

Introduction: Local Acts: Performing Communities, Performing Americas

by Jocelyn L. Buckner
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This American Theatre and Drama Society special issue of *JADT* features four essays that explore what “local” performance means across very different community contexts. Throughout the Americas, communities generate and are informed by performance in ways that reveal, challenge, and strengthen shared understanding about the identity of the local. Performance plays a role in articulating a collective representation of self not only to local residents, but perhaps also to communities outside the realm of the art work’s place of origin.

The call for papers for this issue was inspired in part by Jan Cohen-Cruz’s *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*[\[1\]](#). Cohen-Cruz explains that in community-based productions, members of a community are “a primary source of the text, possibly of performers as well, and definitely a goodly portion of the audience ... Community-based performance relies on artists guiding the creation of original work or material adapted to, and with people with a primary relationship to the content, not necessarily to the craft” (2). This special issue builds upon Cohen-Cruz’s work to further explore the significance and influence of local and community-based performances, both past and present, across the Americas.

This collection not only illuminates performance practices in specific locales by particular constituents; it also creates connections between studies of community performance and other methodologies and theories of theatre and performance studies. The five authors featured here consider performances in artistic residencies, immigrant communities, localized eco-tourism, and indigenous-language theatre. These pieces highlight culturally specific work generated at the local level, advance the argument for studies focused on performance tuned to community rather than commercial appeal, and draw correlations to larger social and artistic phenomena in the process.

In “The Architecture of Local Performance: Stages of the Taliesin Fellowship,” Claudia Wilsch Case explores the local and regional impact of performances by members of Frank Lloyd Wright’s residential apprenticeship program. The Taliesin Fellowship encouraged its participants in a range of creative endeavors. Its amateur public performances developed into a popular attraction for local residents hungry for artistic experiences. Case provides detailed analysis of the apprentices’ early concerts and skits alongside film screenings from the 1930s, tracing the development of physical movement pieces inspired by Eastern mystic Georges Gurdjieff in the 1950s which, by the 1960s, had evolved into original dance dramas written and choreographed by Wright’s daughter, Iovanna Lloyd Wright. Case argues that the performances occurring at Taliesin and Taliesin West from the 1930s to the 1970s exemplified the Fellowship’s role in remapping the American cultural landscape. By privileging work developed locally, rather than dispatched from larger cultural centers such as New York, Case illustrates how the Taliesin Fellowship cultivated area audiences’ appreciation for locally crafted performances, reinforcing community ties while also priming them for the US regional theatre movement.

Sarah Campbell advocates for a multi-faceted approach to studying Maya theatre in the Yucatán peninsula, arguing that it is often perceived as insignificant due to how it has been treated in scholarship. In “La conjura de Xinum’ and Language Revitalization: Understanding Maya Agency through Theatre” Campbell considers Maya language theatre as an “art world,” defined as a system of interconnected participants determining the reception and influencing the significance of a piece of art. She highlights how dialogues surrounding Maya identity reflect the ways external alliances intersect with community members and organizations that produce theatre, resulting in varying valuations of this work. To illustrate her point, Campbell provides a compelling argument for considering the context for and ensuing local and critical responses to a community-based performance in Tihosuco, Quintana Roo, Mexico, called “La conjura de Xinum.” Campbell makes the case that one should not dismiss the play as simply a fringe act by a community theatre troupe in rural Mexico; instead, the performance exposes the agency of Maya artists in promoting language and cultural revitalization. By illustrating the interconnected nature of artists, audiences, and scholars/critics, Campbell illuminates the roles of respective participants and their influence on the creation, perception, and valuation of Maya language theatre, both in the community from which it emerges and beyond.

In “Exploring the History and Implications of Toxicity through St. Louis: Performance Artist Allana Ross and the ‘Toxic Mound Tours,’” Rachel E. Bauer and Kristen M. Kalz employ performance studies to examine how Ross privileges place, environment, and history in her performance, revealing the long term effects of environmental contamination and its consequences for residents living adjacent to the five stops on her Toxic Mound Tour. By featuring several spaces whose contamination dates back to WWII and Cold War era weapons production, Bauer and Kalz argue that Ross’s tour educates ecotourists on the environmental and health risks that the St. Louis community has assumed in the interest of national safety, thereby rewriting the local history of these spaces and their legacy for today’s community. Sharing their experience as ecotourists in their own community, Bauer and Kalz underscore the significance of featuring place as event to reveal how disparate individuals are linked through a deeper understanding of community spaces and a collective awareness of belonging.

Arnab Banerji’s critical analysis of New Brunswick, New Jersey’s South Asian Theatre Festival (SATF) defines the dynamics of the festival’s shared creative community and the immigrant community’s efforts to affirm itself as a major American subculture. In “Finding Home in the World Stage: Critical Creative Citizenship and the 13th South Asian Theatre Festival 2018,” Banerji asserts that the artists involved in the festival are not only celebrating their culture of origin, but also delineating its relationship with their new home culture here in the United States. While the SATF might at first glance be regarded as simply a public performance of plays, Banerji’s analysis of the audience’s engagement with the works, the mindful curation of festival content, and the cultural sensitivity given to the production of the festival, reveals the complex dynamics of immigration and integration at play on stage and in the audience for these performances. Through examining the SATF as a site for individuals of the South Asian diaspora to assert their cultural citizenship as well as an opportunity to perform acts of creative citizenship, Banerji illustrates how these artists appeal to an audience that does not necessarily conform to geographic, linguistic, and socio-cultural boundaries. Banerji’s piece contributes to the growing field of scholarship on South Asian American performance as well as local acts.

As much as theatre and academic communities often privilege “professional” nationally and internationally recognized centers of cultural production, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing closure of virtually all productions and performance venues well into 2020 and beyond, has revealed how

much we actually rely on local resources and artists for a sense of connection to one another and to ourselves. During these unprecedented times, what so many of us are searching for – and missing desperately – is the reassurance that comes from connection to community. Theatre has survived centuries of crises - from plagues, to world wars, to economic collapses. With each threat, theatre has always managed to realign with the needs of the audience, sometimes by relocating, whether that be to the outskirts of town or to cyberspace, and often by reframing the definition of “local” and where, how, and through whom artistic communities coalesce. The sphere of community held by theatrical performance is proving elastic in the age of the coronavirus, expanding to circle the globe and welcome audiences around the world who are hungrily streaming professionally produced, pre-recorded theatrical content online. Simultaneously, theatre has compressed to include synchronous, intimate, devised Zoom performances for audiences of one who have isolated themselves at home and are desperate for personal, human connection. By reimagining the parameters of production and participation by both artists and audiences, theatre and its communities will not only survive, but it will reinvent itself and its relevance to those looking for themselves and for a sense of belonging.

This issue goes to press in the wake of ongoing violence against people of color, specifically the anti-Black violence evidenced in the recent murders of George Floyd, Ahmuad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, and many others, alongside the subsequent violence perpetrated against those peacefully protesting their deaths. The idea of community, at the local and national level, is being tested once again. Theatre artists and scholars are uniquely positioned to reflect on systemic prejudices, which are also manifest in the theatre industry at large. As scholars/artists/citizens we have an obligation to aid in the development of new community models both within our industry and at the local level that are committed to supporting and participating in anti-racist protests, pedagogy, and productions; honoring and mourning the lives of those who have been lost; amplifying voices of the marginalized and silenced; and advocating for messages of allyship, equity, and inclusion. Theatre must help heal and build community and I encourage you to find ways to participate in and support this work.

As uncertainty and possibility simultaneously loom in the future of theatre and performance, this issue serves as an example of work yet to be done to herald the role of theatre and performance in defining and preserving community at the local level throughout the Americas. This issue was made possible by the support of Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, President of the American Theatre and Drama Society; the stewardship of JADT editors Naomi Stubbs and James Wilson and managing editor Jessica Applebaum; the dedication of members of our Editorial Board who contributed their time and expertise to fostering these essays; and the keen eye of editorial assistant Zach Dailey. I wish readers health and safety in these extraordinary times, and hope this scholarship inspires others to consider their relationship to local acts within their own communities.

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Jocelyn L. Buckner is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Chapman University in Orange, California. She is the editor of *A Critical Companion to Lynn Nottage* (Routledge), and a former book review editor and managing editor for *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. She has published articles and reviews in *African American Review*, *American Studies Journal*, *Ecumenica Journal*, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, *HowlRound*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Popular Entertainment Studies*, *Theatre History Studies*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, and *Theatre Topics*, as well as book chapters in the collections *Performing Dream Homes: Theater and the Spatial Politics of the Domestic Sphere* and *Food and Theatre on the World Stage*, and over a dozen entries in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Stage Actors and Acting*. Buckner is also the resident dramaturg of The Chance Theater in Anaheim, CA, and has collaborated with other theatres including South Coast Repertory Theatre, Center Theatre Group, Native Voices at the Autry, as well as London's Donmar Warehouse and Theatre 503. She is the Vice President of the American Theatre and Drama Society.

[1] Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 2.



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