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Introduction

On 21 February 2012, a brief performance that would have a lasting impact took place. Less than a week before Russia’s presidential elections in which then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin made his bid for a third term as President, members of the feminist punk performance collective Pussy Riot performed what they called a ‘Punk Prayer’ in Moscow’s imposing Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Wearing their signature costume of brightly coloured dresses, tights, and balaclavas, they mounted the soleas (a raised platform in front of the iconostasis) and performed a series of choreographed punk rock dance moves while shouting the lyrics of a song asking the Virgin Mary to ‘chase Putin away’. Guards almost immediately descended upon the performers, but the group persisted in their action for close to 60 seconds before being escorted from the building. That evening, they posted on YouTube a music video containing footage of the
performance, which would go on to be viewed by millions of people worldwide. ‘Punk Prayer’ would be lauded as both an important act of political protest and a significant piece of performance art. It would earn Pussy Riot a spot on ArtReview’s 2012 ‘Power 100’ list of the most influential artists that year.

Russia’s response to the performance would also be watched by people around the globe. Investigations into the action began within days, and in March, three members of the band were arrested and held without bail. A criminal trial against them began in late July, and within three weeks all three were convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred and sentenced to two years in prison. The trial was repeatedly described by the women’s lawyers and by the press as a ‘show trial’, a term for a public court case whose outcome has already been determined by the authorities and which is conducted purely as a form of state propaganda. Meanwhile, the accused and their supporters did their best to turn the theatrical nature of the trial to their advantage: when the three arrested women gave testimony in court, passionately decrying the Russian judicial system, their speeches were met with enthusiastic applause in the courtroom. The judge tried to control the crowd, admonishing those present with the words ‘we are not in a theatre’. Yet, when the women exited the courtroom, they were given a standing ovation.

Outside the court, objections to the prosecution and conviction of Pussy Riot also frequently took theatrical form. ‘Free Pussy Riot!’ protestors took to the streets
wearing their own brightly coloured dresses and balaclavas. Numerous re-enactments of the ‘Punk Prayer’ were performed in art and club venues. On the day of the final verdict, London’s Royal Court Theatre, a venue long celebrated for presenting challenging new work, re-presented the women’s testimonies, translated into English, in a free rehearsed reading as part of a day of global protest in support of the collective. Then, in March 2013, in Moscow, while two members of the group, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, remained in prison, Swiss director Milo Rau and the International Institute of Political Murder staged a re-trial of the Pussy Riot case with public figures representing both sides. Included in the production was the third convicted Pussy Riot member, Yekaterina Samutsevich, who had been released in October 2012 following an appeal. The performance was interrupted by immigration authorities who demanded to see Rau’s visa, as well as by a group of men in Cossack uniforms and the police. Upon being allowed to continue, the trial reached its conclusion with the jury, composed of members of the Russian public, narrowly acquitting the group.

In the years since Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were released, Pussy Riot has continued to inspire theatrical responses. In 2015, American playwright Barbara Hammond premiered a new play, *We Are Pussy Riot*, at the Contemporary American Theatre Festival (CATF). The performance began before the house opened with actors recreating the ‘Punk Prayer’ protest in the lobby of the theatre, complete with actors dressed as policemen to
drag them away. Inside the auditorium, the play continued to involve its audience in the action, including bringing audience members on stage to act as witnesses in the trial scene. The CATF advertised the play as a ‘revolutionary experience’ (CATF email, 2015, italics in the original). However, the play was also self-conscious about its differences from an act of political protest. As one reviewer noted, ‘On several occasions during the play the Pussy Rioters declare that if what we in the audience were watching weren’t theatre but a protest, then we’d be outraged, offended, or otherwise emotionally engaged’ (Oliver, 2015). When asked in an interview if she was writing the play ‘the way Pussy Riot would’, Hammond responded, ‘No. Pussy Riot wouldn’t write a play – Pussy Riot’s actions are spontaneous, public and often get them arrested’ (Anderson, 2015).

Yet, in June 2016, Alyokhina revealed that she herself was writing her first play, *Burning Doors*, addressing not only Pussy Riot’s story but the stories of other imprisoned artists in Russia as well. Significantly, the play, in which Alyokhina would also star, was developed in collaboration with the Belarus Free Theatre – a company that itself must work in secret in its home country after having been banned on political grounds. *Burning Doors* premiered in September 2016 at London’s Soho Theatre.

As this series of related events suggests, theatre and protest are often closely interlinked in the contemporary cultural and political landscape. Protest actions frequently take the form of performance, and the line between protest
and performance art is often difficult to draw. In addition to Pussy Riot’s ‘Punk Prayer’, one could point to numerous other examples from recent years that blur distinctions between protest and performance art, such as Columbia University art student Emma Sulkowicz’s *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* (New York, 2014–2015) or the protest performances of the ‘Feminist Five’ in China, who, like Pussy Riot, were arrested in 2015 for their actions. At the same time, theatre spaces and theatre productions provide valuable platforms for responding to ongoing political situations, both to galvanize support for particular causes and to stage opposition to perceived injustices. Here, one could place the Royal Court Theatre and International Institute of Political Murder productions in support of Pussy Riot within a long lineage of documentary and verbatim theatre practices, from the Living Newspapers of the 1930s to recent work by groups such as ‘iceandfire’ in the UK, which create theatre from documents of current events with the aim of intervening in those events as they are happening. Moreover, as Hammond’s and Alyokhina’s plays demonstrate, theatre can also be inspired by protest and can serve to extend the conversations initiated by protest actions, sustaining interest in these actions and their causes long after the immediate political response has faded from the news. Tim Price’s *Protest Song* (National Theatre, London, 2013), which explored the London Occupy movement (2011–2012) from the imagined perspective of a homeless person one year after the protest camp was dismantled, is another example.
However, the relationship between theatre and protest is also an uneasy one. Doubts about theatre’s capacity to intervene in the social world abound, especially when it comes to theatre in its most recognized forms, which is to say, theatre that takes place in theatres and names itself as such. Hence, despite Rau’s involvement of real opponents in his staging of *The Moscow Trials*, journalist and author Masha Gessen lamented in a *New York Times* post (2013) that the performance remained, disappointingly, a ‘simple – and pale – reflection of reality’, because, in the end, the acquittal in the theatre ‘had no actual consequences’. And, despite *We Are Pussy Riot’s* attempts to reproduce the energy of Pussy Riot’s protest action, at least one reviewer worried that ‘the theatrical bells and whistles ultimately come across as incoherent and self-indulgent, overshadowing the activists’ original act of witness’ (Wren, 2015). Not just paling in comparison to the reality, but threatening to eclipse it, theatre, this reviewer suggests, might even detract from the gravity of a political situation. As we will see, similar concerns have frequently been expressed in discussions of theatre’s political potential.

To explore the relationship between theatre and protest is thus to consider two seemingly opposed stories. It is, on the one hand, to encounter a long history of mutual affinity between the two – a history in which theatre has been used in the service of social and political movements, protests have made use of theatrical forms, and theatre, in turn, has been inspired by political actions. On the other hand, it is to confront persistent mistrust in theatre’s ability
to *act politically* as well as questions about whether this is even its proper place. This book aims to think through these points of intersection and tension between theatre and protest. What makes theatre and protest such beneficial partners? Why, nevertheless, is there so much scepticism about theatre’s ability to have a political impact? Can protest ever happen in the theatre? What does protest offer to theatre? And why is theatre useful to protest? These are some of the questions that I will explore in the following pages.

**Contentious performances**

In focusing on the relationship between theatre and protest, this book does not attempt to cover all that could be included within the vast realms of ‘political theatre’ and ‘activist performance’. Many forms of theatre and performance – including those developed by Brazilian theatre director and activist Augusto Boal and discussed in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), those referred to as ‘applied theatre’ (which uses techniques of theatre to address issues relevant to specific communities), and other forms of socially engaged performance – have activist aims. However, not all of these involve activities that would be described as ‘protest’ (though they might contribute to developing the political consciousness that could lead one to protest). This is a good reminder that activism takes many forms, from raising awareness, to teaching and learning new skills, to building and sustaining communities. Rather than attempting to address all of the ways in which activism and theatre come together, this book is interested more specifically in what social movements
scholar Charles Tilly termed ‘contentious performances’. For Tilly, protest is a form of contentious performance. It involves public actions in which ‘actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties’ (2008, p. 5). Contentious performances involve public expressions of dissent against prevailing systems, and they demand change. Such instances of making claims are contentious, of course, because not everyone shares the same interests. With their ‘Punk Prayer’, Pussy Riot demonstrated their opposition to Putin’s bid for presidency as well as to various church and state policies. In doing so publicly – and in an area of the church reserved for male clergy – they protested against the prevailing interests of church and state, and it is clear that their performance was contentious. Many of Pussy Riot’s immediate audience members were not at all sympathetic to their cause, while many who viewed the video subsequently were. Contentious performances are thus performances that address contested issues and whose audiences are consequently fractured.

One of the underlying assumptions of this book is that such performances are productive for society. Protest movements have contributed to many positive advances in modern history, from changes in labour conditions and voting rights to the peaceful overthrow of dictatorships. Yet, protests can also feel inconvenient at times. One of the things they do, after all, is interrupt the usual proceedings of daily life, whether by marching down a city street and forcing traffic diversions, occupying a building and inhibiting
‘business as usual’, or, as in the case of Pussy Riot, disrupting the conventional rituals of a site with an unexpected (and sometimes unwelcome) performance. As we will see, protest can also seem inconvenient for the theatre, particularly in its institutionalized forms, since protest can disrupt the theatre’s usual procedures too. Nevertheless, theatre has an important history of producing contentious performances, and, as I hope to show, the sometimes uncomfortable eruption of contention in the theatre can be valuable, not only politically, but theatrically as well. Finally, it should be said that the notion of contentious performance does not in itself imply any particular political viewpoint. Protest performances are enacted by those on the left and the right of the political spectrum. Furthermore, the politics of any individual use of protest are particular to that context. While most of the work related to theatre and activism emerges from a left-leaning political position, which I share, my aim here is less to convince you of a political viewpoint than to argue that contentious performances are productive, and they can make for good theatre.

In the following section, I offer a brief overview of some key ways in which theatre and protest have come together in the West since the beginning of the twentieth century before moving on to a consideration of some of the major tensions between them. As I will show, while theatre and performance scholars and social movements scholars have long recognized that theatre and protest coincide in various ways, there are, nevertheless, a number of points at which they seem to conflict with one another. These
include: *protests against theatre*, where protest would appear to threaten not only an individual production’s ability to carry on but also one of theatre’s most cherished values, the freedom of expression; *protests by and in theatres*, which have been plagued by doubts about theatre’s ability to engage in real political action; and the *theatricalization of protests* in the form of protest re-enactments, where theatricality itself has often been seen as a threat to the legitimacy and urgency of political action. Addressing these trouble spots will be the aim of the remaining sections of the book. For, as a politically committed person who also spends a lot of time in theatres and other performance spaces, I am motivated by a sense that, in addition to affirming the value of political performances outside of theatres, we might also expect theatre, as an art form and a social institution, to serve as a site for the expression of dissent. To make my case, I consider a range of examples from the early part of the twentieth century (just as modern theatre was taking hold) to the present, drawn primarily from Europe and the United States (reflecting my own geographic positioning as a US-born scholar currently living and working in the United Kingdom), with the aim of affirming the productive intersection of theatre and protest precisely at those points where they might otherwise appear to be at odds. I take this relatively broad historical view not to paint a narrative of progress, or to look nostalgically to a past when protest (in or out of the theatre) seemed more possible, but to show that the intersections between theatre and protest are longstanding ones and that the tensions that arise
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