

Editorial: Behind the Scenes

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One of the pleasures of editing *Theatre Research International* is the opportunity to engage with scholars from different parts of the world about their research. In the past year or so, I have visited several universities in South East Asia, finding out about the practices and ideas people are investigating, and how they are doing it. In the process, I have been struck by the alacrity with which ambitious universities in the fast-developing economies of the region – and, I suspect, elsewhere in the world – are embracing the metrics and other criteria required for success in global university rankings exercises. The legitimization, prestige and increased attractiveness to talented staff and students that a good showing in such exercises can bring is presumably an important reason why governments and university administrations see participation as an efficient use of limited resources. However, as anyone with direct experience of rankings-motivated institutional change will be aware, the practical results can be highly disruptive, and their cost can fall disproportionately upon arts and humanities researchers, so much of whose activity remains resistant to easy quantification.

My recent experiences further suggest that these effects may be felt particularly acutely by arts and humanities scholars in aspirational developing-country institutions that are seeking to leap-frog their way to international prominence. There, the speed of change and the need for efficacy mean that a sciences-based paradigm of research productivity is being prioritized over other modes of discovering, communicating and contesting knowledge. Articles in ‘top-ranked journals’ take precedence over monographs, edited volumes and book chapters; conference and research funding applications must meet narrowly defined standards; and otherwise varied and often diffuse impacts are increasingly having to be rephrased in the language of bibliometrics – or else go unheard.

Here is not the place to debate the issues in detail: they are many and complex. But as a journal with an explicitly international remit, it is important to register these developments, and to reflect on how they can be addressed both by scholars working within such regimes, and by those of us located in systems with a more heterodox understanding of what research is. This latter point is particularly important, because one of the ironies of these developments is that the idea of what comprises ‘international’ standards is not, in fact, how many so-called ‘world-class’ institutions operate. Ambitious and budget-conscious university managers may see the quantification of scientific research outputs and impacts as an opportunity to bypass linguistic and cultural barriers and compete globally with major Euro-American institutions. But they fail to recognize not only the social value – and relatively low cost – of local research engagement, but

also the competitive advantage that specialized cultural expertise can carry in disciplines such as theatre and performance studies.

Theatre Research International exists as one of those journals that can help place such research into the international arena. It is not the only means by which this can happen; nor should it be. However, there is no room for false modesty or naivety. The journal offers an exacting reviewing and editorial process so that good-quality research can enter the international conversation. In part, this involves standardizing format, style and reference so that diverse articles from different places can be readily located within a database and a citational network, and have something to say to each other when a reader brings them into dialogue. At the same time, this is not a one-way process. For it is also the duty of a journal like *TRI* to be continuously internationalized by the authors it features, the world-views they bring with them, and the preoccupations of the artists and audiences they investigate.

In their comprehensive and thought-provoking study *Academic Writing in a Global Context: The Politics and Practices of Publishing in English*, Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry analyse the many challenges faced by scholars working outside the anglosphere who nevertheless seek the widest readership for their work. Lillis and Curry examine the whole process of anglophone academic knowledge production, discussing in detail, for instance, the crucial role of academic networks, and of what they call ‘literacy brokers’: the many individuals, often unnamed, who ‘mediate text production’, whether formally (reviewers, editors, proofreaders), or informally (friends, colleagues).¹ The authors go on to propose a series of criteria for evaluating the internationality of a given publication, namely ‘the inclusion of citations to works outside the Anglophone centre and/or in languages other than English; evidence of engagement with research carried out in a range of localities; involvement of editors and reviewers from across all geographic locations; explicit discussion at editorial level about varieties of English and the politics of style’.²

The fact that *TRI* goes some way towards meeting all of these criteria is no reason for complacency. There is always more that can be done in such areas, though only some of it happens at the scale Lillis and Curry outline. ‘Literacy brokering’, and variations thereof, are a large part of the editorial work for a journal such as this one, though it is by no means limited to contributors who are non-native English-language speakers. Moreover, that activity is itself an extension of the complex conceptual and cultural brokering that has already taken place within the research itself. As it happens, all five articles in this issue are the result of authors going behind the scenes to find out more about creative processes or critical response, and elaborating on how this inflects the understanding of public performances. All five draw in one way or another on interviews with artists or audience members. Archival materials feature heavily in David Barnett’s article, and various other kinds of contextualizing information – most consistently on local politics – are provided by authors writing, respectively, about Germany, South Korea, Taiwan, Ghana and Australia. In other words, the articles in this issue exemplify the kinds of culturally attentive, multi-method engagement with complex social and creative circumstances that registers faintly, if at all, in the ‘thin’ internationalism of quantification that informs the global research rankings.

At which point, it behooves me to get a little more specific. In ‘The Rise and Fall of Modelbooks, *Notate* and the Brechtian Method’, David Barnett builds on work he has recently published in his *History of the Berliner Ensemble* (2015, reviewed in the previous issue of this journal) to tell a story of the company’s history as it emerges in its archives and other dramaturgical traces. Barnett examines the extensive production notes and documents created by Brecht, his collaborators and his successors at the Berliner Ensemble, and relates them to the creative process as it changed over the course of more than half a century. Barnett shows how a variety of factors, from changing personnel and tastes to external political and economic circumstances, made an impact on how the company conceived of and presented its work.

The tale Barnett tells is broadly one of creative decline at the Berliner Ensemble as the production documentation became increasingly instrumental or perfunctory. For a more contemporary manifestation of the Brechtian spirit we need to look elsewhere on the international scene. That, at least, is what Hyunshik Ju’s ‘Becoming Hamlet for Only Nine Days’ suggests. Ju examines the intriguing case of *Hamlet for Only Nine Days*, presented in Seoul, South Korea, in 2013 by Vibrating Jelly Theatre Company in collaboration with laid-off workers from Cort Cortec, a guitar manufacturer that had shifted production to China and Indonesia to save on labour costs. The dynamic, dialectical approach to process and performance that Barnett identifies in the early work of the Berliner Ensemble was, as Ju explains it, brought front and centre in the Korean production, which juxtaposed the workers’ presentation of *Hamlet* with documentary material about their long struggle to protest the layoffs, and have them declared a case of wrongful dismissal. By bringing together an account and analysis of the performance with perspectives provided by the participants in interview, Ju elaborates a project of great political, ethical and aesthetic complexity. And while, by all accounts, the performance was not without its limitations, Ju makes a compelling case for its significance as an event that took place squarely at the intersection of different classes, cultural forms, life experiences and economic imperatives.

A similar political dynamic and set of research methods animate Catherine Diamond’s ‘Politicizing the Pastoral’, which draws on performance analysis and artist interviews to trace the complex entanglement of forces underpinning two plays on environmental themes presented by the Taiwanese companies Sun Son and Sanchueyi, in 2014. Diamond’s starting point is the nativist impetus of the ‘Sunflower Movement’, a large-scale student protest triggered by the then-government’s signing of an unpopular trade agreement with the People’s Republic of China. As Diamond shows, the energies of the protest fed into two plays that sought to address questions of over-consumption and environmental degradation – *Mulian Saves Mother Earth* and *The Earth Project* – and yet the persistent association of the idea of a Taiwanese homeland with a romanticized image of pastoral cultivation limited both the political acumen and, arguably, the aesthetic values of the works. As Diamond herself avers, it is sometimes difficult in such cases to identify whether a compromising flaw resides in the characters being depicted, or in the efforts of the artists involved. Diamond concludes on an equivocal note, suggesting that the problems the plays highlighted are at least in part symptomatic of a struggle in Taiwan to find an aesthetic form that can properly welcome, as a popular song has it,

a hopeful new 'island sunrise', while also registering the complexity of post-industrial environmental degradation and the urgency of the problems to which it is giving rise.

Awo Mana Asiedu extends the project of interviewing performance participants in order to thicken an understanding of theatre and its meanings, but in 'The Money Was Real Money' the focus is on processes of reception, rather than production. Asiedu's approach to audience research is at once obvious, and far from as common as it might be. Building on an approach described by Willmar Sauter, she gathered volunteer audience members for a guided conversation about a play they had just watched. The work in question was by Roverman Productions, a Ghanaian company that enjoys enthusiastic support for its professionally produced plays on social themes – in this case, one play about corruption, and one about domestic violence. The performances appeal to an emerging middle class in Ghana, and, along with a monthly publication and radio programme by the same company, promote an aspirational message of moral self-improvement. As Asiedu shows, the audience members she talked with took such messages very seriously, relating the situations depicted in the plays to their own lives and social circumstances in nuanced ways. Asiedu suggests a number of reasons for this, including widespread admiration for Roverman CEO Ebo Whyte. But the care she takes in laying out her research methods highlights the fact that her article is as valuable for what it can tell readers about audience research more generally as for the unique insights it provides into pressing social issues in Ghana and beyond.

The final article, by Lara Stevens, also directs attention to post-performance responses, but in this case they are more distributed in space and time. The title, 'Sometimes Uncomfortable, Sometimes Arousing', comes from an interview Stevens undertook with artist Casey Jenkins, describing her experience of presenting *Casting off My Womb* (2013), a twenty-eight-day durational performance during which she knitted a long scarf from balls of wool inserted into her vagina. The title phrase can also be taken to describe the range of reactions to the work, particularly after a short video, which showed Jenkins knitting through the duration of her menstrual cycle, went viral. It provoked scandalized news items and visceral responses from online commenters. Stevens takes her cue from the disconnect between the slow, careful and resolutely unspectacularized performance, and the 'gut reactions' of the online public. How might one respond to the provocations of the work, she asks, in ways that respect its integrity and give voice to its powerful but understated politics? Stevens's answer resides in part in slowing her own response rate. She allows *Casting off My Womb* to unravel a range of circumstances and contexts which, taken together, comprise, perhaps unexpectedly, a widespread enquiry into speed, matter and politics. Jenkins's work runs as a highly distinctive figure through the weave of Stevens's own thought.

Stevens's exercise in 'slow thinking' about Casey Jenkins's own extended performance might be taken as an unusually explicit manifestation of the patient, careful and, yes, sometimes maddeningly ponderous ways in which so much research is worked out in arts disciplines. By contrast, one of the most striking things about the global research rankings I referred to at the beginning of this editorial has been the rapidity of their rise to prominence in the scholarly landscape: the Academic Ranking of World Universities began in 2003; the Times Higher Education/Quacquarelli Symonds

World University Ranking (run separately from 2010), in 2004. Since then, at least half a dozen others have emerged at the global level, with countless more functioning at the national and regional levels. Competition between the rankings themselves now means that criteria are subject to frequent alteration, leading Ellen Hazelkorn, in her comprehensive book on the phenomenon, to write, 'In many countries, governments and institutions have pursued the world-class university designation without sufficient consideration of the implications – making plans into the future based effectively on a moving methodological target. To me, such actions constitute an abdication of national sovereignty and/or institutional autonomy'.³

Taking time to get the measure of the rankings industry and the broader knowledge economy of which it is symptomatic is something that everyone implicated in the brokering of international research has a stake in. I sense it will be a preoccupation of these editorials for some issues to come. At the same time, the articles and reviews that comprise the body and *raison d'être* of *Theatre Research International* will continue to model an ever more nuanced and deliberative version of what 'international' might properly mean, and to which, citation counts and impact factors notwithstanding, we might usefully aspire.

NOTES

- 1 Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry, *Academic Writing in a Global Context: The Politics and Practices of Publishing in English* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 87.
- 2 Ibid., p. 170.
- 3 Ellen Hazelkorn, *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. xvii.