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Anne Imhof, *Sex. Performance view*,
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Theater and *Communitas*

Introduction

Theater is often acclaimed as a *pars pro toto* of social life: the stage a microcosm of events, the audience a common ground for experiencing them. Treating the assembly of actors and spectators as a community, within its single space and time, constitutes one of theater's fundamental myths. Yet is theater actually capable of connecting actors and audience, and of generating a special bond among those in attendance, despite cultural differences and social inequalities dividing them? Doesn't theater in fact hinge on power dynamics between those observing and those acting? Can hierarchies prevalent in theater be neutralized by establishing temporal, affective bonds among participants in a performance? Can a theater community, coalescing over a play's duration, be nurtured as a seed for a new form of political being-together? Or is the ever-argued promise of a spontaneous, egalitarian community in contemporary theater but an illusion?

Explorations into theatrical forms of commonality have recently acquired a particularly elevated significance, in the context of the ongoing pandemic. Cultural institutions' closures and the impossibility of in-person gatherings challenges artists, theater workers, and audiences alike. In like fashion, the very idea

of theater as a public gathering place, an art form of visceral togetherness, and a *communitas*—a liminal form of collectivity—is now in question. In the context of new forms of interactions in the digital realm between actors and audiences, we are hearing with increasing regularity about “post-pandemic theater,” characterized by hybridity and immersivity. Long before the pandemic, theater had been experimenting with digital forms of performativity, yet the online creation and distribution of plays on a global scale has spurred new thinking on theater as a shared experience undertaken in space-time circumstances that have yet to be adequately defined.

In the section Theater and *Communitas* of the current *Pamiętnik Teatralny*, we propose a nuanced reflection on the forms of commonality occurring in contemporary theater. We take into consideration traditional ways of thinking about theater community along with redefinitions in post-pandemic theater of public and private space. Resorting to examples from dramatic and postdramatic theater to activist and digital performance, we take a rejuvenated look at communitarian concepts and practices. In place of the notion of community—firmly rooted in the social sciences yet badly tainted by twentieth-century totalitarianisms—we propose the anthropological category of *communitas*, with the aim of reflecting on egalitarian forms of togetherness to open new perspectives on relations between aesthetics and politics.

The section opens with the present writer’s “Toward Theatrical *Communitas*,” to advance the term into the field of history and to establish the category in experimental-performative practice. I will employ the tradition of anthropological thought on that which is shared, to underscore the meaning of processuality and of the anti-structural dimension of egalitarian forms of being together and their potential for unleashing human creative abilities. Studying relations between *munus* and *ludus*, the article will show theatricality to be a quality immanently rooted in *communitas*. It also analyzes the significance of transversal *communitas*, in which humans are among many actors creating social relations and responsible for them. The interview “*Communitas* versus Performance” then expands on the untapped theoretical and aesthetic potential of *communitas*, in my conversation with the anthropologist and cultural scholar Leszek Kolankiewicz, who incisively analyzes semantic shades of the term, and precisely fixes their location in anthropological, philosophical, and aesthetic discourse. We explore the nonnormative potential of experimental theater and cinema, underscoring the collective, temporal, as well as excessive and often obscene dimensions of avant-garde art, as it eludes capitalist rules of efficacy. Consequently, the discussion brings forth a new, inspiring confrontation of two theoretical categories pivotal in anthropology and in performance studies: *communitas* and performance.

Following this introductory overview, of a general and speculative nature, is a series of essays on specific communitarian concepts and practices. In Nina Seiler’s “A Reading of Community,” the literary scholar proposes to concentrate

on the “community of writing [and] writing of community” as outlined by the late Jean-Luc Nancy to compare them with her own notion of community in reading. In Seiler’s poetic treatment of Nancy’s essay “The Confronted Community,” she studies textual stagings of community and affective interactions between text and corporality, as well as her own position as a reader of Nancy’s writings and an author. The next two essays comprise something of a dialogue on political, gender-based, and ethnic determinants of the concept of community in post-communist countries. In “The Dark Continent: *African Tales by Shakespeare* and the Experience of Transitional Community,” theater researcher Dorota Sosnowska advances an analysis of the director Krzysztof Warlikowski’s 2011 production melding key Shakespeare protagonists and other sources through the lens of the discourse on political transformation and reflections on race and gender. Examining the play’s means of constructing and representing the Other, Sosnowska inquires into possible community formation that, emerging from the experience of exclusion, could transcend phallogocentric imaginings. She locates political potential for creating an “existential community”—one free from sexism and racism, in the female experience of the body and in the theoretical proposition of the feminist philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina. Then Sandra Biberstein also investigates feminist community in her essay “The *Communitas* of Mourning: Women in Black and Dah Teatar between War-Protest and Theater,” proposing a reading of female-produced theater in the context of the civil war in Yugoslavia. Analyzing the Women in Black vigils in Belgrade and the Dah Teatar’s *The Story of Tea*, Biberstein discusses specific approaches that have facilitated a strategy of mourning unconstrained by friend-foe dualities that characterize war as a male form of problem-solving. The concept of “the *communitas* of mourning” that she advances draws theoretical inspiration from grievability, which Judith Butler introduced in *Frames of War*. Biberstein portrays theater as a space for grieving and remembering victims not officially acknowledged, and as a place where community coalesces around the act of mourning irrespective of their national allegiances.

The section Theater and *Communitas* closes with two essays applying a magnifying glass to the audience’s significance as a community. In Louise Décaillet’s “Marta Górnicka’s *Grundgesetz*: The Chorus as Portrait and Proxy of Political Community,” the culture analyst investigates the chorus’s political function in the director Górnicka’s open-air play from 2018, staged for the hundredth anniversary of German unification and the seventieth anniversary of the German constitution. The aesthetic and political concepts of representation, integrally interwoven in the play, make it possible for Décaillet to show how Górnicka’s chorus enacts the “German nation” as a multiplicity of bodies and voices united by its constitution. She argues that the director, by rendering the chorus as a community accessible to all, emphasizes the question of the audience as a collective body capable of shared action in public space. The chorus in *Grundgesetz* challenges its listeners’ ability to speak in the name of and represent themselves as the “nation,” and in

so doing collectively defies totalitarian tendencies. Next, the theater scholar Kai Padberg, in “New Forms of Communities? The Constitution and Performance of Audiences in Digital Theater during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” analyzes new forms of audiences that have arisen from theater creators and audiences in lockdown isolation. Having lost access to public space, understood as a shared bodily presence of social actors, what has taken shape, according to Padberg, is a “digital theater audience” that’s significantly distinct from earlier forms of gathering and that necessitates different protocols of social interaction. Citing two German digital-theater productions, he demonstrates possibilities of building a temporal community, and highlights its intrinsic technological determinants. The Internet offers greater access to theater, yet digital performances don’t democratize the theater event in itself. For that reason, too, as Padberg argues, theater creators must be critically engaged in algorithms and functional logic to produce alternative forms of community in digital space.

Despite varied theoretical perspectives and diverse theater practices proposed by their authors, the essays collected for *Pamiętnik Teatralny*’s section Theater and *Communitas* reflects our shared, ongoing need to rethink relations between social actors and to generate alternative conceptions of vital bonds in theater situations. These essays are underpinned by a desire for anti-structural, egalitarian forms of togetherness; each contains the postulate of studying *communitas* in its processuality and nonessential potentiality. The notion of processuality thereby invites parallels between reflection on community and theater as an art form that is ephemeral, heterogeneous, free of fixed identity, and, in the best sense, enduringly unfinished, incomplete. Or theater seen as—to utilize the words of Jean-Luc Nancy—an inoperative and workless community. The postulate of potentiality, meanwhile, delineates the political paradox in the ongoingly undefined formula of what theater may be, and of what community may be.
