Theatres of Contagion: Infectious Performance

Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Theatre, 11-12 May 2017

At least since Thebes was beset by plague, western theatre has incubated a fascination with its own contagious power. This has extended beyond investigating medical and psychological conditions on stage, to both exploring and protecting against performance’s capacity to transmit ideas, illnesses, feelings and behaviours. This two-day Wellcome funded symposium puts the relationship between theatre and contagion under the microscope, to assess it from a range of humanities, medical, psychological and scientific perspectives, and by looking to diverse forms including drama, theatre, live art, dance, musical and cultural performance.

Our central questions include:

1. How have theatre and performance represented, examined or been implicated in the transmission and circulation of medical and psychological conditions?
2. How has our understanding of these relationships and phenomena changed over time, across cultures, including via developments in interdisciplinary practice and inquiry?

Keynote speakers:

- Bridget Escolme (Queen Mary University of London)
- Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (University of Oxford)

With performances by Birkbeck Centre for Contemporary Theatre Fellows:

- Dickie Beau
- David Slater and Entelechy Arts

20 minute academic papers or performative presentations might address:

- How theatre has represented contagious medical conditions: plague and its metaphors in Sophocles and Shakespeare; venereal disease in Ibsen; measles in Shaw; infections and neurological conditions in Beckett; HIV/AIDS in Kushner
- How theatre has represented contagious psychological conditions: versions of melancholia or depression in Chekhov; hysteria in Miller; madness in Churchill; paranoia and anxiety in Letts
- The ways in which theatre has been affected by public health epidemics (e.g. plague, sweating sickness, cholera, influenza, HIV/AIDS, ebola), and reacted (e.g. through banning assemblies, withdrawing funding) or been strategically deployed (e.g. to inform and educate)
- Contagious group emotion and behaviour: yawning, coughing, crying, laughing, violence
- Scientific, medical, historical and theoretical accounts of how ideas, illnesses, feelings and behaviours spread in theatre and performance
- The relationship between contagion and affect theory
- How performance site, architecture, technology and design are implicated in questions and processes of transmission
- The relationship between immersive practices and histories and theories of contagious performance
- Performance in digital cultural, and analogies of viral dramaturgies or effects
- Health, safety and law

Abstracts of 300 words and a short bio (less than 100 words) should be sent to birkbeckcct@gmail.com by Friday 20 January 2017.

The symposium can also offer 4 x £50 bursaries to graduate students to help with attending from outside London. Please outline your situation briefly (less than 100 words) if applying one of these. The conference is free, although booking and registration will be required to attend once the schedule has been formalised and announced.

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