

# Up Front

## AFTER AMERICA'S ELECTION

*Tom Sellar*

Because this journal's production calendar is long and articles are written months in advance, this is the first edition of *Theater* to launch since the November 2016 election brought Donald Trump to the American presidency. We plan to devote future, topical sections to some of the political exigencies already at hand—crises of nationalism and xenophobia, for instance. But for this edition we wanted to let theater artists speak for themselves.

The election has precipitated political cataclysms almost too numerous to record here, but with major implications for artists and scholars. Among them: the implosion of both major US political parties, leaving factions competing for power with few, if any, ideological underpinnings; the cancellation or altering of policies advancing health care, environmental protections, and civil rights; aggressive assaults on judicial independence and a free press; and an attempted ban on visitors and refugees from a list of Muslim-majority countries. At the time of this writing, the new administration, its allies, and campaign officials were under three separate federal investigations into corruption and possible collusion with Russian agents to hack computer systems of the Democratic party and the Hillary Clinton campaign in order to influence the election's outcome.

These months have been bewildering, as norms fall away and a nation that has served since World War II as the guarantor of a stable world order has now transformed into a disruptor—of alliances, of economic systems, and of democratic standards.

Theatermakers, like all artists, find themselves summoned to many fronts at once. Among proposed deep cuts to “discretionary” national spending—in order to reduce taxes for the wealthy and boost military spending—the executive branch has called for the outright elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Both agencies operate with miniscule budgets (in comparison to other democracies, or to other agencies in the United States) but they nonetheless sustain countless small and regional organizations vital to America's

The Ghostlight  
Project at Seattle  
Repertory Theatre.  
Photo: Logan Riely  
for *The Seattle Times*

cultural fabric. Although opponents assert that the NEA props up elitist big-city high-culture venues, the effects of this change would be felt primarily in rural counties and small cities, where private patrons are fewer. The policy is phony populism, and artists and audiences have already rallied against this cynical political maneuver.

The larger struggle for theatermakers—harder to perceive and define—will be to provide clarity where leaders sow confusion, to inspire when cynicism reigns, and to offer a moral compass while the nation reels in disorientation. This edition shows how creative minds have already risen to the challenge. The celebrated artist Carrie Mae Weems casts her gaze at the historical transitions underway in her performance text *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*. Nobel laureate playwright Elfriede Jelinek's newest work delves into the psyche of *The Burgher King*, a businessman tyrant whose hold on power gets channeled through Miss Piggy, another icon of American narcissism. Critic Jennifer Krasinski considers Taylor Mac's recent 24-hour marathon performance of music from the American songbook, one decade passing with each hour.

Preparing these projects for publication has given us insight and faith at a dispiriting and dark historical moment. We hope that reading them will do the same for you.