“Like Calvino’s Invisible Cities, Sack’s Imagined Theatres are mirages for the mind’s eye, creations by leading artists and scholars that speak of stages that never were but may yet be—an editorial and critical tour de force.”
—Joseph Roach, Sterling Professor of English, African American Studies, American Studies, and Theater at Yale University.

“Imagined Theatres invites us to envision theatre as a utopic ‘no place’ of infinite possibility, in which theory and practice conjoin in a liminal space of creative imagining. Sack brings together contemporary theatre and performance’s brightest artist/thinkers in a constellation of words and images, ideas and propositions that give me hope, not just for the theatre, but for how human beings might interact, relate, and connect in ways that performance helps us conjure. An inspired collection for precarious times.”
—Jill Dolan, Dean of College and Amman Professor of English and Professor of Theater at Princeton University.

What possible and impossible worlds might the theatre imagine?
In what way is writing itself a performance?
How do we understand the relationship between real performances that engender imaginary reflections, and imaginary conceptions that become real theatrical productions?

Imagined Theatres collects hypothetical performances written by nearly one hundred leading theorists and artists of the contemporary stage. These dramatic fragments, prose poems, and microfictions describe imaginary events that put theory itself onstage. Each no longer than a page, and accompanied by a reflective gloss, these texts consider what might be possible and impossible in the theatre.

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Imagined Theatres
Writing for a theoretical stage

Edited by Daniel Sack
In memory of Robin Joy Allan and all her imagined theatres.
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Preface: The horizon

Daniel Sack

The curtain opens endlessly; it does not stop at the proscenium’s jamb, but instead runs on.

What you assumed a line splitting open the frame of a thought is but the tangent of a larger encompassing circle describing the outer curve of your attention. The sound of the tracks recede into what you called offstage, farther and further afield, a train dividing the great dark plains into what is still the theatre and yet already becoming not the theatre.

In what other houses do those other people sit, patient for the slow progress of the veil to reveal their night has truly begun?

Tragedy is all a matter of scale, said Aristotle: You must be able to hold the event in memory or take its full shape in with a single glance.

Indefinitely, on the most distant horizon, the curtain is coming around at the other side of sight, inverting itself like a crimson velvet ouroboros. You think you see it opening still: this life here and now, appearing.
Acknowledgments

One of the innumerable imagined theatres this book does not contain tells the story of a performance that ends, like many theatrical performances, with a curtain call. After all the actors have had their bow, the stage hands begin to emerge—one by one or holding hands in pairs, squinting at the light. They keep coming as the audience’s clapping turns insistent, as the stage fills and they spill over into the orchestra, down the aisles, and out into the lobby—those countless hidden bodies whose labor made the show possible. As if having traveled from far away, from the edges of a theatre that extends to towns or countries unseen, it takes many hours for the last to make their way to the boards. The last hand that moved the theatre bows as dawn brightens the city streets.

Great hosts from near and far have sustained this book, too. Without keeping you here until morning with a list too long to name, a few figures deserve attention: Jane Hwang Degenhardt, LeAnn Fields, Peggy Phelan, Alexandra Ripp, Rebecca Schneider, Jenny Spencer, and Silvia Valisa. Special thanks to Kyle Gillette and Aaron C. Thomas for close readings and outside eyes when I needed them most. Also to Ellie Kevorkian, the “Liveness is Critical” residents, and the entire staff at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts for encouragement at an important moment in the process.

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Kate Edwards for her patience in the face of ever-expanding complications, and, above
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with excitement. He has backed this project unconditionally from the very first.

My acknowledgments begin and end with the contributors to this volume. These are
the people who have long shaped my understanding of the theatre, and have repeatedly
shown me where that understanding confronts its limits. It has been an honor to imagine
alongside them.
A note on the website

The theatre keeps imagining itself anew. Every time we return to the rehearsal room or settle into our seats, we imagine a difference, however small, however subtle. This need not be a matter of disruption; it may be a gesture of conservation or repair. The theatre looks, listens, feels outward from the immediate to discover what could be. Imagined Theatres will continue beyond these covers, too. Alongside the publication of this book, a website offers bridges farther and further afield.

Imaginedtheatres.com is an open-access online journal with two streams for further development. Beginning in the summer of 2017, new “issues” containing texts by 15–25 authors will be released every six months. Under the stewardship of a guest editor or team of editors, each issue focuses on a geographic area overlooked by the book, beginning with South Africa (Summer 2017) and then Australia/New Zealand (Winter 2017). Later issues will move into translation and may incorporate other themes in time. While these volumes follow the basic structure of the book, guest editors may decide to articulate a slightly different orientation for each subsequent collection.

In addition, the site contains an ever-growing archive of select user-submitted work. In an effort to treat this material with the attention often reserved for more conventional academic production, an editorial board peer-reviews and curates these texts before publication. You are invited to send your own writing for consideration—in glossed or unglossed form—via the links provided on the website. The technologies afforded by the site will allow for new arrangements and constellations to take shape within this archive, discovering how the digital imagines the theatre differently from the book.

The platform will evolve over time, but web-exclusive work is already available. You will find a list of references to earlier writings that might be called imagined theatres, as well as links to contemporary artists whose existing work covers similar terrain. A series of pedagogical applications are outlined, providing suggestions for classroom and workshop use. Here, too, we welcome accounts of different uses that you have made of this material. Collectively, we hope to foster a second universe of theatrical possibilities, by turns inspiring and responding to the actual production it exists alongside.
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The lights rise on a room not unlike this one. At center a table with a cardboard box on it. After a moment, a figure enters and sits down. The figure opens the box and takes out a book, opens the book and begins to read.

The lights rise on a room not unlike this one. At center a table with a cardboard box on it. After a moment, a figure enters and sits down. The figure opens the box and takes out a miniature theatre. It is made of paper, remarkably intricate in its design—all the parts and pieces down to the smallest scale, are in perfect working order. There are lines that maneuver drops, levers that dim lights, machines that lift gods high, walkways that lead to buildings within buildings, some labyrinthine echo from the Noh stage. A trick of smoke and mirrors seems to immerse you as a participant one moment and then another places you watching from outside, the stage hiding behind a proscenium, or thrusting forward, even surrounding at once on all sides. Obsolete mechanisms stand side by side with mysterious devices that promise unforeseen revelations. What are they all for?

You want to take it apart. You want to get at the essence of the theatre, even if you know it’s a quixotic venture. This is how the poet/theorist Charles Baudelaire explained the destructive inclination so common to children—that “first metaphysical tendency”—to tear apart the toy to find the heart of the machine that sets it in motion. If the toy or miniature dreams a secret life (as another poet/theorist, Susan Stewart, has it), then the theatre guarantees some other prime mover behind the scenes, a stagehand at the board or prompter feeding lines.¹ In this case, I claim responsibility for casting you in the performance that is the reading of this book, but there are many of us back here, each proposing a different event that might dress you in strange costumes and take you in stranger directions.

Imagened Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage is such a paper theatre—or, rather, a universe of paper theatres—bringing together short conceptual performances written by close to one hundred artists and theorists of the stage. Each writer offers a text one page in length, describing an event that may or may not be performed in some future theatre to come. Another single page text faces each theatre, written by the same author or another: a gloss outlining a critical context, a history, or a personal reflection, which models one of many possible responses to the hypothetical event. Imagined Theatres works in fragments, only suggesting the outline of a shape and leaving the reader to fill out the volume. For the imagination flits and falters; it does not finish a form or stick to its intentions; it fragments attention.

These “imagined theatres” might seem illogical or fantastical; they might break the laws of physics and etiquette. Or perhaps they could be staged in some ideal architecture
where the finances, conventions, ethics, or other practicalities of actual production do not hold sway. Each is a thought experiment about the expectations of the theatre, a parable or paradox that touches upon its nature and elaborates on the many ways in which that nature might be conceived. *Imagined Theatres* gathers together what may initially seem impossible in order that its readers might interrogate where that impossibility lies and what lies are obscured by calling it “impossible.” (For is anything truly impossible in a theatre?)

Many of the imagined theatres in the following pages provoke questions of performance’s fundamental dimensions: time and space. Some stretch the duration of an event to last a lifetime or to outlive many generations, while others pass momentarily. Great accumulations fill the page with a density that exceeds the carrying capacity of the theatre’s confines: cities, nations, whole ecosystems and vast complexities flicker into appearance. They literalize the long-lived philosophical conceit of the *theatrum mundi*, the world as stage, and make theatres of canyons and gardens. They open prosceniums that look out upon the edges of outer space to choreograph a dance between planets, mount a conflict between microscopic actors, or frame a people in migration as performances.

Others ask us to reconsider who or what gets to perform on a stage. The theatre may be largely concerned with humans watching other humans in action—holding a mirror up to (human) nature, as Hamlet put it in his address to the actors about to perform his own imagined play. But in an age when non-human animals, objects, technologies, and the ecological surrounds at large are recognized as living actors, participating in events far more intricate than any Disney-like dream of anthropomorphic song and dance might portray, we require an expanded ethics and sociality born out of interspecies and interanimate relations. With its histories and para-histories of puppets, circus, and animal shows, the theatre might pose responsible ways of thinking and acting with the non-human. It shows how that mountain is doing something, how the ocean is delivering us a message.

Historically and culturally defined conventions limit the theatre in ways as profound as any seeming natural order. In confronting these conventions directly, word for word, imagined theatres show us what should be possible today, what thinkers like Jill Dolan and José Muñoz have framed as the utopic aspect of performance. Such proposals demand that we reconsider theatre’s publics, that we create spaces welcoming those normally without the means and time to access its offerings, or whose makers do not require approval from the gatekeepers of cultural acceptability or normativity. They play with the concrete materiality of labor conditions, imagining theatres that recompense performers fairly, or give voice to underrepresented participants. They turn our attention to sites where people are made socially and politically invisible—prisons, hospitals, schools—or force us to look hard at the undersides of institutions devoted to display—theatres, museums, cinemas. Since the theatre is contiguous to the everyday, as these pieces challenge art they also challenge quotidian life (knowing that these two dimensions can never be separated). To call these “imaginary” is to recognize the current prejudices of artmaking in the Anglophone world, but it is also to recognize that theatre is anything but fixed and stable; it changes in different contexts and times. There have been many theatres, and there will be many more.

Some of these texts will not look like theatrical texts at first glance. Remember how Marcel Duchamp signed a name to a urinal and thereby turned that overlooked mundane receptacle into a voluptuous porcelain sculpture. He placed this “readymade” object into the frame of a museum, called it “art,” and thus the definition of art had to alter to accommodate the interloper. So, too, walk across a stage and you will become an actor;
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place a chair on its boards and it will begin to perform something. With *Imagined Theatres*, you might think of the page itself as a stage or performance space where anything that enters its field becomes a player. This expansion of the term “theatre” applies to the form of the writing as much as its content. Yes, there are scripts in here with characters and speeches, italicized stage directions like the ones that opened this very introduction. Yet other texts appear as sets of instructions, stories in prose, or poems in verse. Some are closer to what goes by the name of “philosophy,” or “history,” or “confession.” What happens to these texts when they are called “theatres”? What is gained or presumed by such a designation? What is lost?

Imagining the limit cases of a theatrical event, one might come closer to understanding what theatre in its broadest conception can be and do. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said of his own writing, “I am not interested in constructing a building, as much as in having a perspicacious view of the foundations of possible buildings.”² For Wittgenstein, this meant a reflection on the nature of language itself, communication as a game that we play with others, almost always according to unspoken rules. He described his writing as a ladder of language that might be used to climb outside the building of language and then regard its foundations. So, too, the hypotheticals of *Imagined Theatres* are intended to see and put pressure on the actual makeup of the medium.

If *Imagined Theatres* is a building, then it is one with many, many rooms. Its occupants are named and addressed towards the rear of the volume; there you will also find what might be thought a kind of basement or attic collecting Related works for each of the theatres contained herein (to keep the academic apparatus at bay except where it plays a necessary part, any references mentioned in these theatres will be found there). A final section provides a set of maps, or Constellations, illustrating different methods of access and escape. Otherwise, the book follows a consistent modular structure that could be expanded endlessly. Each left-hand side page—the verso—contains an imagined theatre. Facing it, each recto presents a page-long gloss. Some contributors have written glosses on their own work; others have been asked to dialogue with another contributor—perhaps someone with whom they have worked extensively, perhaps a complete stranger.

For millennia, readers from China to Egypt to Greece and beyond have annotated books with marginal commentary serving as explanation, interpretation, or reminders to future readers—perhaps even one’s own future self. To “gloss” in this manner is to participate in a text, to make the reader’s performance apparent. In dialogue with their original authors, these parasitic texts present arguments for, against, and alongside their host. I say “parasitic,” because a gloss is beside (a para-site), but also because a gloss is not merely a transparent double. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that “gloss” is “often used in a sinister sense: a sophistical or disingenuous interpretation.” For a gloss might also cast a lustrous layer atop a text, a sheen on the scene; it might divert attention or draw a veil or curtain over the original text. This insinuation of deceptive behavior and superficial appearance feels particularly apropos to the theatre, which has faced similar charges throughout a long history of antitheatrical prejudice stretching back to Plato. So, too, the theoretical has often been charged with hiding behind obtuse jargon—another form of duplicity that has produced antipathy among many readers. I’d like to suggest, then, that these glosses theatricalize the theoretical act.

Discourse around the theatre usually presumes a binary that sets practice/performance/art on one side and theory/criticism/scholarship on the other. *Imagined Theatres* prefers to see a continuum in place of an opposition: an imagined theatre lies closer to the practice end while still connected to theory, just as its gloss lies closer to theory while still
participating in creative practice. Some of the glosses here resemble theatrical scenarios themselves, and some of the theatres, too, read like glosses on some other pre-existing theatre that has gone missing. To echo the performance theorist Richard Schechner’s understanding of the liminal state of play, where the actor is both not herself and not not herself, one might say that an imagined theatre is at once not theatre and not not theatre, just as a gloss is not theory and not not theory.3

As the subtitle to this book has it, imagined theatres and their glosses together comprise a multitude of “theoretical stages.” An obsolete meaning of theory was “a sight, a spectacle,” sharing a common root with the theatre as a “place of looking” from the Greek word theatron. These texts are theoretical performances in that they make a spectacle of theory, they make it perform. They are also theoretical performances in that they are provisional and hypothetical. They could be, but they could also not be. Theory in the theatre most often happens in response to performance, circulating in conversations after the fact that do not include or effect practitioners. But what if the theoretical happened as an event in itself? What if the act of imagining a theatre were an event with real consequences? And what if the theatre were taken seriously as a mode for theorizing beyond its own stages?

This book rests on the belief that the theatre allows us to theorize about our world as if it were another and to test that difference in motion, in time. An engine of cosmogony, the theatre creates, according to Elinor Fuchs, “another world passing before you in time and space.”4 This is why the theatre has long been a favorite metaphor for philosophers seeking to imagine a closed system with a logic of its own. When Plato wanted to tell us about the nature of reality, he asked us to imagine a theatre. Not the open-air auditorium overlooking ancient Athens that he knew so well and upon which he watched the performances of his day; rather, he invented a proto-cinema with shadow puppets dancing on a cave wall. Recall, too, that the dialogues the philosopher wrote—theatres that staged debates between his protagonist/teacher Socrates and a rotating cast of antagonists—were initially read for small audiences; staged readings even if these did not fully embrace imitation through costumes and sets. Indeed, in his book The Drama of Ideas (2010), Martin Puchner has argued that, at odds with the conflicts of the Athenian tragedies, these Socratic dramas originated a counter-tradition of philosophical theatre performing argumentation in place of action. Thinkers like George Berkeley (Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, 1713), Denis Diderot (Rameau’s Nephew, 1762), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Dialogues, 1776) imagined theatrical conversations intended to think through the limits of philosophy.

Imagined Theatres joins a long history of impossible theatres or theatrical performances conceived for the page.5 Many plays written will never reach the stage, in spite of their authors’ best intentions. Maybe these works do not find a willing or able producer; maybe they make demands that exceed the means of production. Seneca’s Roman tragedies were probably unstaged, indulging instead in an elaborate spoken description of violence that threatened to overwhelm representation. In distinction to these works, there are those dramatic texts deliberately written to be read, whose ideal stage is the page itself. The closet drama exemplifies such a theatre of the book. Romantic poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and modernist poets of the twentieth century alike proposed events that challenged the very constitution of the theatre, while the Marquis de Sade’s Philosophy in the Bedroom (1795) staged scenes of erotic couplings and unmentionable desires. Unmoored from visible anchors and material constraints, only such closet drama, Puchner suggests,
can actually change a man into a woman, place thousands of people on an impossible
stage, and even turn objects and fragmented body parts into agents … This resistance
is part of a larger resistance to the limitations of the theater and the normativity that
stems from them. It is this possibility of resistance, built into the very structure of
the closet drama, that necessitates what one might call an epistemology of the closet
drama.6

Such bookbound performance increasingly finds its way into theatrical production
today. In one of the episodes of their Life and Times project (2009–present), for example,
Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper of Nature Theater of Oklahoma gave each spectator in a
darkened audience their own copy of a hand-drawn pornographic comic book, letting
each individual leaf through the explicit drawings under the private illumination of their
own handheld flashlight. A chamber full of private fantasies danced in those dim globes
of localized light. (For their contribution to this book, you will be required to bring your
own magnifying glass.)

The name of the Nature Theater of Oklahoma derives from an imagined theatre that
Franz Kafka describes in a brief fragment from his incomplete novel Amerika (1927). A
whole city of theatrical re-performance on the move across the Great Plains of the US,
the Nature Theatre of Kafka’s book offers a utopic promise of redemption for the pro-
tagont, Karl, and his fellow immigrants and vagabonds lost en route to the American
Dream.7 Fiction writers and poets have often imagined theatres as metaphors and con-
ceptual sites where divergent worlds nest within other worlds. Roberto Bolaño’s extraor-
dinary novel 2666 (2004) turns to the image of a theatre to make sense of the monstrosity
of Santa Teresa, Mexico—a fictionalized version of the violent city of Juárez. He perverts
Plato’s theatre–cave into a mine–like hellmouth where the spectacle of brutality engulfing
the city is always obscured or merely overheard by a diverted audience. And then there
is the nightmarish performance in the opening chapter of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man
(1952), where the narrator and other young black men are tortured, blindfolded, and
forced to fight each other in a makeshift arena for the amusement of the leading white
men of society. This concludes with the terrified narrator’s re-performance of his high
school graduation speech to the mockery and celebration of the assembled masses—an
allegorical theatre of mid–century America that reflects racism far too familiar today.
From novels like Hermann Hesse’s Steppenwolf (1927) and Virginia Woolf’s Between the
Acts (1941), to the poetry of Gertrude Stein and Anne Carson, writers across different
literary genres provide rich examples of the kind of work that this volume collects.

Imagined Theatres is primarily concerned with what the language of theatre might
afford our thinking, but precedents in the visual arts have explored related ground.
The early happenings and chance-based events of John Cage or Allan Kaprow from
the 1950s and 1960s often originated in a score that organized time and space into
formations of possible actions. These events were usually performed by the artist, or at
least in his or her presence. However, Kaprow soon began creating instruction works
for individuals to perform on their own time and in their own space—the scores,
perhaps with an attendant prop, stood in for the event as artwork. In the conceptual
art of the 1960s and 1970s, actualization of a proposition was not compulsory; it was
even considered redundant once an idea had been proposed. Take one example among
many: Yoko Ono’s 1962 Instructions for Painting and subsequent work collected in the
books Grapefruit (1964–1972) and Acorn (2013) separate the linguistic construction of an
event from its enactment, presenting hypothetical occasions “for dealing with oneself.”8
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She asks us to envision situations that reframe the world around the subject: imagine secretly speeding up all the clocks in the world by two seconds (*Clock piece*) or opening a small hole in a canvas and looking at the world through its window (*Painting to see the room*). Though some of these have been realized, Ono conceived of them as “paintings to construct in the head,” rather than atop some material support. Between artist and spectator, “there [is] maybe a dream that two dream together, but there is no chair that two see together.”

Theatre theorists and artists have also often wondered over hypothetical events and worlds that might test the limits of the stage. Antonin Artaud wrote performance texts describing tableaus of apocalyptic proportions for his promised Theatre of Cruelty, but his essays, too, manifest events upon the stage of the reader—sometimes on the very body and nerves of his imaginary audience. As writers like Jacques Derrida have argued, Artaud’s dream of a theatre without representation is impossible to actualize, but it has nonetheless inspired generations of performance makers. If contributors to this collection repeatedly return to Samuel Beckett’s work, it is perhaps because so many of his non-dramatic texts describe events that might be staged in some theatre at the end of our world, but also because his plays seem to take place on a nearly internal register for the spectator, a fragmented figure lit by attention against the black surround. Marguerite Duras wrote plays for disembodied voices or novellas written in dialogue form that imitate plays but resist enactment on a stage always already corrupted by an inherently patriarchal representation. These are conceptual theatres, impossible perhaps, limning shapes from the depths of consciousness. The late director and theorist Herbert Blau, too, spoke of one such imagined theatre in an interview published in *PAJ* (*Performing Arts Journal*):

> I’ve always wanted to create a theatre that would be … like Picasso’s sculptured “Death’s Head” [1941]. So dense it would be almost like a black hole, the gravity so great it would warp back into itself and come out the other side. And yet, it would be like that sculpture, impacted, dense, or as if set in stone. I’ve always wanted to create a theatre event[t] that had such mass and spatial power, such density in its passing that it would be virtually absolute.

Even before I invited them to conceive texts for this volume, many of the contributors here had written or performed work that belongs in the library of imagined theatres. A set of connected pieces by Tim Etchells (*230 Titles: I, II, and III*) stand in the foyer of this alphabetically organized collection; they are marquees announcing productions that are not contained here, but that might be imagined taking place in some forgotten buried venue. For more than thirty years, Etchells has been artistic director of Forced Entertainment, a collective of five artists/performers based in Sheffield, England, that has excavated a theatre not unlike the one his alter-ego describes in the gloss to these first works. In an email exchange we had at the outset of this book project, Etchells charted the company’s engagement with the imaginary:

> Marking a break with Forced Entertainment’s largely physical and visual work to that date, *Dirty Work*—the performance I made with the group in 1998—took the form of an imaginary performance summoned only via descriptive text from the performers on stage. Writing at the time, I framed the piece as a kind of virtual or imaginary performance, unpacked by the audience who were co-opted as authorial collaborators, drawn into the act of picturing the events described.
As a solo artist, too, Etchells has employed language as a prompt to make the spectator/reader a collaborator in the work. *Surrender Control* (2001) and *A Short Message Spectacle* (2010), for example, were instructional dramas delivered by mobile phone text messaging to individual audience members who had subscribed to experience the work.

My year-long Internet project *Vacuum Days* (2011), later published as a book and presented as posters, comprised a rolling program of imaginary events announced online at the rate of one per day. The 365 announcements of absurd performances, spectacles, debates, contests, film-screenings and other events was a distorted process of call and response with unfolding political situations and events during the course of 2011, mirroring the ubiquitous language of sensationalist media, news-as-pornography, hyped-up current affairs, Internet spam, twitter gossip, and tabloid headlines.

Then there is Ricardo Dominguez’s work with the Electronic Disturbance Theater, a company he co-founded with Brett Stalbaum, Micha Cárdenas, Amy Sara Carroll, and Elle Mehrmand. Consider the *Transborder Immigrant Tool* (2007), a hypothetical mobile app intended to locate water sources and provide emergency assistance and poetry to those walking across the desert spaces between the US and Mexico. Even though the application was never developed, the project was under investigation by the US Congress; right-wing political agitator Glenn Beck deemed the piece a gesture that potentially “dissolved” the US border with its poetry. As Diana Taylor describes it, “the idea of helping undocumented immigrants, not the tool, proved powerful and radically altered the way in which power had to respond.”

Or consider how Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish—director and dramaturge, respectively, of the Chicago-based performance companies Goat Island and Every house has a door—have worked at the hinterlands of their performers’ capacities. *The Sea & Poison* (1998–2002), for example,

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Watching these willful failures to actualize a series of actions, one could feel a kind of ghost choreography of intentions hovering over a space so filled with sweat and strain. It’s an approach that the company has taken up in other ways, creating spaces in which an audience might imagine an otherwise inaccessible time or space—the architecture of a building (*The Lastmaker*, 2007), the theatre extending beyond the theatre space (*Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.*, 2010), or a series of crimes or accidents traced in legal documents (*Testimonium*, 2013). Conversely, artist Rose English has exhibited the remains of theatrical events that never were performed, turning the imagination back towards what might have been, while choreographer Emily Johnson has fostered participatory performances that ask dancers and local communities to together imagine events they would like to see realized in the future through long gatherings lasting the night or for days on end. Finally, fatally, Jonathan Ball’s collection of prose poems *Clockfire* (2006), several of which have been reprinted here, describes imagined
theatres that hollow out the very possibility of theatre’s survival or one’s passage through it. So, too, the scholars in this collection have written in ways that trouble what we mean by a theatre, forcing us to reckon with a diversity of traditions, outlooks, and political exigencies that stress the conventions of this ever-changing art.

Writing about and doing theatre have long been intertwined in my understanding of this art. I first started exploring directing and devising while I was also beginning to study the history and theory of performance in graduate school at Stanford University. As conceived by what was then called the Department of Drama, the two courses—practical and theoretical—both pursued a common end: they demanded one imagine what could be put onstage. Incited by my readings and by the weekly problems that the late Carl Weber asked us to perform in his directing workshop, I dreamed up and wrote out scenarios that seemed impossible, conceptions far beyond my means and time. There was the play comprised entirely of accidents, the scene in which the audience secretly watched the stage technicians building the set of *Mother Courage* for weeks on end, the performance where we burned the theatre to the ground, and so on. I jotted these fragments down in notebooks or saved them in files titled “future projects.” (And here I was not so far removed from Joe Kelleher’s piece *The Theatre of the Town* in the pages that follow.) Even as I moved further into an academic career of writing, further from my theatre-making, I kept adding to my stockpile of imagined theatres. These became places for a concept to play out in ways my academic work did not allow, or where I might extend some greater distance the suggestion a performance conveyed.

In 2011, I made some of these imaginings public on a blog I called *Behind this Curtain*. I thought the curtain emblematic of the theatre’s fundamental function—a means of appearance and disappearance at once. Anything could be held behind this curtain. I conceived a theatre of endlessly unfolding layers of curtains, constructed of any and all materials: transparent, translucent, opaque. One entry put it this way:

> I am a writer and only occasionally a director, so most of my imagined theatres must remain in utero, suspended in conception without actualization. […] Behind each imagining lies the expectation that these will take place some day or that they have already taken place in one of the countless theatres that gleam dimly in some subterranean quarter of this world of ours. A kind of contradiction in terms, an imagined theatre is an impossibility clinging fast to its eventual realization.

I knew that others had their own dreamed-of and hoped-for theatres. Sometimes, sitting in a darkened auditorium, I would drift into a reverie, wondering what the director or designer or playwright or actor would do if they could do anything. Or, when at an academic conference, listening to scholars present their research, I would sense some underlying impulse at the root of their inquiry. I would dream of interrupting, asking to hear of their imagined theatres. Instead, I began to gather people together with this in mind, presenting a compilation of such texts first with two friends and fellow artist-scholars, Kyle Gillette and Rachel Joseph, then in a series of solo readings and workshops where those in attendance might write or share their own inventions. In classrooms and in late-night conversations, I asked people to tell me of their imagined theatres, to write them down. I imagined an endless festival of these works.

This book is the further development of that project. What began as an invitation to twenty writers quickly expanded to include a host far more numerous. And then, over the course of several months, small gifts of extraordinary writing began to arrive in my
inbox on a daily basis. It has been a rather private delight, and I am anxious to see it made public.

If I take this moment’s divergence into personal recollection, it is to signal that my own history, worries, and predilections have shaped this book’s constitution—I hope in ways that inspire others, but certainly also in ways I cannot see. I have tried to find some version of a whole here, but this is in no way a comprehensive representation of the theatre and its constituent parts. The miniature theatre imagined at the beginning of this introduction is the fantastical theatre of all theatres past and future, all ready to perform, but not yet in action. Of course, it would be impossible to hold all these different traditions and approaches in a single space or time, or even to name them—the black box, the white cube, the theatre-in-the-round, the kabuki stage, the Greek auditorium, the Italianate proscenium, the street theatre, the invisible theatre, and so on. The library of imagined theatres stretches as far and wide as Borges’ seemingly infinite Library of Babel, but this book, like all books, must find a beginning and an end.

And so I have decided to only invite contributors who explicitly work in or on the theatre: theatre artists, performance makers, choreographers, and scholars of the same. Another vision for this book would include texts by artists and theorists of performance in the gallery or everyday life, perhaps writers who don’t work in performance at all, such as philosophers or political theorists. I have also asked that these theatres be constructed only out of written language—no images or diagrams. Another version would be comprised entirely of photographs or drawings from designers and visual artists.

Needing some further limit to this compendium, and wanting to establish some common geographical and historical ground between diverse voices, only contributors based in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland will be found in these pages. I have broken my rules in one instance: in acknowledgment of the profound debt I feel to the imagination of the Italian director Romeo Castellucci, an artist who consistently ruptures distinctions between possibility and impossibility, I have invited him to share an offering beyond the arbitrary geographical boundaries of *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage*. This sally presages more far-ranging wanders to come. An accompanying website ([www.imaginedtheatres.com](http://www.imaginedtheatres.com)) will slowly expand this scope with issues published every several months, compiling texts originating from other regions and, eventually, texts written in other languages. The website will also maintain an ever-expanding archive of user-submitted imagined theatres, selected and edited by a panel of artists and scholars. Readers are encouraged to put words to their own imaginings and contribute to this conglomeration of possible worlds via the website.

In other words, these are not merely texts for reading. You may choose to write your own imagined theatres, or respond to those written here with your own glosses, your own theatres. Playwrights, directors, designers, actors, and other performance makers are encouraged to try to stage these pieces—indeed, scholars and others who do not consider themselves theatre practitioners should do the same. (Note, however, that each of the writers in this book retains the rights to any professional production of their contribution.) Such a practice might force you to explore new methods of representation to circumvent the seemingly impossible. These imagined theatres might provide ways to rethink theatre history, performance practice, poetics, and philosophy, and it is hoped that they will be taken up in the seminar room or studio with this in mind.

There are any number of ways in which you might decide to approach this book. Like an anthology of poems or a series of microfictions, each individual voice invokes a world
that may be dense and strange. Mimicking the (dis)organization of Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), which arranges its fragments alphabetically to prevent the illusion of a single narrative shaping the whole, I have opted to place these imagined theatres in alphabetical order according to title. You may find yourself dipping in to read a few at a time, deciding to flip forward and backward by chance. Or you might prefer to follow one of the many paths outlined at the end of this book, each Constellation guiding the reader through a cluster of works that speak to one another about a common subject or mode. These different trajectories acknowledge the fact that any number of relations might connect the worlds in this theatrical universe, more arrangements than can be characterized here. I invite you to chart your own.

If my imagined theatre with which I began is made of paper, then it is a book. And it is finally a closed book, containing the infinite array of happenings that may be put on stage. For Stéphane Mallarmé, the perfect book is the closed book—not the blank page, but in the words of the poet Maggie Nelson, “one whose pages have never been cut, their mystery forever preserved, like a bird’s folded wing, or a fan never opened.” Present on the page, but suspended before the reader, such a book occupies a peculiar form of what I’ve taken to calling performative potentiality, its capacity to do many things at once; it says nothing in particular even as it presents the quintessence of bookishness. Such a closed book could contain anything and everything in its pages. It may describe your greatest fear or be the one and only book you need right now. It may be the book you will write some day. Or it might just be another book on the shelf beside others.

It is a book, in other words, awaiting the event that will be its reading, an undisclosed performance with the lines written, rehearsed, and ready. A space has been prepared for you, the props laid out. Your interpretation of the role will be unlike any other. You take the stage as the lights dim. You open the book and begin to read.

Notes

1 Susan Stewart writes: “That the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life—indeed, to reveal a set of actions and hence a narrativity and history outside the given field of perception—is a constant daydream that the miniature presents. This is the daydream of the microscope: the daydream of life inside life, of significance multiplied infinitely within significance.” In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 54.

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 7e. At the end of his first book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein wrote: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)” It is from the height of the ladder that he might look down on the foundations of other possible propositions. Do we use the theatre to get outside the theatre, to see the senselessness of its rules and regulations? See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London and New York: Routledge, 1974), 74.


5 While scholars like W.B. Worthen have reminded us that scripts do not necessarily precede performance or dictate its happenings, it is certainly the case in western drama that many texts are written before they are enacted in performance. This is not true in all traditions or of all forms of performance: dance, for example, is often choreographed on and through a body, its writing taking place in the aftermath of transmission.


See www.goatislandperformance.org.


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Orfeo. An Exercise in Dying. Directed by Susanne Kennedy, Suzan Boogaerdt, and Bianca van der Schoot. Zollverein Essen, Ruhrtriennale, August 2015.


