's goals (61), while agency refers to individuals' or a community's ability to participate in and shape the process of creative production undertaken on their behalf (71). These aspects are particularly relevant for theater forms that actively and explicitly engage with the public realm, such as community-based theater, documentary theater, participatory theater, and theater for social change. Yet neither of the two terms is self-evident but entangled in a set of questions: how to effectively convey the concerns of a group while also providing room for individual group members' self-expression? Where to locate efficacy – in a performance's politics, in its aesthetics, or perhaps in both? Can an overt political agenda make for good art? Since one can hardly presume a direct causality between theater-makers' intentions and spectators' reactions, how to measure a performance's effectiveness? Furthermore, how does individual agency relate to the collective agency of the creative team as well as to that of the community presented? While interactive methods of collaborative production – such as devising or a verbatim approach – foreground the voice and agency of the individual, editorial choices of selecting, framing, and casting, along with company concerns over funding and venues of performance, frequently reveal the limits of individual just as much as communal agency in the collective endeavor. In the end, agency is contingent on a number of factors and efficacy might manifest itself in paradoxical ways (Fişek 71, 62). Still, as Fişek insists with Judith Butler, in its embodied presence the very assembly of theater-makers and theatergoers in a public space "enacts a *claim*, whether or not this declaration is ultimately vocalized in a coherent and collective form" (Fişek 79); it asserts its "plural and performative right to appear" (Butler 11). On this score, theatrical performance can constitute, in Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's words, a "performative commons" – a lively, ever-changing site for the figurative and embodied negotiation of questions of representation and participation.

Thanks to its collective and cooperative nature, theater has "historically been at the center of some of the complexities and paradoxes of ideas of community" (Fişek 24). In this regard, however, it has never been an "exemplary space" but has all along posed difficult and pertinent questions about the nature and dynamics of community (80). We believe that these questions have gained new urgency in the contemporary moment when, in the context of a series of severe crises, *community* is frequently deployed as such a "warmly persuasive word." We had the opportunity to discuss many of them during the 2023 annual conference of the German

Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE) in Erfurt. In this special issue we bring together a selection of articles emerging from these conversations. In keeping with CDE's tradition, our inquiry features contributions from scholars as well as theater practitioners. Together they map the tensional field of theater and community, highlighting the productive values as well as the risks of evocations of community. Though varying in their assessment, these essays agree on the unique affordance of theater to experimentally address, negotiate, and self-critically reflect the complex dynamics inherent in the nexus of theater and community. They understand theater's primary function as opening up discussion rather than promoting reductive answers.

Approaching the nexus of theater and community from very different theoretical angles, the contributions by Nassim Winnie Balestrini and Martin Middeke fittingly open up the broad spectrum of responses offered by dramatic performance. In "Sensing a Twenty-First-Century Commons in the Theater: Relationality in a Climate of Distrust and Destruction," Balestrini draws on Dillon's notion of the performative commons along with recent considerations of activist strategies of "commoning" (such as by Peter Linebaugh, David Bollier, and Silke Helfrich) to highlight and conceptualize a prominent turn in contemporary community, amateur, and professional theater that foregrounds networks of relationality, a pedagogy of solidarity, and strategies of sustainability. She finds this "growing engagement in envisioning or realizing heterarchical ways of living with the common good in mind" prominently articulated in recent eco-drama and climate-change theater, which, due to the nature of their subject, tend to emphasize planetary and decolonial perspectives along with a relational and cooperative ethos. Drawing on the large corpus of short plays produced in the context of the global, biannual theater festival Climate Change Theatre Action, which since 2015 has been synchronized with the United Nations Conferences of the Parties (COP) climate conferences, Balestrini reads these works as not only enacting commons in their own creative process and performance aesthetics but also as contributing to "potentially insurgent commons-based engagement and thinking" in the world beyond the stage.

While Balestrini's article zooms in on the productive aspects of community, Middeke, in his article "The Inoperative Community in Twenty-First-Century British Theatre," focuses on the fissures, breaks, and negative potentials also inherent in it. Drawing on Nancy's concept of the inoperative community and Giorgio Agamben's notion of a coming community, Middeke shows how contemporary British playwrights Inua Ellams, Travis Alabanza, and Martin Crimp deconstruct traditional concepts of community anchored in ideas about identity and unity and oppose them with alternative models "marked by a shift to singularity, by an openness to the Other, by fluid dramatic/theatrical/linguistic structures that challenge traditional normative and exclusionary practices and borders." Ellams's *Barber Shop*

Chronicles (2017), Alabanza's *Sound of the Underground* (2023), and Crimp's *Not One of These People* (2022) enact these "inoperative" community models in their very performative aesthetics. Middeke reads them as exemplary for "the ethical as well as the aesthetic programme of much British theatre in the twenty-first century."

In their article "The Poetics and Politics of We-Narration on the Contemporary British Stage," Dorothee Birke and Janine Hauthal also engage the tension between singularity and collectivity. Taking their cue from recent narratological studies of we-narratives in prose fiction, they uncover a proliferation of "intriguing varieties of we-narratives" in drama, which they conceptualize as "neochoric play" and as "postdramatic polylogue." Both forms are decidedly performative. They do not merely represent a collective entity but "also forge one in and through performance." Moreover, they "frequently unsettle the conventional identification of one voice with one body" and thus are particularly suited to charting the dynamics between individual and collective on stage as well as between stage and audience "in ways that assert, but also interrogate, the potential for community building in the shared space of the theatre."

With her essay "'You Are Alone': Singularity, Community, and the Possibility of Solidarity in Slavoj Žižek's *The Three Lives of Antigone*," Mona Becker contributes the perspective of a scholar-practitioner to the discussion of dramatic conceptualization and performative negotiations of issues of singularity and collectivity. As a dramaturg for the Belgian theater company AGORA, she was directly involved with staging Slavoj Žižek's provocative adaptation of Sophocles's primary dramatic assertion of singularity. Becker traces the complex tensions between the individual and the collective, as well as the singular and the public at the heart of Sophocles's text and shows how they are even further amplified in Žižek's *The Three Lives of Antigone* (2016), particularly by presenting two alternative endings, including one where both Antigone and Creon are killed by the chorus. Discussing various performative strategies used by the ensemble, Becker details how their 2020 production "successfully bridged the divide between the singular individual and the community suggested by Sophocles's and questioned by Žižek's versions of the myth."

We follow up with a group of articles focusing on the dynamics between the theater, its audiences, and the public. In "Community and Manipulation in the 'Parallel Worlds' of Tim Crouch," Ondřej Pilný discusses Tim Crouch's interest in the manipulative aspects of community formation, which the British playwright experimentally examines in *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (2019) and *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel* (2022), both conceived as "'parallel worlds' to be measured against the present world of crisis." Pilný argues that Crouch's highly self-reflective metatheatrical work, which includes both overt and more subtle moments of audience manipulation, "explore[s] in practice" both Rancière's ideas of emancipated spectatorship and Nancy's insistence that communities must

remain inoperative, resistant to venerating any sacred power – including that of the playwright and that of live theater.

In his contribution "Dissensual Performances of Race and Community in Claudia Rankine's *The White Card* and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*," Frank Obenland takes up the question as to what extent the institutional whiteness of Western theater along with accultured assumptions about race always already structure the theatrical experience of the performers and spectators assembled and thus also shape notions of a *theatrical community*. In a careful analysis of Claudia Rankine's *White Card* and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* (both 2018), Obenland shows how contemporary Black artists effectively use performative techniques to rupture existing frames of perception and to "create a form of theatrical dissensus that fundamentally disrupts how issues of race and racism are rendered tangible in theatrical performances."

Julia Rössler turns to documentary theater to examine the relationship between theater and the public sphere. Drawing on Christopher B. Balme's concept of the theatrical public sphere, she shows how *The Laramie Project* (2000), developed by Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project, via its verbatim approach, captures the complex and highly tensional dynamics of the public sphere that emerged in the wake of the murder of the homosexual student Matthew Shepard. More importantly, Rössler argues, thanks to a variety of dramatic and performative techniques, *The Laramie Project* also succeeds in shaping this public sphere into a space of dialogic encounter and accountability. At the same time, the play metadramatically interrogates and reflects on its own context of emergence, artistic process, and formal methods, thus advocating a model of "critical theater practice" that is both sociopolitically engaged as well as artistically mature and self-reflective.

Adding a second practitioner's view to the forum of voices, we publish an interview with acclaimed playwright Mary Kathryn Nagle, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and the author of fifteen dramas. In plays such as *On the Far End* (2023), *Sovereignty* (2015), *Manahatta* (2013), *Sliver of a Full Moon* (2013), and *Fairly Traceable* (2013), Nagle thematizes the ongoing struggle of Indigenous peoples against settler-colonial violence. She also advocates for the recognition of the sovereignty of their nations, so as to safeguard people, cultures, and environments. As a playwright-activist and practicing attorney, Nagle understands her work in court and theater as questioning, shaping, and changing public narratives of belonging and non-belonging. For her, the notion of community – particularly tribal communities as well as the larger Native community –, while not without tension and contestation, affords cultural continuity, protection, collective survival, as well as individual strength.

The last section of this collection foregrounds the productive potentials of community, while also keeping its pitfalls and ambivalences in mind. In "The Politics of Queer Be-longing and Acts of Hope in Peter McMaster's Solo Performance *A Sea of*

Troubles and Split Britches' 'Zoomie' *Last Gasp (WFH)*," Heidi Lucja Liedke emphatically stresses queer performances' capacity for enacting forms of "queer be-longing" that allow for queer being in – "and, sometimes, 'slightly above'" (Dolan 5) – the present, "despite being placed in an environment that offers primarily discomfort." Using the examples of British performer Peter McMaster's *A Sea of Troubles* (2019) and the US-based performance duo Split Britches' *Last Gasp (WFH)* (2020), Liedke reads these autofictional performances as "acts of hope" that dismantle repressive and exclusionary heteronormative and patriarchal scripts and invite reflection on what more hopeful communal narratives might look like. Drawing on Dolan's concept of utopia in performance and Zygmunt Bauman's retrotopia, Liedke here underlines the future-oriented potential of queer performance in producing more inclusive and tolerant models of community.

In her article "Queer Hope in Working-Class Performance: Scottee's *Bravado* and *Class*," Amy Terry also asserts the hope-affording potential of queer performance but stresses how intersectional facets, such as a queer working-class identity, might complicate assertions of queer be-longing off stage as well as on stage. British, queer, working-class artist Scottee thematizes the intersectional friction of inclusion and exclusion, identification and alienation not only in the content of their autobiographical solo performances, but also and especially in provocative interactions with their audiences – both the predominantly middle-class audience of traditional theater venues as well as the working-class audiences of non-traditional spaces. In Scottee's performances, Terry claims, "queer performance forms are a way of altering and undermining [the] narrative of working classness as a deficit," just as elements of working-class culture challenge and revise dominant narratives of (middle-class) queerness.

In her contribution "'Be Yo'self. It's Just a Show': Performing Community through the Comic Grotesque in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *Neighbors*," Annette J. Saddik adds the critical reflection that communities, in order to avoid stasis and closure, require subversive and potentially destabilizing forces to obtain a sense of self-awareness and self-criticality necessary for openness and change. Saddik argues that by employing techniques of clowning and the comic grotesque, African American playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins "questions the stable notion of 'community,' particularly in terms of racial and historical identity, and exposes the contradictions of closed constructions, creating a space beyond the boundaries of rational discourse that may begin to engage a more complex reality." Subverting fixed communities, in Saddik's reading, in particular through the figure of the clown, creates "a potential space for regeneration and renewal through instability and failure when the stable and the rational have failed."

David Savran's essay "Identity Politics as Lingua Franca?" provides a provocative coda to our forum of inquiries. Taking a transnational and comparative per-

spective on the question of identity politics in the theater, Savran reminds us that terms such as *identity*, *woke*, *diversity*, *political correctness*, or *race*, cannot be easily transferred from one cultural and performance context (including its histories and conventions) to another. In fact, doing so might be prone to failure, as Savran compellingly illustrates in his readings of the Broadway production of Michael R. Jackson's Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning musical *A Strange Loop* (2019) and the Maxim Gorki Theater's English language production of Yael Ronen's *Slippery Slope* (2021). Using identical vocabulary blurs and conflates "deep-seated disjunction[s]" between different historical contexts, cultural settings, and demographics. Specifically, "the terminology of US-style identity politics is especially ill-suited to Germany." What is more, according to Savran, "German theatres are ill-equipped to perform the plays of the most important playwrights working in the US today, a new generation of African American writers, including Jackson, whose work is steeped in the performance traditions of Black American cultures." Performances of identity politics, he concludes, do not speak a "universal language," but rely on an intimate knowledge of histories, contexts, and conventions in order to be effective. In the end, Savran even cautions against an overuse of identity politics in contemporary performance, reminding us of theater's affective potential to move audiences "not as an abstraction but as groups of real people coming together for an ineffable experience" with "unanticipated results."

During our many exchanges at the CDE conference and while preparing this special issue, we noticed that in the convened scholars' arguments, there seem to be two broader tendencies at play. Some evaluate the concept of community as productive, as offering possibilities for finding safety, for sharing narratives, for articulating one's voice as part of a collective, and for asserting one's agency. Others point out the dangers and risks of communities, for instance, their potential for violence as a result of processes of inclusion and exclusion that are constitutive of the concept of community or the fact that enforced sameness or processes of homogenization can become restrictive and pose dangers for democracies. We suggest perceiving these two tendencies as the two ends of a spectrum. In theater as well as in our everyday lives, we negotiate time and again what form and shape the concrete praxis of coming together takes, situating our responses somewhere along this spectrum. The theater, by virtue of its mediality and history, is an excellent place for bringing to the fore the tensions and drawbacks of communities but also for asserting the hope that there is more to our being with each other than simply sharing the same space. Thus, theater strikes us at its best, not when it calls for unity, but when it offers theater-makers and theatergoers the time and place for lively, and even contentious, self-critical debate and reflection.

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Bionote

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