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Theatre & Performance, Crisis & Survival

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Introduction: Theatre & Performance, Crisis & Survival

By Kim Solga

Only a few years ago, 'crisis of the humanities' might have referred to the long, slow decline in the numbers of university students studying the humanities, or to one or another element of the culture wars—identity politics, poststructuralism, new historicism, cultural studies ... the politics of literary canons. Today, those topics have the feel of another epoch.
Wendy Brown (2011, 283)

'Theatre and performance vs the "crisis in the humanities"' has a very personal origin story.

It was late 2012, and I was working as a Senior Lecturer in Drama at Queen Mary, University of London – pretty much my dream job. My then-husband and I were living in South London, in a neighbourhood that had once been, perhaps, not much to look at (though a happy enough home to immigrants and regular working people) but was now full-on gentrified. We rented a two-bed garden flat that cost more than 75% of my take-home pay. The rest of our finances we cobbled together from J's tech-entrepreneur income. Some months were way up, and some were way down.

So far, so global city. But life at work was also less manageable than I'd imagined it would be. I'd been warned by colleagues that the UK academic system was very different from that in Canada, with a lot more faculty-side administration, HR-driven systems that gave the feel of a 'corporate' university structure, and of course the dreaded REF exercise: the 'Research Excellence Framework' that requires all departments in all UK universities to submit their top research 'outputs' for measurement against one another, in a Game-of-Thrones style competition for league table status and future funding. When I arrived at QM, I was fully aware of all of these fresh challenges, but not prepared for how all-encompassing they would feel, day in and day out.

So this, I realized about three months into the job, is what it feels like to work in the neoliberal university.

Now, seven years on, I'm back in Canada at Western University, in southern Ontario. While we don't yet have a REF to dread, our new provincial government is driving hard to implement quality-measurement tools that will be keyed to university funding around the province in the future. Western is finally emerging from a number of years under a dogmatically STEM- and business-forward administration, and our new president (a theatre scholar!) is one bright light at the end of this tunnel. But things are hardly about to change overnight, if they change at all: the aforementioned provincial government has just delivered punishing budget cuts that have seen my faculty's (Arts & Humanities) part time workforce reduced by over 75%, and morale is the lowest it's been in years. To try to save ourselves, teams of Deans and other senior administrators from Western fly regularly to China, desperate to attract a life-line's worth of foreign-student investment. We continue to 'internationalize' as much as possible, imagining that is the key to our survival.

Welcome to the neoliberal university-as-normal.

The Scope of this Issue

'The discourse of crisis in the humanities persists', as Kathleen Gallagher and Barry Freeman write in their 2016 collection, *In Defence of Theatre* (5). Indeed, it not only persists but has become entirely normalized: as Wendy Brown, Michael Fabricant, and Stephen Brier variously argue, 'humanities education and research' is 'not merely in crisis but in danger of extinction' (Brown 2011, 283), as 'austerity ideology' and crisis discourse are rendered utterly pervasive across public university landscapes around the world (Fabricant and Brier 2016, 4). Scholars, artists, and educators in theatre and performance feel the pressure of crisis-as-normal increasingly acutely as a result of the expendability with which fine arts programs are often regarded within the neoliberal university and its governing logic of austerity (Levin 2016, 161). In the face of a persistent, unrelenting discourse of crisis and austerity, the challenge for us, Patrick Finn argues, is to face 'the steamroller' of data collection, measurement, and data-driven efficiency-modeling within the neoliberal university on our own terms. But, in order to do so, we also need to find creative ways to redefine the terms by which that data – and the university administrators, government officials, and increasingly privatized interests it serves – recognizes us, and understands our contributions to knowledge.

The process of meeting this challenge has been underway for some time, and this issue seeks to document it, however provisionally and partially. My primary goal in curating the work assembled here has been to gather a variety of 'best practices' that, taken individually as models, can assist readers in working toward local change at their own institutions, while taken collectively can represent qualitative evidence of some of our most successful, ongoing adaptations to existing institutional realities in different contexts around the world. Our eleven case studies are especially trained on this work of process-modeling; they include reflections on deploying theatre and performance paradigms in a variety of collaborative education contexts both inside and outside the university-as-institution. Among our case studies readers will find: discussions of working through theatre to support language learning and cross-cultural understanding with vulnerable populations in Indigenous, migrant, and second-language contexts (Sadeghi-Yekta; Kandil and te Bokkel; Santucci); examples of working effectively with science-side colleagues on collaborations at home and abroad (Cahill and Warwick; Dorsey; Gray and Kontos); creative examples of deploying theatre as a critical tool to examine the shortcomings of neoliberal university culture from within (Hatton; Dar, Inchley and Pujara), and inspiring reflections on surviving the neoliberal normal in both teaching and administration, using the principals behind theatre and performance education and training as a guiding ethic (Shawyer; Low and Damian Martin; Kilburn).

Of course, making life inside the neoliberal university work for us, or at least not work quite so hard *against* us, is inevitably a process of lying down with the lions (at least part of the time). But this need not be a deal-breaker. As Michael McKinnie (2017) and Jen Harvie (2013) have both separately argued, building on foundational meta-disciplinary work by Shannon Jackson

(2004), theatre and performance have always occupied enviably precarious positions vis-à-vis institutionality. They are imbricated within institutional paradigms (from grammar school through to university curricula, to national theatre spaces and government-granting agencies), and yet work regularly in tension with, or even openly against, those paradigms as essential forms of social critique. While this issue takes seriously the blunt, often painful reality of higher education in theatre and performance driven by neoliberal practices in 'globalized' economies, we also share here initiatives that ride this precarious institutional line, for better *and* sometimes for worse.

Can theatre and performance find ways to be *instrumental to* the neoliberal university, without fully becoming *instrumentalized by* it? Can we embed systemic critique into the work we do on behalf of our individual education systems, even as we draw on the resources those systems have to offer? These foundational questions motivate in particular our article selections, which document several potential interventions that provide both valuable cautions, and real scope for hope. Asif Majid and Nkululeko Sibanda open this section of the issue, tracing work at Georgetown University's Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics, and in the theatre arts departments at the University of Zimbabwe and Great Zimbabwe University respectively. They each discuss choices and practices within their focus institutions that have successfully taken advantage of neoliberal paradigms to advance theatre making and education, as well as those that have fallen short and placed important performance labour and theatre pedagogy at risk. Next, Hillary Miller and Richard Windeyer invite us to speculate on pedagogical formations that can help us to make a virtue of austerity normal, precisely by inviting students' increased critical reflection on conditions of precarity. Windeyer imagines a "black box" classroom that uses theatre to model embodied investigations into the practices of big data collection and dissemination, while Miller argues for the intellectual value and pedagogical urgency of incorporating TV writing by playwrights into our theatre criticism classrooms. Closing this section of the issue are two extended case studies of Applied Theatre practices deployed in cross-disciplinary contexts: Linda Taylor reports on 'Operations of Dialogue', a theatre-based tool she has developed to advance critical citizenship development for undergraduate students in Northern England, while Bridget Horner and Miranda Young-Jahangeer share a remarkable collaboration between Applied Theatre and Architecture scholars in Durban, South Africa – one that both yielded an important material community intervention and went some distance toward challenging received, hierarchical norms in Architecture education.

Neoliberalism and the Neoliberal University

Neoliberalism is a term we all know now, and one we frequently invoke in frustration. Often we use it vaguely; its ubiquity has arrived at the expense of precision. I offer two glosses on the term here, one that roots neoliberalism in supply-side economics, and another that moves us helpfully beyond.

In *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, Jen Harvie writes:

Neoliberalism is the revived form of liberalism which thrived first in Britain in the seventeenth century and which recognizes and prioritizes the individual's right to seek self-fulfilment and to do so in conditions unrestricted by state-instituted regulations, such as the requirements to pay appropriate taxes, to heed trade restrictions or to observe employment laws pertaining to hiring, firing and paying workers. In neoliberal capitalism, these principles of diminished state intervention and enhanced individual liberty to seek self-reward work in the service of maximizing private profit. Simultaneously, the welfare state is diminished as taxation shrinks and government 'intervention' – which in some contexts might instead be seen as support, for example of workers' rights – is rolled back. (2013, 12)

Harvie's brief history articulates key links between classical liberalism (the seventeenth-century economic model) and neoliberalism: a focus on individual rights and freedoms, especially the freedom to amass and retain capital, argues against state interventions that might in any way curb those freedoms. For Wendy Brown, however, neoliberalism's central social intervention lies precisely in the way it erodes, quietly but powerfully, the central distinctions between economic market and liberal democratic state on which classical liberalism ultimately depends. In 'Neoliberalized Knowledge' (2011), Brown writes:

... more than economic policy, neoliberalism is a governing social and political rationality that submits all human activities, values, institutions, and practices to market principles. It formulates everything in terms of capital investment and appreciation (including and especially humans themselves) ... As a governing rationality, neoliberalism extends from the management of the state itself to the soul of the subject; it renders health, education, transportation, nature, and art into individual consumer goods, and converts patients, students, drivers, athletes, and museum-goers alike into entrepreneurs of their own needs and desires who consumer or invest in these goods. (288)

Thus, Brown argues, neoliberalism is far more than an economic model. *It is a socio-political system based on the privatization of public goods, and indeed on the eradication of the very notion of the public good* (288). Unlike the Enlightenment liberal model, which was based on a recognition of the essential difference, the guiding tension, between an 'inegalitarian and undemocratic' capital market and 'a liberal democratic political and legal order minimally committed to equal access, shared power, and a common good' (289), neoliberalism purposefully disguises and then erodes that difference, generating a system in which 'The market is not merely secured by liberal democracy ... but comes to govern the institutions and practices of "democracy" and to exhaust its meaning' (289).

For this reason, the neoliberal *university* is, arguably, the system's lynchpin. Education – knowledge production and dissemination, learning for the sake of learning, learning as central to the development and maintenance of robust liberal democracy – is *the* public good par excellence, and thus the privatization of education, its reformation into a model of skills training aimed at individual student-consumers rather than at a community of concerned citizens, is the best means neoliberalism has to guarantee its own future.

Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier unpack the creative destruction of higher education under neoliberalism in their 2016 book, *Austerity Blues*. A deep dive into the making and key characteristics of the neoliberal university in the United States (whose public university system, now constantly under siege, was once the canary in the coal mine), *Austerity Blues* charts the process through which 'neoliberal ideology has seeped into the governance and practices of most public agencies, where it has borrowed strategies from the business sector that focus on efficiency, increased productivity, and metrics of accountability and measurable outcomes' (91). Austerity, aligned with the goal / panacea of privatization, controls this shift toward business-side management, and in the process 'the culture of public agencies' changes rapidly. This is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the university sector.

Neoliberal governance models, applied to public university management, have wrought a range of painful outcomes already, as Fabricant and Brier chronicle. 'Public disinvestment in public higher education has affected the quality and conditions of learning. It has resulted in the rationing of high-demand courses, major disruptions and delays in degree completion and time to degree, overcrowded classrooms, decayed physical plants, and a rapid expansion in the number of part-time faculty' (93). Neoliberal universities – again, as the engine of entrenchment for a fully normalized neoliberal worldview, a guarantor of neoliberalism's futurity – must be less and less funded by government; this translates to increasingly heavy fiscal reliance on tuition dollars and debt management, driving the price of education up and building all kinds of inequalities into a system that was originally designed to ameliorate class-based difference (117-40). In step, reliance on part-time, just-in-time, precariously employed and compensated instructors grows, while administrators are compensated increasingly exorbitantly for meeting market-driven success measures – effectively, for managing the delicate balance of raising tuition not-too-much, while taking on just enough debt to keep things floating (155). Meanwhile, students are treated (and encouraged to view themselves) as consumers – as 'disposable citizens' (114) – while university leaders seek more and more opportunities to locate and exploit 'new sites of profit making' within the university proper, turning public knowledge fully into private commodity.

Performance as Critical Paradigm

What is to be done? Brown asks this question of her own essay; her response strikes me as thrilling, but utopian: 'the challenge facing humanists today is to persuade the public that our worth lies apart from science and the market and that this elsewhere is one that a democracy, a self-governing or even self-regarding people, cannot do without' (294).

I sympathize very much with this call to action, yet it seems too easily undone. How is such an account of ourselves to be made, within the terms set out today by the neoliberalization of everything? Will the governing framework not quickly and persuasively argue that we are working with outmoded models, behind the times in our thinking and planning?

If neoliberalism is no single thing, not just an economic model but a socio-political system, a paradigm for organizing human living, perhaps the tools to combat it will need to be paradigmatic, too.

In the interview that opens this issue, Natalie Alvarez offers us a window onto what it would look like to deploy performance as just such a tool – as a ‘mobile critical paradigm’ (Gallagher and Freeman 2016, 9, citing Levin 2016), a methodological framework for rethinking the shape of our world as we have come, disappointedly and fatiguedly, to expect it. Drawing on the now-long history of performance studies as an ‘interdiscipline’, a broad-spectrum tool rather than a discrete aesthetic event, Alvarez shares her experience as a performance scholar and educator leading a large, interdisciplinary team of social scientists, health clinicians, Applied Theatre practitioners, and police officers in a mental health crisis intervention training project in the Toronto area.

We might be tempted, in the anxiety produced by relentless austerity ideology, to imagine that this project is just another example of performance being ‘instrumentalized’ for the good of other disciplines, or in the service of the neoliberalized state, always terrified of insecurity. Challenging such an assumption head-on, Alvarez instead reflects on the ways in which the centering of performance at the heart of the project she is leading has already powerfully affected both the other academic disciplines and the public disciplinary practices the project touches.

Alvarez reminds us that we, too, have a powerful paradigm at our disposal in the fight to save our public institutions, our very democracies. Performance at its best is both art and system, both product and tool. A labour of love, and a weapon of war.

It’s time to deploy.

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