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Editor

Editorial

For Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen

The editorial team is happy to present the latest issue of *Performance, Religion and Spirituality,* after much delay caused by the continuing effects of the pandemic. This issue includes four fascinating articles and a pair of book reviews that demonstrate the breadth and relevance of the subfied of performance and religion, and how useful this particular nexus can be as a space for discussions around intercultural literature, postcoloniality, gender, the live presence of history, and the methods of bringing mythological and religious traditions to life in a way that has a great potency in both engaging the minds and attentions of a wide variety of people and sidestepping the theological and doctrinal questions that, too often, act as barriers to spiritual engagement.

In this issue, Iswarya V offers a new reading of the aesthetics of British playwright Tom Stoppard's *Indian Ink* through classical Indian aesthetic theory. She argues not only that meaning of Stoppard's text is illuminated by this engagement, but that this opens up an understanding of consciousness, spirituality and the transcendent that extends throughout Stoppard's work. The rigour and detail of this article do a great deal to show the power of Stoppard's intercultural synthesis of theatre, art, and philosophy. While sidestepping explicitly political postcolonial considerations, the article offers a reading of British engagement with Indian aesthetics and spirituality that will be of great interest to scholars of artistic interculturalism.

Aneshwa Ray discusses the history of religious devotion in the context of the love story of Radha and Krishna, and in particular, the devotional practices of kirtan ushered in by the sixteenth-century saint Chaitanya. The article discusses the forms, meanings and practices of this new form of devotion, showing how it develops the political and mythological aspects of

Hindu tradition. This model of historical performance analysis as a means to understand theological developments as both social and devotional may one that other scholars of performative devotion, even outside of a Hindu context, wish to draw on.
Allison Hodges offers a very interesting report on her contemporary staging of a pair of ancient Egyptian religious texts with her American students as a means of making their meaning, affect, and spiritual function clearer for the contemporary world. Hodges's work demonstrates the possibilities of practice research methods for religious texts, especially with an eye to understanding their performative function and not just their theological meaning. We hope to offer further articles making use of this method in the next issue.

And finally, Minwoo Park offers a fascinating analysis of the performance of care tied to traditional Korean shamanism on the island of Jeju. They analyse the ways in which gender assumptions, geographic marginalisation, political trauma, and spiritual traditions have come together to make an extraordinary form of performed resilience. The centrality of care to this practice, and the improvisation and ambiguity it necessitates, mean that it does not so much oppose oppressive norms as circumvent them. Park sees this work as no less radical as a consequence. Performance scholars with an interest in the social potencies of performance and gender will find a great deal to learn from this case.

Eagle-eyed readers may have noticed a change in our masthead since the previous issue. And this is, unhappily, the news that, as editor of *PRS*, I have the sad task of reporting to our readers. This year, we lost a major voice in our field: Dr Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen, one of the founding editors of this journal, and the co-founder (with me) of the Performance, Religion and Spirituality working group of the International Federation for Theatre Research. I have known Kim for many years as a scholar, a collaborator, a fellow-traveller, and a friend, and it is difficult for me to separate these threads out. I hear this voice in his writing, and for me, that is a good part of the charm and drive of his work. For those readers who may not have known him as well, I would like to briefly present something of Kim's intellectual biography and academic project, from my own perspective, and show how he has become an inspiration and model for my own work. Others will see him in other ways, of course; he has colleagues who knew him as a performer, as a teacher, and, in recent years, as an artist-researcher of the ecological and cosmic.

Kim was an open and radical thinker, but one grounded in a very specific and rigorous academic tradition. Without understanding this grounding, it is difficult to understand just how radical he was and how far he moved. Kim was trained in the Nordic branch of the German tradition of theatre science; the tradition of Max Hermann and his modern heirs, such as Erika Fischer-Lichte, Patrice Pavis, and his doctoral supervisor and mentor, Wilmar Sauter. He read deeply into the semiotic and phenomenological traditions, and their integration in the theatrical event model developed by Prof Sauter and the IFTR's theatrical event working group. In particular, he wrote about kinaesthetic response more clearly than most anyone else I know. He integrated this with a rigorous engagement with anthropological and theological understandings of ritual, especially in the Franco-American ethnographic and Nordic theological traditions. But his grounding in *Theaterwissenschaft* meant that the core task of his research was the long-discussed but perhaps unfashionable work of performance analysis. He was an artist before he was a scholar, but his work, especially in the earlier phase of his

career, did not identify his art as a form of research. He wrote about work he had engaged with and made liberal and appropriate use of his own experience in his work, but he consciously separated the artist's task of invocation from the researcher's task of clarification. His writing never collapsed into himself. There was nothing self-indulgent in him or his work. If, at times, he used his own experiences in Scandinavian art museums or at Māori rituals as data for analysis, it was only because he had had the privilege of being there. These experiences may have been subjective, but they were ultimately public events in which anyone was welcome to share. The invitation to participate may have been quiet – Kim was never pushy – but it was present, and it explains the core of his academic project: to understand how staged events can give their participants memorable and meaningful experiences; the forms, possibilities, and limits of those experiences, and what they suggest about the nature of our human life on this planet and in this cosmos.

If theatre studies gave Kim the tools by which to clarify those experiences and their working, their content came from two different places. One was his longstanding interest in and work with contemporary experimental theatre and art performance, worldwide but especially in Denmark and Sweden. He knew this performance work well, and Copenhagen, he was a part of it; Kim's reputation as a performer is nearly as great at his reputation as a scholar. The other is the open, humble, friendly, anti-dogmatic, socially conscious Lutheran tradition that was part of his Danish childhood and that stayed with him in one way or another throughout his life. I saw him, in many ways, wrestling with how that tradition could be developed and articulated, to see what performative possibilities it contained; through the church plays of Lund, for instance, and in his deep engagement with contemporary theology, especially at the radical edges of the Lutheran tradition. I don't know if all Christians would have recognized Kim as a believer, but this was not a particularly important question to me or, I think, to him. Understanding what experiences the tradition could offer up was far more important than dogmatics or apologetics.

Despite his deep creativity, I do not think Kim would have been happy to be cast in the role of theologian, mystic, or prophet; he was an explorer, a scientist, a *theaterwissenschaftler* at heart. For such a scientist of staged events, experience may be enormous, but it is fundamentally a human experience of this world (or this cosmos), and it is one we can, at least potentially, share with other beings. It is in that sharing that we can gesture towards that which transcends ourselves, whether that is our social and cultural setting, our physical bodies, our relationship to the natural world, our place in the cosmos, or the infinite transcendence that religion so often speaks of. Kim did not begin his work with a claim to an understanding or experience of anything larger than himself; he began, always, with the performance in front of him and the affordances that it offered. We have access to these grander things only through humble human tools such as ritual and theatre. This made it all the more important that we hone our ability to analyse them critically, contextually, and sensitively.

For myself, I always appreciated that approach. As a scholar, I tend towards a scepticism towards the use of spiritual language in the sphere of academic research (though I hope not to impose this view as an editor.) It is not that I deny that something that could be called the spiritual exists or that this sort of language cannot be meaningful to people or useful in the right setting—the chapel, the rehearsal room, or the comforting arms of a friend. It is that I find the spiritual exceptionally difficult to describe ontologically, epistemologically, and

even phenomenologically. It is easier to come to terms with academic work that treats religion as a profoundly-meaning-generating cultural force, in a Geertzian sense, and to leave the language of spirituality to the pulpit. It's certainly more comfortable to do so. But Kim gave me a way of articulating the spiritual that I could defend and support intellectually. He found a way to talk about spirituality that maintained our position as scholars whose job was to clarify, not conceal. I think it was this that allowed us to work together so well over the years, even when we disagreed (as, of course, we did); we shared a commitment to the project of understanding spiritual experience that comes from performance and what it can do. His generosity, dedication. and sense of humour didn't hurt either.

Kim had a great sense of joy in absurdity; he fit right in into the ludic, ironic world of performance studies. One of the last times I talked with him was from, of all places, the World Expo in Dubai; a bizarre sort of UN-meets-Disney-World simulacra in a desert metropolis built with oil money to house shopping malls, pleasure palaces, and offices of international trade. I sat in front of the Danish pavilion, which featured the recreation of a Viking ship going nowhere as a national icon. Kim would have loved it. All that work to create experiences, all these tourists dutifully consuming, came together to make an experience that was equal parts kitsch, postmodern, endearing and human. Certainly, Kim had good taste, but he was far from judgemental about art or performances that didn't aim as high as they might have. All human experiences were there to understand and learn from and enjoy; a few years back, he gave a paper to the IFTR's Performance and Religion Working Group on the performativity airline safety videos that captured this brilliantly.

This was his generosity. Theologians might call it ecumenical, and I do see both his church upbringing and his own glorious humanity in it, but it served an important intellectual purpose as well. Performative experiences can gesture to things beyond them – the transcendent, potentially including the cosmic – but because those experiences are conditioned by the shape, context, form, and setting of each performance, it is helpful to explore as broad and diverse a set of performances as possible. By crossing cultural, geographic, methodological, and disciplinary boundaries, it becomes easier to see what aspects of what appears to be a spiritual or transcendent experience are in fact culturally specific, and which are not. Certainly, one needs sensitive tools to account for cultural difference, but Kim's intellectual background gave him this. And so, he rushed across borders. He was an exceptionally joyous and curious travel companion. He spent a great deal of time in Aotearoa New Zealand, experiencing the rituals of the Māori.

His generosity stemmed from a conviction that many of us who have found ourselves in this odd nexus of performance and religion share: that at the end of the day, our experiences of the spiritual point to a commonality shared between all humanity and, potentially, all of the cosmos. With empathy, we can share these. With all due respect to the work of cognitive scientists, Jungian psychoanalysts, and universalists linguists, this is more of an ideological conviction than it is a demonstrable fact, even if it is the core claim of most religious traditions.

This generosity, I'd argue, is also what made Kim so aware of the climate crisis. If you see all potential lived experience as a potential source of spiritual learning, then the coming general devastation of our world is particularly harrowing. That others do not share that urgency is a sign of their failure to expand on the limitations of their own experiences.

Creativity, in art or ritual, becomes essential in broadening those experiences quickly and effectively. The mourning parrots of the video piece *The Great Silence* by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla that Kim discussed in his 2020 essay in *Peripiti* (Skjolager-Nielsen 2020: 32-34) are typical, here. In his analysis, we see Kim seeking to understand the human experience by finding common cause with others, here even other species. But imagining experiences of the future, especially on a dramatically changed planet, can also expand our experience empathetically in ways few other methods can. I think that Kim found in some sci-fi influenced works—David Bowie and Stanley Kubrick, for instance—some of the most helpful ways of gesturing out from our own experiences both to shed light on our possible future and to better understand our humanity. This is the same move as understanding the cosmic or spiritual as an expansion of the human experience; indeed, I think Kim saw both the ecological and the spiritual questions as ones that were fundamentally about our place in the cosmos. And phenomenally evocative, semiotically and kinaesthetically rich staged events—whether ritual, theatre, installation, film, or something else—can offer some responses to these questions.

I have tried to make use of this perspective in my own research work. For next two years, I'll be working on a project looking at the ways that the embrace of digitalisation, has changed the ways that religious communities across Europe are constituted, organised and run, and how the ritual performances and experiences engendered by these communities have changed. In the past two years, religious groups of all sorts have learned about the nature and shaping of communities and ritual, and they've gained familiarity and expertise with technologies and means of gathering that were unthinkable before the pandemic. What does this mean for the future of religious life in Europe? One strand of the research project is a consciously Skjoldager-Nielsenian performance analysis of the new rituals that have developed in recent years.

In thinking about how to set up this strand, I had in my mind what Kim would suggest. First, I know he would find it very important to include as many kinds of rituals, from as many different contexts, as possible. But because the work of these rituals comes from experience, it will not be sufficient to simply read about them. We will have to visit them, and ideally not just for the day, but for an extended period of time to collect ethnographic observations from the communities they take place in. This is fairly standard anthropology, in a way, but from Kim, I hope to take a measure of courage that I can, with rigorous contextual study and self-conscious observation, make use of my own phenomenal experience of a ritual as a rich source for analysis.

I have been re-reading Kim's PhD (2018), and his subtle and critical re-reading of Erika Fischer-Lichte's phenomenological analysis of the auto-poeitic feedback loop, and the complex ways that phenomenological experience makes use of both established religious tropes and certain performative patterns to evoke the transcendent. His analysis of the Pōwhiri of Aotearoa, for instance, is an exemplary phenomenal and semiotic analysis of a ritual with which he was not initially familiar, and how meaning and significance were generated in the interaction between participants. Kim is particularly good at including non-human agents in his analysis; he takes their contribution to the experience of staged events seriously in their own right, and does not always treat them as simple manifestations of human decisions. Profound experiences, including transcendent ones, are not limited by physical objects for Kim; they are enabled by them. Again, Kim is no world-denying mystic – he is a theatre scholar who pays

keen, caring attention to the physical, and thus cosmic, details of the performances he witnesses.

This journal, and our field, cast their nets wide, of course, and much of their strength comes from the wide variety of perspectives, foci and methods used by our contributors and collaborators. But for those looking for a role model for innovative, rich contributor to our field, I recommend Kim to you all. He will be missed.

Works cited

Skoldager-Nielsen, Kim. 2018. *Over the Threshold, Into the World: Experiences of Transcendence in the Context of Staged Events.* PhD diss. Stockholm University, Department of Culture and Aesthetics.

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