Editorial Comment: Possible Worlds

Joanne Tompkins

Theatre Journal, Volume 67, Number 4, December 2015, pp. ix-xii (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/tj.2015.0140

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tj/summary/v067/67.4.tompkins.html
Editorial Comment: Possible Worlds

This special issue emerged from my own interests in the multiple intersections between geography and theatre: the many ways in which space, place, and location shape and affect how we attend, observe, interpret, produce, and even archive theatre and performance. Theatre being a spatial medium is one of the fundamental elements of the discipline, and we teach our students that theatre has always had a relationship with geography, fashioned by where it takes place, whether that be its location within a town or city or the venue in which it occurs, and how space transforms through the generation of a realized (or imagined) set/location onstage. Recent critical attention to space and geography (for example, by proponents of site-specific performance and by multimedia performance) has helped to articulate further the detail of location in theatre and performance. The book review essay in this volume, “Performance and the Spatial Turn” by Fiona Wilkie, draws attention to the “spatial turn” in recent publishing in the field as she explores some of the provocative ways in which space and place matter to theatre and performance. There is, of course, much more to theatre’s spatial context than we are often able to acknowledge in critical analysis. This special issue provides an opportunity to think through some of the implications in one aspect of spatiality: possible worlds.

When I framed this special issue I imagined possible worlds to account for, among other definitions, alternative geographies; mythic and psychic locations; and zones that may or may not be fixed by geographical coordinates. I anticipated investigations of capital and place; the intersections between marginalized subjectivities and location; and historicized alternative geographies. Multimedia, meanwhile, describes a differently situated “geography of elsewhere.” The essays that form this issue investigate a number of these topics in diverse ways.

Inevitably with a topic that is described by possibility rather than actuality, there are utopian dimensions to several of the essays in this issue, but the authors do not necessarily seek utopian outcomes. They investigate possible and actual worlds that contribute to the shaping of space and place in and through performance. Each essay examines flows between an actual place and “imagined” geographical locations. The essays address the multiple ways in which spaces of possibility are realized (or can be realized) theatrically, even if fleetingly. Each author also makes reference, whether obliquely or directly, to the transformation of urban space: sometimes this transformation is actual, in other examples it is utopian, and in still other cases it is full of potential. This accords with Doreen Massey’s articulation of space as more than a single object. Space, she argues, “is about contemporaneity (rather than temporal convening), it is about openness (rather than inevitability) and it is also about relations, fractures, discontinuities, practices of engagement. And this intrinsic relationality of the spatial is not just a matter of lines on a map; it is a cartography of power.” 1 This is the case whether the space in question is actual or possible.

While Massey argues for the contemporaneity of space, the first essay in this issue, by Michal Kobialka, investigates the lessons learned (and sometimes not learned) from examining historical uses for and transformations of space. In “Possible Worlds of the Pomarańczowa Alternatywa” he explores Poland’s Orange Alternative by invoking other, older possible worlds, such as the period following the Russian Revolution in 1917. His reassessment of the Orange Alternative in the 1980s recounts a range of artistic and performance events that attempted to isolate what a possible world—an alternative to one defined, in the case of Poland, by martial law—might look like. He traces some activities that influenced the Orange Alternative from the early 1980s, and then focuses on the Orange Alternative itself, which operated from 1986 to 1991. Crucially, in reexamining resistant performance from these key moments, he also revisits the prominent theoretical ideas of the time. The “traces of other worlds” that he isolates through, in the first instance, the possibilities that seemed so vast at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall have shifted meaning significantly to suggest very different ways in which to read the potentiality of both possible worlds and actual worlds. Concentrating on praxis, Kobialka argues that a possible world “denies or even betrays its own promises and potentialities unless it is radically and critically examined; instead, it can offer reminders of the forces that were defeated or turned into remainders that are now reconciled with the established system and the status quo.” Far from a pessimistic rereading of history or a conclusion that possible worlds are an impossibly utopian concept, Kobialka retains the potentiality in the possible world’s conceptual frame: a possible world is, he concludes, “a mode of cognition” that enables a collective resistance to a status quo. Its relationship to a landscape may be less geographically placed than anticipated.

The second essay, “A Theatre of Many Dimensions: The Italian New Spectacularity and the Inhabitable Image” by Flora Pitrolo, is also located in a historical moment. She investigates the performance of two Italian companies, La Gaia Scienza (from Rome) and Falso Movimento (from Naples), which operated during the 1970s and ‘80s. These examples of the post-avant-garde and new spectacularity were at the vanguard of experimental Italian performance, interrogating the spatial as much as the visual. Focusing on new spectacularity, Pitrolo takes advantage of Fredric Jameson’s use of postmodern spatialization to argue for what she calls the “inhabitable image.” This involves “a flattening of image and space into a single dimensionality in order to be staged,” and then “a continuous tilting of the angle (a movement akin to looking at a holographic postcard) in order to be spectated.” This inhabitable image combines both the “unreal” and “real” to reach beyond theatre’s usual spatial and perspectival boundaries. The performances that she discusses explored literal worlds, such as basements and rooftops, as well as the intersection of two-dimensional cinematic and the three-dimensional theatrical spatialities, and the opportunities that the televisual realm’s chromakey technology brought into the theatrical environment. In each case the performances attempted to “extend the frame of representation, or to multiply the frames within which a given theatrical action, theatrical image, or theatrical discourse was placed” in order to subvert “the geometrical rules, the perceptual reality, and the function of everyday spaces.” The possible worlds that Pitrolo isolates were utopian ones that, in their links to the “real” world, provided a realistic, inhabited means of rethinking space, place, and architecture.

Susan Haedicke’s essay relocates the (historical) urban focus that characterizes the first two essays into the contemporary moment. In “Co-Performances of Bodies and
Buildings: Compagnie Willi Dorner’s *Bodies in Urban Spaces* and fitting and Asphalt Piloten’s *Around the Block* she examines how a rethinking of urban space can generate new possible worlds. Austrian-based Compagnie Willi Dorner and Swiss-based Asphalt Piloten both insert the human body into an urban context in a more obvious and disruptive way than our quotidian navigations of a city tend to achieve. The former deploys numerous actors in brightly colored clothing to “occupy” doorways, road signs, fences, and city streets briefly, in ways that accentuate the actors’ “throwntogetherness” (to use Massey’s phrase) in the city; while the latter company performs brief dance routines that are projected high on the tops of city buildings. The companies’ performances enable spectators to rethink not just urban space, but also the larger social context. Using the work of Laura Levin, Tim Ingold, and Jacques Rancière, she argues for a contemporary form of Situationist détournement. Like Pitrolo’s essay, Haedicke’s investigation of the urban world interrogates architecture in the context of performance: architecture as performer, as setting, and as political statement. The performance provides the means for “a collaboration between people and architecture, with communication going both ways.” She skillfully situates the street theatre of Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten among other companies around Europe that also encourage participants to understand the urban ecology in a very different means than usual. Through these performances utopia may give way to a bleaker reality, but they also elicit the potential of a possible world if participants take up the challenge of “writing the urban spatial stories in which we want to dwell.”

The final essay moves away from the urban context in Europe that circumscribes the first three essays to explore a very different formulation of geography and landscape. Christine Evans’s “Drones, Projections and Ghosts: Restaging Virtual War in *Grounded* and *You Are Dead. You Are Here.*” relocates performance to a landscape of war that is politically and historically specific, but that reimagines the spatial in several different dimensions. Evans uses George Brant’s play *Grounded* and her own *You Are Dead. You Are Here.* to explore compromised landscapes in a technological world of war. *Grounded* takes place in the Nevada desert, where drones are sent to Afghanistan, but it also inhabits, via the main character’s engagement with her computer console, the country where those drones land, explode, and kill—Afghanistan. This character, known as The Pilot, experiences an extension of and shift in her psychic geography through the play’s performance of its essential locations. *You Are Dead. You Are Here.* focuses on a US Iraq War veteran, Michael, whose posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is being treated by an immersive tool that incorporates war video-game technology. His story intersects with the video blog of a young Fallujah teenage girl, Zaynab. Outside the context of theatre, the technology for the Virtual Iraq visualization project assists actual veterans in overcoming PTSD in the first instance; its incorporation into Evans’s play is a further function for it. This technology presents a different form of a possible world through which we can approach the topics of war, place, displacement, and, for some veterans, the possibility of recovery, among many other topics. Evans’s essay articulates “distance” in a different way than one normally measures how long it takes to get from one geographical point to another. The future for spatiality in theatre and performance may reject conventional mapping tools altogether.

Immersive, interactive performance can considerably alter what we mean by possible worlds and the perceptions of performance itself, as Evans’s essay explores. In an extension of these ideas Sarah Bay-Cheng’s performance review essay “Virtual Realisms: Dramatic Forays into the Future” addresses the possible worlds of theatre itself
as a discipline, via an in-depth analysis of Jennifer Haley’s play *The Nether* and Anne Washburn’s *Mr Burns: A Post-Electric Play*. In a useful way Bay-Cheng makes clear that the future of virtual reality (or virtual realisms) is grounded in the past in, among other traditions, Antonin Artaud’s work during the first half of the twentieth century.

Contemporary current events signal yet another way of understanding possible worlds: this special issue was put together against repeated media images of waves of migrants trying to reach Europe from northern Africa and various parts of the Middle East and Asia. Too many did not survive the journey. Migrants seek a better, safer possible world; the kindness of many Europeans who greeted them suggests the potential for just that, while exclusionist policies and borders still tend to frame our geographies. Three of the essays in this issue concentrate on European urban contexts: reading them against this contemporary backdrop extends their reach even further.

Finally, Evans notes that *You Are Dead. You Are Here.* is a play of “unfinished spaces.” This is a characteristic of the examples discussed in all four of the essays herein, a feature that could be said to describe possible worlds itself. While unfinished, possible worlds appear to be somewhat defined, not necessarily unbounded free space. They are, however, not always framed by conventional geographical referents. A special issue is itself an unfinished space: there are many aspects of a topic that cannot be accommodated between the bounds of a journal’s covers. There is much more to be done to map (using whatever tools are relevant) some of the detail of the possibilities of worlds beyond the urban, the metropolitan, and the actual, incorporating the “space” of databases, the space of capital, and space in the context of time.

This issue marks the end of Ric Knowles’s tenure as editor of *Theatre Journal*. I have been guided by his extensive knowledge, wise advice, keen sense of fairness, and overwhelming desire to assist contributors in improving the quality of their writing. I thank him very much for his exemplary editorship of this journal, and for encouraging me to work with him on it. I welcome Jennifer Parker-Starbuck as coeditor, and I very much look forward to continuing to work with her over the next two years.

—Joanne Tompkins