

EDITORIAL

## Endurance



**Figure 1.** Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Jentes Family Courtyard Theater. Set for *Short Shakespeare! Macbeth*, with scenic design by Scott Davis. Photo: © Matthew Gilson, All Rights Reserved.

The ghost light, an illuminated bulb placed center stage in an otherwise darkened theatre, has become one of the most poignant and frequently cited theatrical symbols of the COVID-19 pandemic. Part superstition, part safety measure, the ghost light holds space for absent bodies, living and dead, and anticipates the moment of return, when stage crew, actors, and audience will fill the space once more.<sup>1</sup> Ghost lights have become stars in their own right in recent months, inspiring news stories,<sup>2</sup> academic associations,<sup>3</sup> recirculated photo essays,<sup>4</sup> and, in my home town of Toronto, Ontario, a new company dedicated to providing mentorship and training for theatre artists during lockdown.<sup>5</sup> Matthew Gilson's beautiful 2019 photographs of ghost lights in Chicago theatres grace this issue's cover and interior (see Fig. 1), testifying to the ghost light's power as a symbol of hope and endurance.

The articles gathered in this issue also speak to the power and pain of endurance, while offering glimmers of hope. Although written well before any of us knew what 2020 would bring, in their documentation of past lives and theatrical moments,

they remind us of the persistence of performance, of its capacity to linger long after the crowds have disappeared.

In “Katherine Dunham’s Global Method and the Embodied Politics of Dance’s Everyday,” Harmony Bench and Kate Elswit meticulously track the global movements of African American dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham as she toured with her company in the 1950s. Drawing on data gathered as part of their digital humanities project, *Dunham’s Data: Katherine Dunham and Digital Methods for Dance Historical Inquiry*, they drill down to the scale of the “everyday” to “understand better the global method necessary for her company’s survival, and how the ongoing pursuit of solvency propelled her, her performers, and her work into the world.” What emerges is an account of a woman in constant motion who endured financial challenges, illness, and a grueling schedule for the sake of the people she employed and the hope of a better life. Bench and Elswit’s account of Dunham’s everyday as a Black artist resonates in new ways in the wake of the most recent Black Lives Matter protests and ongoing public discourse about anti-Black racism and institutional culpability.

Rashna Darius Nicholson writes about a different kind of endurance in “A Christy Minstrel, a Harlequin, or an Ancient Persian”?: Opera, Hindustani Classical Music, and the Origins of the Popular South Asian ‘Musical.’” Here, Nicholson challenges received narratives of the history of Hindustani music by pointing to the influence of Italian opera on performers and musicians as they migrated to Bombay in the mid-nineteenth century and participated in the formation of the “powerful pan-Asian performance phenomenon” known as Parsi theatre. “By citing the formative signifier ‘opera,’” Nicholson asserts, “both Parsi theatre and its numerous, localized South and Southeast Asian imitations capitalized on aesthetic and linguistic associations of high civilization, refinement, and cultural domination within a global entertainment economy.” Opera’s influence endures today in the descendants of Parsi theatre, most notably Bollywood cinema.

The experiences of theatre artists returning to the theatre after a period of devastating loss is the focus of Nick Underwood’s article, “The Yiddish Art Theatre in Paris after the Holocaust, 1944–1950.” Working from rich archival material, Underwood recounts the final July 1945 performance of the Parisian Yiddish Avant-garde Theatre (Parizer yidisher avangard teater / PYAT), an important 1930s Yiddish theatre troupe, and then offers a detailed analysis of the newly formed Yiddish Art Theatre (Yidisher kunst teater / YKUT). For these artists, theatre was essential to the revitalization of Yiddish culture after the horrors of the Holocaust. It gave them an opportunity not only to document and reflect upon their lives during the war but also to carve out a path toward reintegration into “the changing and chaotic postwar French cultural, social, and political landscape.”

Themes of survival and endurance likewise shape Dror Harari’s “What Remains? A Critical Historiography of 1960s–70s Israeli Lost Performance-Based Works.” Zeroing in on the performative turn in Israeli art in the 1960s and 1970s and the concomitant development of performance-related practices, Harari asks why *documented* action and performance works from this period have been excluded, lost, or otherwise overlooked in “the historical memory and historiography of Israeli art.” The answer, Harari suggests, has much to do with art scholars’ initial prejudice against performance art during the 1970s, which has, in turn, informed

subsequent histories of the period. Seeking to redress this historiographic oversight, Harari returns to the personal archives and collections of the artists themselves, where he glimpses long-forgotten performances and faces new challenges. Such archives, he suggests, are “extensions of the artists’ embodied and lived memory—and, therefore, saturated, haphazard, elusive.” Through his conversations with artists like nonagenarian Dov Or Ner, Harari encounters the possibilities as well as the limits of documentation and memory.

Caroline Weist investigates darker elements of memory and endurance in “I’ll wait’: Crip-Queer Temporality and Reproductive Futurism in Musical Adaptations of Dürrenmatt’s *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The Visit of the Old Lady),” tracing the fascinating history of Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s 1956 “tragic comedy,” *Der Besuch der alten Dame*. The play centers on Claire Zahanassian, an elderly billionaire who returns to her bankrupt hometown of Gullen after four decades with revenge on her mind. She proposes to save the town by giving it one of her billions but only on the condition that they kill Alfred, the man who fathered her child and then betrayed her. Drawing on queer and crip theory, Weist analyzes the “tangled temporality” of Dürrenmatt’s play and its three subsequent adaptations, including Kander and Ebb’s 2015 *The Visit: A New Musical*, arguing that “the foundation of Dürrenmatt’s play rests on the usurpation of the Gulleners’ desired timeline by Claire’s unconventional one—a temporality that I contend is inherently crip in a way that is also inherently queer.” However, later adaptations departed from the play’s most subversive aspects, “curtail[ing] the perceived physical, sexual, and temporal excesses of the protagonist to fit the conventional genre” of the musical. Underlying Weist’s sophisticated reading are two important questions: What endures through adaptation? What is lost?

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*A final note:* This issue marks the end of my tenure as Editor, and so I would like to take this opportunity to thank the wonderful people who have supported me on this journey: Holly O’Neill and Jonathan Geffner at Cambridge University Press; Associate Editor (soon to be Editor!) Brandi Wilkins Catanese; Book Review Editors Erika T. Lin and Donovan Sherman; Assistant Editor Shannon Hughes; and copyeditor extraordinaire Michael Gnat. Thanks as well to the members of the *Theatre Survey* Editorial Board and to the members of the ASTR Publications Committee, led by two dynamic Vice Presidents for Publications, Esther Kim Lee and Dorothy Chansky.

It has been a tremendous honor to edit *Theatre Survey* these past two years, and although the world around us looks very different from the world when I started my journey, I draw hope from the image of the ghost light and the many performances that continue online. I also recognize the crucial work that lies ahead for scholars like me—a white, middle-class, cis-gender Canadian—as we contend with our complicity in white supremacist structures and cultural arenas, including academic journals. I have been fortunate in these past two years to have had a colleague like Brandi Wilkins Catanese, who has offered thoughtful corrections at important moments. I am grateful for her patience, advice, and collegiality, and am thrilled to be passing the journal into her very capable hands. I trust that *Theatre Survey* and the community it serves will be the better for it.

## Notes

- 1 Lindsey Wilson, "Why Do Broadway Theatres Keep a 'Ghost Light' Burning on the Stage?," 19 September 2008, [www.playbill.com/article/ask-playbillcom-the-ghost-light-com-153440](http://www.playbill.com/article/ask-playbillcom-the-ghost-light-com-153440), accessed 24 May 2020.
- 2 Katie Daubs, "A 'Ghost Light' Has Brightened the Stage for More than a Month at the Royal Alex, as Theatre Faces Its Second Pandemic," *Toronto Star*, 26 April 2020, [www.thestar.com/news/insight/2020/04/26/a-ghost-light-has-brightened-the-stage-for-a-month-at-the-royal-alex-as-theatre-faces-its-second-pandemic.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2020/04/26/a-ghost-light-has-brightened-the-stage-for-a-month-at-the-royal-alex-as-theatre-faces-its-second-pandemic.html), accessed 24 May 2020.
- 3 Erin Hurley, "CATR Coronavirus Response," email communication, 9 May 2020.
- 4 Matthew Gilson, "Leave the Light On," *Chicago Reader*, 29 March 2019, [www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/leave-the-light-on/Content?oid=69284812](http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/leave-the-light-on/Content?oid=69284812), accessed 24 May 2020.
- 5 Glenn Sumi, "Meet the Bright Lights Behind Theatre Mentorship Platform GhostLight," *Now*, 4 May 2020, <https://nowtoronto.com/lifestyle/education/ghostlight-theatre-mentorship-graham-abbey/>, accessed 24 May 2020.