

Performing Crisis

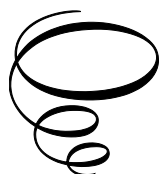
Performing Crisis:

*Interdisciplinary Insights
on Identity and Existence*

Edited by

Shuchi Sharma and Mitali Bhattacharya

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FOREWORD

Theatre is inherently a crisis-driven form: it unfolds in real time, traces contradictions, and brings the precariousness of being to the center. In times of historical rupture, it has always emerged as a vessel for reflection, resistance, and reconfiguration. *Performing Crisis: Interdisciplinary Insights on Identity and Existence* gathers a group of critical voices that explore the intersections of crisis and performance to indulge in an urgent and timely examination of how the performing arts bear witness to and actively shape the turbulent realities of the present. This volume is a comment on how performance is more than a tool for representation. It is a space for embodied thought, for aesthetic dissent, and the re-articulation of identity in fractured contexts. Whether it is political violence, colonial aftermaths, social collapse, or psychological breakdowns, the volume contributions show how theatre makes visible what often gets suppressed. These chapters attempt to understand that theatre is a reflection of crisis, an agent of critical consciousness, and a performative practice capable of generating affective communities. In reading these contributions, one is reminded that to perform a crisis is also to perform the complexity of existence.

INTRODUCTION

Shuchi Sharma & Mitali Bhattacharya

The 21st century is defined by its intrinsic crises that lead to a breakdown in the very fabric of modern being. Whether it is the climatic disaster that destroys ecosystems or the conflict of identities in the face of intensifying political fragility or existential melancholy produced by postmodern phenomena of fractured truth, the contemporary crises are pervasive as well as ubiquitous. The crises of the present era demonstrate a world that is more distraught and dissociated. In contrast to the past, when crises were marked by war, economic ruin, or natural disasters, today's crisis is diffuse, long-term, and deeply rooted in contemporary existence. It is mainly characterized by erosion of meaning, paving the way to a radical disorientation. Amidst crisis, the meanings of religious faith and moral compass have dissolved, and nothing coherent stands out. As a result, the modern individual is overwhelmed by information and choice and increasingly feels rootless and unanchored. Societies are no longer connected by a unifying force that ties them together through a sense of belonging and shared empathy. Furthermore, the crisis is not only social or cultural but also spiritual, which has resulted in a loss of agency, dignity, and depth in the experience of life and an increase in anxiety, depression, and alienation that are not coincidental but rather are symptomatic of a deeper crisis. Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth, in the essay titled "The Heuristic of Crises: Reclaiming Critical Voices¹," critically deliberate upon the concept of crisis. They argue that the present times are marked by a wide array of events that shake the entire structure of society so much that crisis has now become an interpretive tool for understanding the contemporary times. However, they also contend that such a ubiquitous nature of crisis should not become the reason for normalizing it. They identify two intellectual perspectives when it comes to the representation of crisis. The first is the nominal perspective that views crises as social constructions. These are mainly governed by people in power and are a way to raise questions

¹ Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth, "The Heuristic of Crises: Reclaiming Critical Voices," in *Crisis Under Critique: How People Assess, Transform, and Respond to Critical Situations*, ed. Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 1–4.

about hidden motives and authority. The other is the realist perspective that views crises as real phenomena that demand urgent attention and analysis.

The global warming-driven environmental crises and the depletion of natural resources are causing irreparable damage to the Earth, which further gives rise to a feeling of ecological anxiety and a danger of an imminent existential threat. At the same time, the growing economic, racial, and gendered global disparities have been amplified by pursuing neoliberal policies that perpetuate cycles of exploitation. In such a situation, when marginalized groups fight for justice, it results in protests, rebellions, and social movements. Identity became a battleground in the midst of all this instability as issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality have threatened to dismantle traditional ideas of selfhood. Individuals and groups are facing the consequences of globalization, migration, and the intersectional politics of oppression that shape their lives. Simultaneously, state brutality, censorship, and political crises are pushing societies towards collapse. But crisis also suggests a turning point. It compels us to revisit values and relationships to create a better future. It urges us to analyze and problematize what it means to live well, to live together, and to live with purpose. In the face of such crises, art indulges in re-imagining and resisting. It analyzes the greater depths of crisis and, along the way, turns into a critical intervention. In the process, art is also a socio-political move, a spiritual query, and an ethical stand. Art creates dialogues to give us new avenues to observe, reflect, and respond. Of all art forms, theatre stands apart for its liveness, immediacy, and communal experience. It represents the immediate and complex nature of crisis as it unfolds in real time and in shared body space when a performer and a spectator occupy a moment of confrontation, catharsis, and reflection. It represents war stories, environmental devastation, social injustice, or individual/collective trauma that enables society to react to its lacunae by indulging in what words cannot say through gestures, silences, or monologues. It brings to the fore marginalized voices, subverts dominant narratives, and envisions other futures. From activist street theatre of marginalized communities to experimental performances about the climate crisis, theatre practices in the twenty-first century are spaces of resistance and re-enchantment. They offer not only representations of crisis but also possibilities for change that stimulate spectators to move from despair to hope. In the fractured and disorienting world regulated by crisis, theatre reflects the world as it is.

Performing Crisis: Theatre as a Site of Negotiation, Resistance, and Transformation

The idea of performing crisis facilitates possibilities for negotiation, resistance, and transformation. By performing a crisis, theatre thrives on conflict and tension by allowing an affective engagement. Theatre, by default, is a social act as it results from collective effort, develops in communal spaces, and is shaped both by performers and spectators. Through performance, spectators are exposed to the lived experience of breakdown, injustice, displacement, or grief. Such an engagement deepens the understanding of crisis as a phenomenon which is both internal as well external. Moreover, through performing crises, theatre presents and represents the gaps and uncertainties that lead to crisis. The space of the stage becomes a site where contradictions, vulnerability, resistance, despair, hope, trauma, and healing coexist. Such a multi-layered representation not only depicts social crisis or personal trauma, but it also questions the way we perceive and respond to crisis. Moreover, through performing crisis, theatre also creates a community. In the present times when isolation and alienation shape the collective experience, this communal act of witnessing and responding becomes a way to create dialogue, confront discomfort, and give rise to actions. Crisis, when performed, becomes an involvement, not to escape, but to stay with the trouble, to engage aesthetically and politically with the realities that surround us. It is to be noted that performing a crisis through theatre does not solve the crisis. Rather, it contributes to our understanding of crisis, not as an abstraction, but as a lived experience that demands observation, imagination, response, and reflection. James Thompson and Richard Schechner argue in “Why ‘Social Theatre’?” that social theatre actively engages with contexts marked by ruptures such as prisons, war zones, and refugee camps, that in turn, facilitates performances that are not about presenting theatre to a passive audience, but about co-creating it with communities. They state:

From the performance studies perspective, “non-theatre” venues are in fact sites of multiple performances. Prisons, refugee camps, hospitals, etc., are not empty of theatre nor do they only experience the theatrical when a social theatre project is staged. These locations are arenas rich in performance moments- sometimes small and subtle and at other times huge and obvious. These places and the regimes of knowledge and practice that operate within them are performed. The dress, demeanor, and responses of people are performed-and even more so in institutional and highly controlled situations such as prisons, hospitals, schools, and refugee camps.

Social theatre uses one set of performance processes to make new sets at sites already full of performance. (Page 13)²

They opine that such spaces are fraught with “everyday performances,” and that theatre intervenes by enabling testimonial or action-oriented responses to lived crises. In doing so, theatre attempts to create an impactful community of shared witnessing and potential transformation. Performing crisis, then, is not a means of resolution but of recognition of staying with the trouble, engaging aesthetically and politically with the realities that surround us, and reimagining how we move through them together. Going further, Thompson and Schechner explain how theatre responds to crisis. This response can be understood in four ways. First is the theatre for healing, where individuals or communities affected by crisis, such as war, violence, or displacement, adhere to performance to release pain and enter into the recovery phase. Then comes theatre for action, which traverses from expressing hurt to initiating resistance and change that invites affected people to stand for themselves. Third is theatre for community, which facilitates healing through sharing by bringing people together through shared experiences that, in turn, pave the way for a sense of belonging. Finally, theatre is for transforming experience into meaning that enables individuals and communities to revisit what happened in the past to give shape to their memories. This further helps them understand and rationalize their past through storytelling and expression. In this way, theatre becomes more than performance; it becomes a way of living through, responding to, and rising beyond crisis.

Addressing the Urgency of Crisis through Theatre

This volume, *Performing Crisis: Interdisciplinary Insights on Identity and Existence*, arises from the urgent need to explore the role of theatre in responding to crises. The nature of contemporary crises in the form of mass migration, climate change, racial injustice, or gender violence demands new forms of representation. Contemporary theatre reflects the global interconnectedness of crises and suggests strategies for resistance and survival. This volume brings together contributions from scholars, artists, and academicians to understand how theatre can respond to crisis and then represent it. Each chapter in this collection examines a particular crisis, such as an ecological, political, psychological, or social one, and explores how theatre serves as a tool for confronting and negotiating that

² James Thompson and Richard Schechner, “Why ‘Social Theatre?’” *TDR* 48, no. 3 (2004): 11–16.

crisis. The contributors explore a wide array of contexts in which theatre plays a crucial role in both reflecting and shaping societal responses to crises, such as examining the crisis of identity in the LGBTQIA+ community in Iran, unpacking the psychological trauma of contemporary womanhood, and investigating the political violence in Belarus, the resurgence of authoritarianism, the trauma of the pandemic, or the existential alienation caused by rapid digitalization. Crisis, in such contexts, represents crisis and becomes a tool of epistemological and political mediation. The chapters in this volume analyze how theatre and performance practices across the globe engage with diverse crises such as social, political, cultural, ecological, and existential ones, articulating stories of survival, resistance, and transformation. This volume challenges conventional understandings of both performance and crisis by situating these practices within theoretical frameworks of trauma, memory, embodiment, and resilience.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This volume establishes theatre and performance as a sight and site through which identity and existence are re-examined in times of crisis, drawing from a diverse range of theoretical frameworks such as Performance Theory, Trauma Studies, Memory Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Existential Philosophy, and Feminist and Gender Studies. One of the frameworks revolves around postcolonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Spivak offer political and cultural frameworks for examining how theatre performs crises of identity and nationhood. Fanon's vision of decolonial crisis, Hall's idea of identity as a process of positioning, and Spivak's critique of subaltern erasure contribute to arguments that examine performance as a site of resistance that confronts colonial legacies, challenges essentialist narratives, and gives form to marginalized experiences.

Another theoretical perspective pertains to Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an incomprehensible yet recurring wound³. In other words, theatre becomes a site of repetition and return where trauma is performed not for resolution but for acceptance. Dominick LaCapra's concept of working through trauma⁴ further adds to the discourse where

³ Caruth views trauma as a wound that is beyond comprehension in the moment and occurs/recurs belatedly, affecting the subject in a fragmented and repetitive manner.

⁴ LaCapra conceptualizes "working through" as a reflective process that helps the subject remain at a critical distance from trauma, in contrast to "acting out," which is defined by repetition and emotional entrapment.

performance acts as a therapeutic medium for collective reflection and witnessing. Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire⁵ also critically adds to the argument that theatre and performance represent cultural memory through embodied enactment. Adding on, Victor Turner's liminality⁶ and Richard Schechner's ritual theory⁷ have also been used to explore how performance operates as a spiritual healing practice. Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of performance's transformative power⁸ and Baz Kershaw's idea of "staging the unstageable"⁹ analyze theatre's power to make visible what remains invisible. Lastly, feminist and gendered discussions also problematize the meanings of crisis, examining how theatre brings forth patriarchal, racialized, and gendered constructions of identity. Hence, the volume attempts to assert that understanding identity and existence in times of crisis demands turning to the stage as a metaphorical and imaginative space where history, trauma, and resistance are revisited, re-analyzed, and re-represented.

Positioning the Chapters

In the subsequent chapters, the contributors draw on a wide range of theatrical forms and traditions, from classical drama to contemporary performance art, from street theatre to puppetry. They explore theatre's role in creating empathy, raising awareness, and inspiring action. In doing so, they demonstrate the transformative power of theatre as a site for confronting and navigating the crises that shape both individual and collective experiences. The selected chapters have been curated to reflect a representative spectrum of crisis as performed on stage, across varied geographies and temporalities. The volume is structured to facilitate a critical dialogue between distinct thematic strands, while allowing each essay to retain its

⁵ Diana Taylor conceptualizes archive as cultural records and documents, and repertoire as made up of embodied practices and performances.

⁶ Victor Turner defines liminality as the transitional phase in a rite of passage, marked by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy, where participants exist between social states and experience potential for transformation.

⁷ Richard Schechner's ritual theory understands ritual as a performative process that entails restoration of behavior, repetition, and transformation, linking performance with social, cultural, and symbolic systems.

⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte opines that performance consists of a transformative power through the loop between performers and spectators, where the shared experiences can change perceptions, identities, and social realities.

⁹ Baz Kershaw uses the phrase "staging the unstageable" to describe how contemporary performance represents experiences like trauma, crisis, or catastrophe.

voice and contextual specificity. To this end, the following four categories together encapsulate the volume's core vision of interrogating crisis through the lens of theatre as an interdisciplinary, embodied, political, psychological, and cultural phenomenon. These four categories are Theatre of Embodied Crisis, Theatre as Political Crisis, Theatre of Psychological Crisis, and Theatre of Cultural Crisis. Together, they reflect the multiplicity of ways in which crises shape identity and existence and how theatre acts as a dynamic space for witnessing, performing, resisting, and responding to those crises.

1. Theatre of Embodied Crisis: Performance, Identity, and Radical Self-Fashioning

Theatre of embodied crisis entails the visceral representation of crisis lived and performed through the body. The way identity and trauma are represented through performance shows how they are emotionally expressed. Such a portrayal turns the performance into a powerful act where the actor attempts to revisit the narrative of the affected to convey who they are and resists the forces that try to silence them. Through abstract or distanced depictions, embodied crisis prioritizes immediacy and presence to highlight the performance space as a site of trauma portrayal, survival, and agency. Fred Moten, in collaboration with Stefano Harney, in their work *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013), discuss a framework where they introduce the concept of the "undercommons,"¹⁰ a space where marginalized subjects engage in collective survival through embodied practices. Moten's "undercommons" concept diverges from normative political and social structures. In this context, theatre becomes a site for improvisation rooted in the body's capacity to enact alternative modes of identity. Similarly, José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) discusses performance as a tool for negotiating crisis through the process of disidentification. He emphasizes that embodied performance becomes a crucial intervention by which marginalized subjects do not directly oppose dominant cultural identities but attempt to inhabit and transform them creatively. This dynamic process showcases that the embodied theatre of crisis, as a site of resilience, becomes a generative force without being only a site of victimhood. The performance of crisis comprises ritual gestures, repeti-

¹⁰ The Undercommons is a space enacted through gatherings, gestures of care, sharing, study, and refusal. It's a space that comes into being through performance, performance of solidarity, of fugitive presence, of collective dreaming.

tion, and symbolic media such as blood, which, in turn, pave the way for reclaiming histories, invoking collective memories, and bringing about communal affect.

Trauma theory provides another theoretical lens for understanding the theatre of embodied crisis. Cathy Caruth, in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), opines that trauma presents itself through repetition instead of clear articulation. Theatre's capacity to evoke and embody the incomprehensible nature of trauma paves the way for a collective witnessing of crises that are unrepresentable. The performer's body becomes a site where trauma is made visible and visceral. Performance studies theorists such as Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan have also discussed the political and transformative potential of embodied performance at length. Schechner, in his founding text, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2003) argues that performance is a space of both liminality as well as potentiality, where all kinds of disorders and crises are revisited and critiqued. Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) highlights how the ephemerality of performance can be considered as a political act where the body's presence and deliberate absence resist the idea of fixity and conventionality. Through such a *modus operandi*, theatre acts as a potent medium of performing crisis to bring about reflection and transformation.

This section explores how theatre and performance act upon the body as a site of identity, vulnerability, and reinvention during moments of crisis. Each chapter investigates how the body becomes a performative terrain where personal and collective crises are inscribed, negotiated, and reimagined. These works address radical self-fashioning, where trauma is not merely portrayed but lived and rewritten on stage. Iryna Kastyl-ianchanka, in her chapter titled "Theatre in Turmoil: Performing Protest, Violence, and Identity," focuses on how Belarusian theatre has responded to the 2020 socio-political crisis by transforming performance into a space of protest, reflection, and resistance. In a nation long governed by authoritarian rule, theatre has historically functioned as a cultural tool for dissent, often employing allegory, symbolism, and subversion. During the mass protests that erupted after the contested presidential election, theatre practitioners in Belarus emerged at the forefront of civic resistance, using both conventional and guerrilla performances to challenge state repression and articulate collective frustration, resilience, and hope. Andrea Pagnes, in the chapter titled "Fluid Selves In-Becoming Tracing the Wound in Scripted Blood: VestAndPage's Blood Writing as a Device to Perform Identity in Crisis," is another unique take on how existential crisis manifests through the performative act of blood writing in the live works of the performance

art duo VestAndPage (Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes). Through an autoethnographic lens, the chapter explores the lived artistic experiences of VestAndPage, situating the body as an archive of trauma and transformation. Influenced by Kirsten Hastrup and Virginie Magnat, who advocate for embodied knowledge and performative epistemology, the work positions blood writing as an expressive tool that transcends verbal language. It becomes an Artaudian poetic language, offering a means to communicate unspoken wounds and access deeper emotional realities. Swarnika Ahuja's chapter titled "Performing Identity Crisis of a Single Woman in Sarah Woods' *Grace and Cake*" focuses on how theatre performs the identity crisis of a single woman by dramatizing emotional states such as exhaustion, anxiety, and disillusionment within patriarchal and capitalist systems. Using Sarah Woods' plays *Grace* and *Cake* as central texts; the chapter explores how theatrical storytelling captures the affective weight of singledom while simultaneously reimagining it as a space of potential resistance. The plays foreground the lived experiences of single women as socially constructed crises, thereby offering theatrical spaces that challenge normative gender roles and expectations. Omid Mashhadi's chapter titled "*Be the One Who You Are Not: Reenacting Continuous Crisis*" delves into the concept of 'aesthetics of bareness' that explores the intersection of politics, performance, and amateurism. The chapter examines the works of the Iranian performance collective 'Music of the Crazyed, comprising transgender members, with a particular focus on the piece *Be Who You Are Not*. The piece under investigation is a prime actualization of the concept of 'aesthetics of bareness' through the interplay of absence, vulnerability, and invitation to encounter, contributing to a new paradigm of embodied epistemology. Through a close reading of the performance and scholarly dialogue with the collective members, and drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Trauma Studies, Linguistics, Gender Studies, and Performance Studies, this chapter examines how the piece challenges traditional notions of representation and narrative, particularly in its depiction of trauma. The aesthetic strategy adopted here asserts that while un(re)presentable stories, histories, and traumas remain concealed due to the limitations of language and the respective medium, their invisibility resists submission to regulatory power, instead allowing the un(re)presentable to emerge spectrally, as a haunting phantom within the gaps and voids of 'bare' elements, ranging from the unadorned stage to imperfect embodiment, flickering at the edges of perception. Furthermore, this contribution reflects on the role of *vulnerable writing*, a methodological approach that mirrors the performance's aesthetics. Just as the performance confronts trauma through absence and vulnerability, so too does the

writing resist the safety of detached academic critique. Instead, it embraces imperfection and invites the researcher to engage with the performance as a vulnerable witness, with this vulnerable writing practice becoming a form of encounter in itself.

2. Theatre of Political Crisis: Witnessing Resistance and Historical Trauma

Theatre of political crisis helps in understanding how performance acts as a critical response to social gaps and historical trauma. By engaging with the realities of political violence, colonial legacies, displacement, and systemic oppression, theatre becomes both a space for confronting crisis and its manifestations. Diana Taylor, in the work titled *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), discusses that performance entails an act of cultural memory. This is mainly because a performance is an act of revisitation of an already existing incident. In a way, a performance enacts a past event which has now become a memory. Taylor posits that political theatre allows for “acts of transfer,” where histories of violence and resistance are transmitted affectively and collectively (Taylor 2003, 20-22). This positions theatre also as a form of counter-history, as it is a lived response to historical erasure. In such contexts, political theatre is both reactive and proactive. Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) also provides a critical framework, explaining how postcolonial theatre is a form of political theatre that challenges colonial representations and gives voice to the subaltern. Said argues that drama resists imperial ideologies by reframing history from the colonizer’s perspective (Said 1993, xii–xv). This act of reframing or reclamation positions theatre as a space of decolonial resistance, where historical trauma, such as that of Partition 1947, war, or exile, is not merely mourned but politically mobilized. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism”¹¹ is also relevant here, as it entails the idea of using collective identity as a performative strategy to fight against marginalization. In political theatre, marginalized groups often recognize collective identities not to essentialize themselves, but to assert solidarity and visibility during times of crisis (Spivak 1993, 214). Theatre as a political crisis functions not simply to portray trauma or resistance but to activate the public. It implicates audiences as witnesses, enacts protest, and mobilizes memory as a force for justice. Through

¹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the term “strategic essentialism” to explain the use of essentialist identity categories by marginalized groups to achieve political or social goals, where they remain aware of their constructed identity.

embodied reenactments of loss, survival, and struggle, political theatre transforms crisis into critique, calling for accountability, healing, and sociopolitical transformation.

In the above light, this section examines the political dimensions of theatre as a response to systemic, historical, and corporeal crises through three chapters. Abhinaba Chatterjee's chapter titled "The March to 'Amor fati': Combating Existential Crisis through Performance of 'Absurd'" responds to the moral collapse post-WWII via the Theatre of the Absurd. This chapter focuses on how the 'Theatre of the Absurd', particularly through the plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Harold Pinter, performs and critiques the existential crises born out of the moral collapse following the Second World War. The absurdist dramaturgy is viewed here as a response to the failure of Enlightenment rationality and the disillusionment with modernity. Through fragmented narratives, cyclical time, and disrupted communication, these playwrights challenge dominant notions of meaning, coherence, and human progress. Anna Caterino, in the chapter titled "Between Make Believe and Make Belief: Performing the AIDS Crisis on the Post-AIDS Stage," resists the erasure of queer trauma and history through post-AIDS performances. This chapter focuses on how post-AIDS theatre engages with the legacy and continued presence of the AIDS crisis, challenging the illusion of "positive progress" and confronting the sanitization of queer narratives in contemporary media. Framed within the complex cultural moment where AIDS is often relegated to the past, the chapter critically examines how theatre revives, reimagines, and resists this historical erasure. Mateo Rojas Samper and Irina Carolina Yépez, in the chapter titled "Performing Crisis, Rebirth, and the Unconscious: Psychomagic as Ritual Healing in Theatre," focus on staging symbolic rituals for healing colonial and psychic wounds through psychomagic. This chapter focuses on how Alejandro Jodorowsky's therapeutic method of psychomagic intersects with theatre to offer a transformative space for healing, particularly in contexts of trauma and crisis. Grounded in the understanding that artistic expression can catalyze profound psychological and communal shifts, the chapter draws upon a rich theoretical framework that integrates Performance Studies, Trauma Theory, Jungian Psychology, and Decolonial Aesthetics.

3. Theatre of Psychological Crisis: Existential Struggles and Emotional Fragmentation

Theatre of psychological crisis explores the inward complexities of human experience that are defined by periodic disintegration and alienation,

leading to the despair of existential crisis. The medium of theatre contributes to the representation of one's fractured self while dramatizing inner dilemma and psychological tension that eventually shapes into a performance. It is not merely a performance of emotional disturbances but a deeper inquiry into how individuals negotiate identity, meaning, and memory during a crisis state. This form of theatre is rooted in the philosophical currents of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and is inspired by existentialist tradition. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) explains the concept of the self as unstable and ever-changing. His play *No Exit* stages crises and dramatizes claustrophobic scenarios in which individuals are trapped by their own psychological burdens.

Martin Esslin's seminal work *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) also discusses how post-war playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco dramatized the absurdity of the human condition through fragmented plots and disoriented characters. As per Esslin, such a theatre highlights "the breakdown of communication" and a world in which "man is lost in an incomprehensible universe" (Esslin 1961, 6). The absurd, then, is what is elusive and destabilizes identity. Similarly, Elinor Fuchs in *The Death of Character* (1996) locates a shift in late twentieth-century drama from linear and coherent individual characters to complex subjectivities governed by trauma, memory, and emotional dissociations. She opines that modern drama enacts a "postmodern subjectivity" wherein the self is multiple, fractured, and often haunted (Fuchs 1996, 5-7). Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) also brings a psychological and clinical lens to the performative and theatrical representation of crisis. Her insights on the manifestations of trauma, such as repetition, fragmented memories, and emotional numbness, align well with theatrical forms that attempt to stage psychological dislocation. The nature of trauma narratives is often marked by silence, flashbacks, and dissociation, and is expressed well in contemporary theatre. In *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama* (2010), Anna McMullan argues that Beckett's plays stage existential anguish and "embodied fragmentation," where physicality, voice, and presence become spaces to represent psychological rupture. McMullan argues that Beckett's characters give voice to mental crisis and embody it through stasis, gesture, and vocal disruption (McMullan 2010, 30-32). Theatre of psychological crisis invites spectators to confront loss, isolation, guilt, and identity collapse. In doing so, theatre does not indulge in facilitating catharsis in the Aristotelian sense but presents it through a recognition of shared vulnerability in contemporary existence.

In the above light, this section addresses how theatre stages inner turmoil, fragmentation of self, and existential precarity in times of emotional

and societal breakdown through two chapters. Mara Mbele's chapter, titled "Dramaturgies of Disorder: Flavor of Love and the Fugitive Syntax of Blackness in Crisis" reads performance as a fugitive act of refusal, challenging racial fixity and presenting crisis through excessive, unstable embodiments of Blackness. This chapter thus argues for reading *Flavor of Love* as a resistant cultural text—a site of theatrical invention and racialized self-consent. It challenges Western aesthetic hierarchies and demonstrates how Blackness in crisis may generate its own syntax of survival, joy, refusal, and rebirth. Olivia Bannerjee's chapter titled "Breaking the Wall of Adversity: Bengali Theatre's Response to COVID-19" reflects on the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, charting how Bengali theatre responded to isolation, grief, and collective vulnerability. This chapter focuses on how Bengali theatre navigated the multidimensional crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic by reimagining its practices, aesthetics, and ideological functions. It theorizes crisis not as a singular, rupturing moment, but as an ongoing condition of vulnerability, survival, and transformation—integral to the ontology of theatre itself. Samiran Bera, in the chapter titled "Assamese Eco-Theatre and Mobile Theatre as Symbols of Identity and Survival" focuses on two of the recent practices in Assam, Eco-theatre and Mobile theatre, which decolonize performance spaces and simultaneously reclaim indigenous identity in post-colonial India. Eco-theatre and Mobile theatre decentralize performance spaces and legitimize the reclamation of indigenous spaces as an innovative way of storytelling and resistance. By imposing rural spaces as a mode of resistance and cultural renovations and bringing their identity into the global world, this chapter showcases how Eco-theatre and Mobile theatre not only provide the stage for artistic expression but also play a vital role in shaping their identity and exploring their crisis in the broader context of decolonization in Assam's postcolonial context.

4. Theatre of Cultural Crisis: Memory, Community, and Social Transformation

Theatre of cultural crisis represents ruptures that take place due to collective memory, shared values, and sociocultural structures, especially in the contexts related to marginalization, migration, colonization, and forced forgetting. In such representations, performance becomes a critical space to recall and reconstruct cultural identity by staging trauma and actively participating in the processes of cultural survival and negotiation. Joseph Roach, in his book titled *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*

(1996), introduces the concept of “surrogation”¹² to explain how communities create substitute narratives in the absence of accessible cultural memory. As per Roach, the performance of displaced or erased communities creates new versions of tradition, bringing in a sense of continuity amidst gaps and ruptures. Rebecca Schneider, in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011), also elaborates on how theatre acts as a performative encounter with the past. Schneider proposes that theatrical performance enables the past to “remain” in the present as a living presence that further demands reinterpretation and revisitations. “Theatre is where we go to touch ghosts,” she writes (Schneider 2011, 2). In this light, cultural crisis is addressed by making the past palpable and discussable in the public space. Peggy Phelan, in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), discusses the inherent ephemerality of performance as both a limitation and an advantage. She opines that theatre’s ephemeral nature allows marginalized voices to express resistance and identity without being fully contained or commodified by dominant systems. Phelan writes, “Performance’s only life is in the present” (Phelan 1993, 146), highlighting its potential to respond immediately to shifting cultural and political dynamics. Baz Kershaw in *The Radical in Performance* (1999) has elaborated on performance’s transformative potential when it represents and responds to cultural breakdown. He opines that experimental theatre that emerges from grassroots or activist contexts holds the power to “generate social energy” (Kershaw 1999, 20) that further challenges hegemonic systems. In a way, the theatre of cultural crisis is a powerful medium that attempts to reclaim memory and resist cultural erasure, and, in the process, it transforms the stage into a responsive space that paves the way for repressed histories and collective reimaginations.

In the above light, this section examines theatre as a cultural force that archives memory and reclaims silenced voices through three interesting chapters. Anup Shekhar Chakraborty and Pragnaparamita Biswas’s chapter titled “IPTA’s Cultural Accountability and Partition Refugee Crisis: Contemporary Bengali Stage Response” focuses on how performance reshapes social consciousness through IPTA’s politically charged responses to the refugee crisis post-Partition. This chapter focuses on how the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) and its affiliated cultural actors responded to the 1947 Partition and the resulting refugee crisis through politically conscious theatre. It conceptualizes crisis not merely as a historical rupture but as a structural condition that exposes pre-existing

¹² Joseph Roach conceptualizes surrogation as a process through which societies attempt to fill the emptiness created by any kind of loss by substituting them with figures or performances that might be contested.

social inequalities, reconfigures collective memory, and catalyzes cultural transformation. Sunhaib Izhar's chapter titled "From Memory to Stage: Examining Crisis and Identity in Select Works" discusses the postcolonial African theatre's reclamation of identity and resistance against imperial legacies. This chapter focuses on how African postcolonial theatre stages the crisis of identity, history, and memory through the works of Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o with Micere Githae Mugo. Building on the concept of "performing crisis," it foregrounds the stage as a charged space where historical trauma, cultural fragmentation, and the search for political agency are not only represented but actively reimagined. Lastly, Pravat Ranjan Sethi's chapter titled "Staging Crisis, Shaping Nationhood: Indian Theatre and the Performance of Collective Trauma" engages with Indian theatre as a powerful vehicle for representing, interrogating, and reimagining national crises. Drawing on trauma theory, memory studies, performance studies, and postcolonial critique, it examines how Indian theatre performs collective trauma to reflect, resist, and reshape national identity.

In totality, this volume raises some of the most pressing issues when it comes to the discourse of performance in the times of crisis. At its core, the volume investigates how performance serves as a vital site of engagement with psychological, historical, political, or cultural crises. It interrogates how embodied practices mediate trauma, memory, and identity, often giving form to experiences that resist linguistic or archival containment. Through varied case studies and theoretical interventions, it explores how artists mobilize performance to resist erasure, reclaim agency, and reimagine existence in the aftermath or midst of disruption. The volume chapters present a range of aesthetic and dramaturgical strategies, such as fragmentation, repetition, ritual, silence, and gesture, that make crisis examinable within performative frames. Together, the contributions in this volume foreground a conceptual shift, that is, from crisis as rupture to crisis as performative condition, which is staged, embodied, and potentially transformative. It also asserts how the idea of performing crisis entails the idea of performing the possibility of healing, redefinition, resistance, and radical becoming. This volume is a record of how artists, thinkers, and communities have encountered crisis on the stage and a roadmap for how performance can continue to shape existence in an unstable world.

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SECTION I

THEATRE OF EMBODIED CRISIS: PERFORMANCE, IDENTITY, AND RADICAL SELF-FASHIONING

CHAPTER ONE

THEATRE IN TURMOIL: PERFORMING PROTEST, VIOLENCE, AND IDENTITY

IRYNA KASTYLIANCHANKA¹

Introduction

The Belarusian socio-political crisis, epitomized by the mass protests following the contested 2020 presidential election, offers a striking example of how theatre intersects with moments of historical upheaval and broader socio-political conditions. In Belarus, theatre has historically been a site of cultural resistance and a medium for articulating dissent under an authoritarian regime. The protests of 2020, characterized by mass demonstrations, strikes, as well as state repression, brought the nation's artistic community to the forefront of the struggle for democracy and human rights. Theatre, both as an institution and a practice, became a key player in this conflict, responding to the crisis in ways that challenged power and gave voice to public frustration and, simultaneously, hope.

Under Alexander Lukashenko's² long-standing rule, Belarusian theatre has operated under strict state control, with independent artists and cultural institutions facing censorship and repression. Despite these restrictions,

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² Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko is a Belarusian politician. He is the first and only president of Belarus since the office was established in 1994.

Belarusian theatre has retained a tradition of voicing, often relying on allegory, symbolism, and innovative forms to critique the socio-political situation. During the 2020 protests, this tradition gained renewed significance as theatre practitioners joined the resistance, using their craft to engage with the crisis. Performances, both on formal stages and in public spaces, became acts of defiance, embodying the collective anguish, resilience, and aspirations of the Belarusian people. Whether through satirical plays, guerrilla theatre, or protest performances, the Belarusian situation exemplifies how theatre, as both a cultural and political practice, navigates the complexities of crisis, offering a space where the fractures of the present can be confronted and the possibilities of a more just society can be imagined.

Crisis, as a concept, is inherently performative—it disrupts norms, challenges structures, and demands public attention. Theatre, with its live, immediate, and communal nature, becomes a natural medium for exploring these disruptions. The theory of performing crisis in theatre examines how performance not only portrays crises but also engages with their dynamics, embodying and reflecting the social, political, and cultural ruptures that define moments of instability. The following analysis of the Belarusian performances reveals that, by staging a crisis, theatre not only represents its symptoms but also interrogates its causes and possibilities for resolution, offering audiences a space to critically engage with the instability of their world.

To analyze the representation of crisis on stage, a clear methodology and theoretical framework are essential for grounding the discussion and ensuring a structured approach to interpreting the chosen plays. The methodology in this context combines textual analysis, performance analysis, and socio-political contextualization to examine how theatrical works construct, perform, and engage with moments of crisis. The theoretical framework draws from Performance Studies, Cultural Theory, and critical approaches to crisis, enabling a nuanced understanding of how theatre reflects and interrogates the socio-political realities of its time.

The theoretical framework is rooted in Performance Studies, specifically the idea that theatre is a site where crisis is both represented and enacted. Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the "transformative power of performance" is central to this approach, as it explores how theatre creates liminal spaces that challenge established norms and provoke critical reflection (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The framework also incorporates Brechtian theory, particularly his notion of "alienation", which encourages audiences to critically engage with the social and political dimensions of the crisis rather than passively empathizing with the characters (Brecht, 1964).

In contemporary theatre, the concept of “performing crisis” has evolved to encompass both content and form. Issues such as climate change, forced migration, and political instability have found expression in performances that disrupt conventional narratives and aesthetics. Performance theorist Baz Kershaw suggests that theatre’s ability to “stage the unstageable” makes it uniquely equipped to address the complexities of modern crises (Kershaw, 2002). For instance, immersive and site-specific performances often place audiences in destabilizing environments, mirroring the disorientation and uncertainty characteristic of crises. This theoretical lens is particularly useful when analyzing plays that explicitly aim to provoke political awareness or action, as it highlights how theatrical techniques, such as direct address or episodic structure, facilitate a critical distance.

Belarus held a presidential election on August 9, 2020, which led to a series of peaceful protests. The authorities responded with unprecedented violence. According to the Human Rights Center “Viasna”, more than 35,000 Belarusians were arrested and tortured between August and December 2020. And, between November 2020 and November 2024, 3,697 people in Belarus were considered to be political prisoners (Human Rights Center “Viasna” 2025, par. 3). In fact, “criminal prosecution for political reasons remains the main form of repression and is becoming increasingly widespread” (Human Rights Center “Viasna” 2020, par. 5). Belarusian authorities are also increasing (both physical and psychological) pressure on the population and restraining individuals for their active civic positions. In response to the brutality against civilians, many cultural workers have recorded video appeals aimed at stopping the violence. Among the first to do so were actors from Belarus’ leading theatre: the Yanka Kupala National Theatre. Unfortunately, the authorities responded by firing the theatre director rather than resolving the conflict. The theatre troupe later quit in solidarity.

On August 18, 2020, actors and stage directors united into the collective Free Kupalaucy and switched to an online production format. Notable productions include *Tuteishyia* [*The Locals*] by Yanka Kupala and *Strah* [*The Fear*], based on the play *Fear and Poverty in the Third Reich* by German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Each performance is about different manifestations of cruelty and violence, specifically about those who commit violent acts and those who are subjected to such acts.

Despite the difficulties of emigration, many theatre professionals have been forced to leave Belarus since 2020. Most remain in the profession and continue staging plays and raising topical political issues. For example, the documentary play *Prypynak Europa* [*The Stop is Europe*] (2023, Divadlo X10 Theatre, Prague) by Belarusian director Valentina Moroz

touches on problems related to how emigration affects national identity. What happens to Belarusians and Ukrainians in times of war and great upheaval? In July 2023, the play *Tikhari* by Sasha Filipenko was staged in Vilnius at the Old Theatre, and it is about crises, social pain, and trials in Belarus. The play is a visceral psychological drama, which is set shortly and depicts a dystopian super-state where individual rights have given way to control. In 2024, the online performance *Maya Mama u Turme* [*My Mum in Prison*] was released on YouTube. Based on documentary materials and interviews, this production tells the stories of the children of political prisoners.

Following up on the Protests and National Identity

On 12 August 2020, a group of theatre actors recorded a video and uploaded it online in which they demanded both an end to the use of force against Belarusian civilians and a recount of votes cast during the 2020 election. Here is an excerpt from the video:

My, aktory teatru imia Yanki Kupaly, z bolem i zhakham nazwiraem za tym, shto adbyvaetsa ŭ nashaŭ kraine. My pavazhaem zakon i pravy chala-veka, ale kozhny vechar zhyviem yak na frontse. My patrābujem spynits' vykarystanne sily ŭ adnosinakh da mímnykh liūdzei. My velymi zaněpakoienyia tym, shto nashy siabry, kalehi, susedzi, znaiomyia znakhodziatsa pad aryshtam. My suprats' teroru i hvaltu. My suprats' smertsiaŭ i kryvi ŭ nashaŭ kraine. [We, the actors of the Yanka Kupala Theatre, watch with pain and horror what is happening in our country. We respect the law and human rights, but every night we live as if we were on the front line. We demand an end to the use of force against ordinary citizens. We are concerned that our friends, colleagues, and acquaintances are under arrest. We are against the terror and violence. We are against the bloodshed in our country] (Sirogha Tutejschy 2020, 0:01–0:43, my translation).

Later, many other artists also united and created various kinds of protest videos. These were staged by the Drama Theatre in Mahiliou (12 August), the Puppet Theatre in Minsk (13 August), the Belarusian Army Drama Theatre (14 August), the Republican Theatre of Belarusian Drama in Minsk (15 August), the Drama Theatre in Maladzyechna (15 August), the Yakub Kolas National Academic Drama Theatre in Vitebsk (18 August), the Drama Theatre in Brest (18 August), and the M. Gorky National Academic Drama Theatre in Minsk (27 August). Notably, the artists recorded a series of short videos emphasizing their opposition to the government's policy of intimidation, the use of force, the arrest of innocent people, and the physical and psychological abuse of arrested persons.

As the authorities reacted negatively to these video appeals, many actors were harassed and arrested, and were forced to leave Belarus. Thus, almost the entire company of actors of The Yanka Kupala National Theatre left the theatre in solidarity with the director of the theatre, who was fired because of the release of the video appeal. At the time of writing, part of the company is working in Poland, joining Polish theatre groups, and part of the actors are in England and Germany. Free Kupalaucy's repertoire now includes plays of different genres and themes, but the first online productions, created in 2020, mainly raised the theme of violence and human existence in conditions of violence and fear. Perhaps the exception to the above-mentioned themes is the play *Tuteishyia* [*The Locals*], which raises the issues of the identity of Belarusians as a nation and Belarusians as a person.

The first-time director Mikalai Pinigin staged *Tuteishyia* [*The Locals*] at Kupalovsky Theatre in 1990. The Soviet Union still existed at the time, but the old Belarusian national (non-Soviet) white-red-white flag was already being raised on the country's main stage. The play is based on one by Yanka Kupala, which was a cult hit in the 1920s and became a symbol of Belarusian national questioning. Pinigin's new version was due to premiere in the autumn of 2020, but political events intervened. *Tuteishyia* was, therefore, recorded on video and shown online, making it the independent troupe's first project.

According to the idea of Free Kupalaucy, they were making a film called *Tuteishyia*. The director wears a fashionable cap with the emblem "Pahonya" (one of the main national symbols) on it. He sits on the sidelines, occasionally commenting on the events and explaining what is shown in photographs (which are displayed on a screen). Meanwhile, the action of the play unfolds on the stage. It is based on the story of Mikita Znosak (played by actor Pavel Kharlanchuk), who tries to adapt to any political regime that takes power in Minsk 100 years ago. At the same time, he endeavours to avoid losing himself as a human being and local citizen. Every time the government in the city changes, Znosak changes clothes. To do this, he takes clothes from several hangers located on the sides of the stage. There are "Russian", "Polish", "German", and "Bolshevik" clothes to choose from. We can identify the protagonist's metamorphosis in this dressing-up motif; he cannot decide on his national identity.

Trying on the costumes of different nationalities, Znosak adapts to his environment like a chameleon attempting to survive. The character is so accustomed to changing his behaviour, clothes, speech, and faith. And, even in rare moments of solitude, he cannot decide which image he should