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Playing with Theory in Theatre Practice aims to present and interrogate theory as an accessible, although complex, tool for theatre students and early-career practitioners interested in critically engaged theatre making. This collection of original chapters, written by theatre practitioners and scholars alike, suggests a necessity for new, productive ways of understanding the relationship between theory and practice, one which is fraught with contestations that are “particularly pernicious in the arts, because of historical frictions between artists and critics.”1 By approaching theory from different perspectives and remaining mindful of its complicated connections to theatre practice, these chapters invite readers to (re)imagine theory as a site of possibility or framework that can shape theatre making, emerge from practice, and foster new ways of seeing, creating, and reflecting. The contributing authors consider the role of theory in theatre practice within historical and contemporary contexts, interrogating the “romantic presumption that thought ruins creativity.”2 By reflecting on how theory is at play within different parts of the theatre-making process, the authors work to close the perceived gap between scholars and practitioners, theorists and theatre makers. As practicing artists and scholars grapple with questions surrounding the function, form, and value of theory in their practice, Playing with Theory offers possibilities for engaging theoretical constructs toward, from, and within dynamic and intentional production work.

For several years, the three editors of this book have worked together on scholarly and artistic projects ranging from academic papers and workshops to professional, university, and community-based theatre productions, all of which involved various negotiations between theory and theatre making, and ultimately prompted us to consider the role of theory in our own practices. Specifically, the idea for this book grew out
of our collective experiences working with graduate and undergraduate students in various theatre spaces and university training programs in the US with a strong emphasis on conservatory training. Our students often express skepticism toward intellectual ideas and demonstrate far more confidence around, and connection to, practical theatre work than theoretical discourse. As we talked with colleagues across the country about our individual experiences of working with student performers, designers, directors, playwrights, and dramaturgs, we realized that many of us in higher education face similar challenges in our efforts to help pre-professional artists bridge the gap between theory and practice in their theatre making, as well as in their writing and reflecting. In classes such as Research Methods and Theory/Criticism, as well as more practice-based courses like Design Studio and Digital Storytelling, students expressed the desire for concrete answers about the relationship(s) between theory and their own practice—what does theory do? Why is theory relevant to me? How is theory useful to my work in the theatre? While we continue to engage students around these questions and concerns, we became increasingly interested in how other practitioners positioned their own relationship(s) to theoretical paradigms and theatre practice. We began to imagine a collection of chapters that would acknowledge the real tensions and disconnects that exist between theory and practice while also articulating possibilities and offering concrete examples of how theory and practice can dance with, for, and in response to each other. We hoped to acknowledge various definitions of, and approaches to, theory within different disciplines of theatre, as well as to provide conscious reflections on the often unconscious process of engaging with theory in/through creative practice. The resulting book is a collective effort to further discourse around theory/practice; it invites consideration of how theory can and does operate in the life of an artist while forwarding a multifaceted and contemplative, albeit partial, picture of the relationship(s) between theory and practice.

The process of assembling this book revealed some important through lines around the dynamics of theory and theatre practice that ultimately helped to contextualize who and what is included and emphasized within this collection. In exploratory conversations for this book, we found that many of our colleagues expressed a lack of interest or confidence in, and/or perceived value around, writing about theory, even in relation to one's own practice. In Geographies of Learning, Jill Dolan writes that “The split between research and practice often draws the fault lines in theater departments in research institutions, as various sets of faculty are positioned against one another in the struggle for resources such as
graduate assistantships and other student aid and faculty assistance.” While research and theory certainly are not equivalent, Dolan’s recognition of this split speaks to an important tension that tends to be perpetuated in/ by the academy. Contrary to the above observation, however, several readers for this book project questioned whether the theory/ practice gap as we discuss it even exists within the UK and elsewhere outside of the US, and subsequent conversations with several artists currently working in the UK revealed a widely held belief that theory and practice are so interwoven that pinpointing the relationship(s) would be difficult, if not unproductive altogether. These differing viewpoints cross cultural and geographic borders, and the debate between them becomes an indication that scholars and practitioners continue to grapple with articulating this contentious and elusive, if not intuitive, set of relationships between theory and theatre practice.

Examples of this continuing dialogue can be seen in recent publications on practice-as-research (PaR), performance as research (PAR), and practice as research in performance (PARIP), pointing to current interests in bridging practical and scholarly engagements in the arts and legitimizing creative production as a site for producing new knowledge. Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter suggest that “Perhaps the most singular contribution of [these] developing areas . . . is the claim that creative production can constitute intellectual inquiry.” These developing research methods, or modes of inquiry, indicate one of the ways that theory functions, specifically, in a dialogue with practice that can emerge from the creative process, and ultimately works to privilege arts practice in spaces where written scholarship and theory are traditionally given more weight. While publications on PaR and its related areas of inquiry contribute to the development of new knowledge, in some ways situating PaR within traditional research paradigms, this book expands the dialogue to consider not only how practice functions as research but how theory can function in relation to theatre production and performance/research paradigms.

Just as PaR and its related areas continue to be met with suspicion from both academics (with their often traditional ideas about research, scholarship, and knowledge making) and artists (with historically justified skepticism about privileging scholarship over creative activity), this book sits in a space of dual-pronged anxiety. The process of developing a theoretically minded book project, one that does not intend to speak directly to scholars or theorists but works to engage their efforts in very practical ways, revealed challenges related to a target audience. As editors, we worked to assemble a book aimed at theatre artists newly
considering the role of theory in their work. The resulting collection articulates and explores practical ideas for engaging theory but does not attempt to offer in-depth theoretical foundations or altogether new theoretical paradigms. In doing so, this book both assumes some exposure to theory and also invites practitioners to seek out further reading and details on theories themselves.

Furthermore, given the range of contributors for this book, all of whom are practicing artists and/or academics, we also faced challenges around unifying vocabulary, writing style, and even our expectations about the assumed or base knowledge of our readers. While we intentionally brought the writing of scholars and practitioners together into one collection to explore a variety of practices, the process of doing so reminds us that discussions of theory by and for scholars and theorists are often quite different from discussions by and for practitioners—in tone, vocabulary, purpose, and application. Various chapters run the risk of disappointing those who are already deeply engaged in theory and/or theorized practice, or baffling practitioners who do not yet possess some inclination toward theoretical discourse. For these reasons, this book may best target Master of Fine Arts students and early-career professionals who are working collaboratively across theatre disciplines (such as directing, performance, devising, design, and dramaturgy), as well as undergraduate Theatre Studies students being introduced to theory/practice dialogue. Finally, depending on one’s background, experiences, and inclinations, readers may wish to approach this text as a linear whole to be read in its entirety, or by specific groupings of chapters that speak more directly to one’s discipline or interest areas within theatre. Either way, provocative dialogues emerge when considering these chapters in relation to one another.

While a significant body of publications exists that trace specific theories in the context of theatre/performance, most often foregrounding the use of theory as a tool for play and production analysis, this book explores theory/practice in a different way. Specifically, we encouraged authors to examine their relationship to theory from the inside out, rather than as an external tool for analyzing a written or performed text upon its completion. Foregrounding productive tensions and issues between and around creative practice, as well as creative intellectual processes, the resulting essays and case studies raise critical questions and ultimately offer ideas, models, and inspiration for approaching and framing theoretical paradigms in our artistic lives, particularly as we engage in the production process. In recognizing the long tradition of theoretical discourse among theatre makers, this book does not attempt
to address all aspects of theory and/or the totality of its implications for theatre practice. Rather, it aims to examine theory's potential for offering theatre artists new ways of imagining their work.

We approached this book project with the premise that the relationship between theory and practice is constantly evolving and inherently fluid, and that these sometimes-artificial categories prove necessarily interdependent in varying degrees. In a transcribed conversation with Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze considers how theory and practice rely on one another: “Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall.”  

Mark Fortier, a contributor to this collection and author of *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, further describes the nature of some of these interdependencies: “Theatre can sometimes be analogous or equivalent to theoretical reflection. . . . Closely related – sometimes interchangeable – are cases in which theatre enacts a theoretical position. . . . Moreover, theory can be used to explain and elucidate theatre in general or particular works of theatre. . . . Finally, theatre can answer back to theory, calling presuppositions into question and exposing limitations and blindness.”  

Theory and practice, then, work in tandem—in, of, through, and for the other; and *Playing with Theory* offers some articulations of, and reflections on, these very intersections.

Within the scope of this book, we refer to theatre theory in broad contexts, working from the premise that, particularly in the field(s) of theatre, the borders between theory and methodology, as well as philosophy, remain fluid in many respects. Indeed, distinctions between theory and philosophy have often blurred in the theatre, as reflected in seminal theoretical texts on theatre written by philosophers such as Aristotle, G. W. F. Hegel, and Friedrich Nietzsche. In addition, theatre and performance have broadened in scope as traditional boundaries have become less distinct between various fields of study and practice, and hence the vocabulary of theatre/performance has come to include theoretical and methodological discourse from a myriad of disciplines, such as visual arts, architecture, anthropology, linguistics, cognitive science, and sociology. Our understanding of theory has also expanded and evolved over time to include (and exclude) various forms and functions within theatre practice. David Saltz questions whether Theory-with-a-capital-T has entered an era of “conceptual blending” (in Bruce McConachie's expression), “bringing together practitioners of hard science and biology with those of social sciences such as psychology and anthropology and humanities disciplines such as literary studies and
philosophy – and now, performance and theatre studies.” At the same
time, social, literary, political, and critical theories (such as feminist
theory, cognitive theory, semiotics, border theory, and media theory to
name only a few) have continued to encourage new ways of seeing and
analyzing theatrical text and performance.

While the interplay between theory and practice is not necessarily a
new phenomenon, Jane Milling and Graham Ley point out in Modern
Theories of Performance that the theoretically minded practitioner has
emerged as a modern phenomenon and that the twentieth century is
marked by many influential theoretical practitioners such as Constantin
Stanislavski, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, and Anne
Bogart. These artists’ written and performance work exemplifies praxis,
or a process of making active choices that reflect an intentional engage-
ment with the dialectic between theory and practice, reflecting some
parallels with the aforementioned practices in areas such as PaR. Many
of these artists developed theoretical or practical systems that eventually
evolved into theorized methodologies, thus offering new models of theo-
retically engaged practice. Often, for instance, the artists’ innovative
goals in practice/performance present a need for theory, inviting prac-
titioners to employ theory in service of their theatre making and fre-
quently moving theory/practice into the realm of methodology. Theory
can present a similar need for experimentation, or practice, inviting
scholars and artists to interrogate theory within or through practical
work. In these examples, theory and practice are therefore in constant
dialogue, informing a kind of theorized methodology that, in turn,
affects practical developments in theatre and propels the emergence
of new theories. In their examination of the notion of a theoretically
minded practitioner, Milling and Ley assert that “part of the attraction of
these select figures was undoubtedly that they produced ideas as well as
performances, and when juxtaposed they might be thought to present a
methodology of theatre practice for modern times.” These methodolo-
gies and resulting theatre practices remind us of the multiple ways that
theory and knowledge are embodied, produced, and challenged.

Despite the celebration of these theoretically minded practitioners and
their widely recognized examples of praxis, tensions around the relevance
of theory in theatre continue to exist. Recent critical discourse in the
field suggests that “theory has been discredited,” “grown outdated,” or
“vanished into new and better critical practice.” Playing with Theory
comes on the heels of After Theory, life.after.theory, the collection of
essays in Post-Theory: New Directions and Criticisms, and the entire issue
of Theatre Journal dedicated to new paradigms for scholarship in theatre
and performance studies, and works to offer clear examples of how moving theory to the forefront of our consciousness/conscience can help forward critically engaged and dynamic representations. Contextualized by criticisms lobbied against theory and its relevance to theatre and practice in general, the chapters in this book invite the reader to reconsider the contemplative and applied components of both theory and practice. These implied “deaths” and consequent rebirths, or revisions, reinforce the evolving nature of theory and its relationship to theatre practice. For Deleuze, “A theory does not totalize; it is an instrument for multiplication and it also multiplies itself.”\(^{16}\) As we continue to interrogate the relationship between theory and practice, the very act of its negotiation will shape, influence, and ultimately re-make the ways we understand, value, and use theoretical frameworks in theatre practice.

Applied theatre scholar Helen Nicholson argues that theory offers us “a way of looking at the world differently, a focus for asking risky questions.”\(^{17}\) In a similar vein, this collection invites readers to consider how theory helps us see the world and our work anew, while also providing specific examples of how various scholars and artists define and use theory in ways that suit their discipline or focus within theatre/performance making. While many of the chapters point to theory as an external stimulus or inspiration for new ways of seeing or knowing, others push us to consider theory as an internal muscle, or an intuition, that unconsciously guides us through familiar processes, gaining strength through its very use. For several contributors, theory functions as a mirror, helping artists to see themselves—their values and perspectives—and to articulate their ideas and questions around a production, or to understand the concrete and hypothetical consequences and possibilities of their artistic choices. Other chapters suggest that theory operates as a tool for challenging the status quo or unifying an approach to developing character, devising new work, or staging a play. Several authors consider theory as a political strategy for debunking systems of power and value, while others suggest that theory can offer a vocabulary for knowing, understanding, or articulating something beyond our own experience. Additional contributors argue that theory provides angles for investigation by focusing our attention to various aspects of meaning, story, and representation. Furthermore, the included chapters invite an examination of the descriptive, prescriptive, and probing nature of theory, encouraging us to (re)consider our own decision making as we engage in theatre production.

In almost every one of these examples, the word theory can be replaced with the word theatre, pointing again to parallels between the function
of theory and theatre, as well as the sometimes-complicated and indistinguisable borders between theory and practice. The chapters also reflect a multifaceted and ongoing conversation between theory and practice in theatre making; theory often comes from practice, practice often results from theory, performance can be theory in practice. And as these various dialogues or interactions between theory and practice become intentionally activated through praxis, new knowledge and creative forms develop. Ultimately, this book demonstrates a range of possible theoretical engagements and applications, stimulating interest in theory and conscious reflection on, and action toward, artistic choices.

In many ways, this collection points to a disruption of categorical absolutes for theory and practice, inviting us to continually reassess and expand definitions of our work. As contributors from various disciplines in the field write about theatre, theory, practice, and praxis from multiple perspectives, this book reiterates that theory plays with, in, and through theatre in endless ways. Rather than providing a set of stable definitions, this collection focuses on ways of thinking about and intentionally engaging with theory; and it is our hope that these chapters inspire complex questions, understandings, and actions within the theatre-making process.

Playing with Theory in Theatre Practice is organized into three parts consisting of essays and case studies. While we provide a brief overview of the three parts of the book in this main introduction, more detailed introductions to each part and analyses of the relationships between individual chapters can be found in focused introductions that immediately precede Parts I, II, and III.

Part I, “Contextualizing Theory and Practice,” explores and contextualizes the historically complicated dynamic between theory and theatre practice. For this section, three scholars reflect on some of the historical, social, political, and practical contexts that shape ensuing discussions in the text. These chapters remind us that theoretical and practical knowledge and skills have been alternately privileged throughout history and in various contexts, raising questions about the cultural and use value of both theory and theatre to society at large. Examining several possible functions of theory, this part invites consideration of how theory can both “thwart us” and “allows us to carry on” in theatre. The authors in Part I offer us contexts for considering representational practices and accepted forms of knowledge, posing several ways to think about the role of theory in our creative/intellectual practices, and asking provocative questions about the complex marriage between scholars and practitioners. Furthermore, the chapters in this part introduce definitions
of theory and practice, offering contexts for thinking about the future of theory and ultimately the theoretical implications of theatre practice.

The chapters in Part II, “Interrogating Theory in Theatre Practice: Productive Tensions, Questions, and Implications,” tease out theorized and un-theorized practice, offering fruitful questions around the integration of theory and practice and exploring theory’s potential for fostering intentional, responsible, and reflective theatre making. The authors in this part direct our attention to the ideological and performative implications of theory for, within, and from artists’ work, encouraging us to imagine how theoretical discourse can literally be performed on stage, grow out of performance/production, and ultimately shape who and what gets valued or privileged in our theatre making. Engaging cultural and media theory, history and criticism, and new developments in cognitive theory and neuroscience, these chapters invite us to reflect on how theory and practice inform one another and how both can simultaneously function in/as practice. Furthermore, the authors remind us of how theoretical paradigms and new developments in the sciences can help us better shape the audience’s experience in the theatre. In addition, a few chapters in Part II suggest that theory, coupled with criticism, historical data, and other research, can complicate creative and intuitive processes and contribute to dynamic choices for the stage. Together, the chapters work to acknowledge, if not reconcile, tensions—between thought and emotion, intuition and intellect, power and responsibility, science and culture, and theory and practice, to name a few. Interestingly, the contributors are not all in agreement about the possible conflicts, questions, and implications surrounding theory in theatre practice; more than anything, the authors offer a starting place for considering our own beliefs and practices, and hopefully, the productive, although not always easy to navigate, anxieties around theory and theatre making.

Finally, Part III, “Case Studies: Activating Theory within and through the Production Process,” provides a series of reflective studies on artists’ praxis, illuminating possibilities for playing with theory in theatre practice, as well as questions and tensions raised by theoretically engaged theatre making. This section brings together a diverse group of practicing artists that work across many disciplines in theatre and represent a wide range of perspectives on how theory is at play in the artistic process. Several of the chapters encourage us to consider how theatre/performance itself can function as a theoretical framework for creating embodied knowledge/practice and new methodologies for approaching character, song, story, collaborative devising, and audience engagement. Furthermore, Part III suggests that theory operates as a dramaturgical
tool, offering clarity around story structure, content, and purpose. Several case studies also invite us to consider whether a production itself is, or can be, a theoretical idea or if it helps us negotiate theoretical ideas. The chapters in this part suggest that theory is at play in multiple ways within our practice, widening creative possibilities, inspiring new ways of seeing and creating, while operating as a process of making meaning.

In conversation with one another, the chapters in all three parts invite us to consider where and how theory and practice converge, as well as what possibilities exist for playing with theory in our own practice. In what ways does theory have the potential to help construct common ground and unify artistic vision? What does the dialectic relationship between theory and theatre making offer our production processes? And how does theory help us “make the familiar strange,” or illuminate systems of value and power that lie at the core of our personal beliefs and intentions, as well as our artistic processes and products? As you move through the chapters that follow, we hope you will find elements of inspiration, new questions, and exploratory maps for building your own theoretically minded practice.

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 50.
8. See Bruce McConachie and Amy Cook’s essays in *Theatre Journal*, 59.4 (December 2007).
13. See Payne and Schad in *life.after.theory*.
16. See Deleuze in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Michel Foucault, 208.
18. See Mark Fortier’s chapter “The Function of Theory at the Present Time?” which is included in Part I of this book.
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