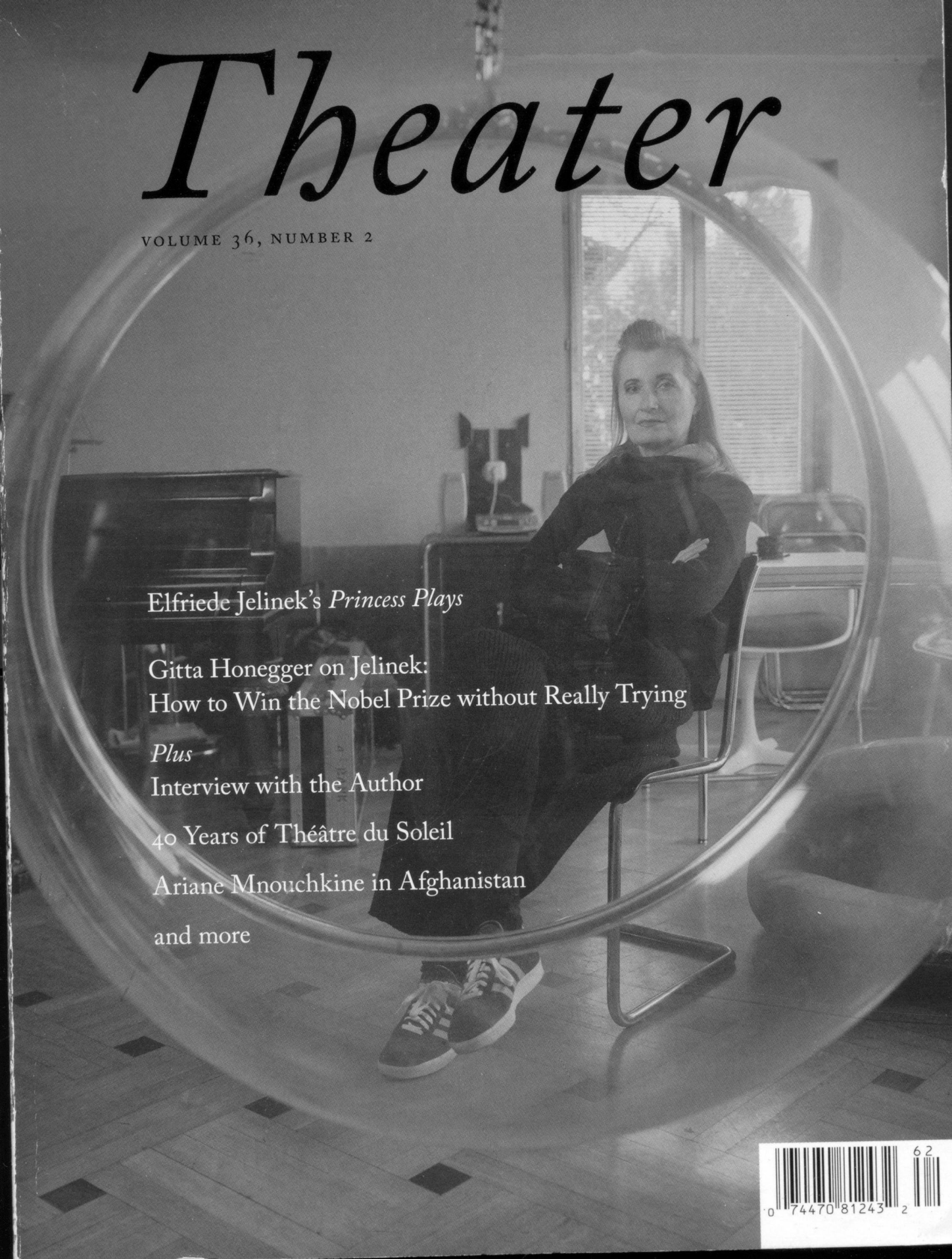


Theater

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 2

Elfriede Jelinek's *Princess Plays*

Gitta Honegger on Jelinek:
How to Win the Nobel Prize without Really Trying

Plus
Interview with the Author

40 Years of Théâtre du Soleil

Ariane Mnouchkine in Afghanistan

and more

0 74470 81243 2

Brook's own "review" of Kustow's book during that conversation was that he thought Kustow "too friendly." He "doesn't find flattery interesting," preferring "only sharp, critical comments." But sharp comments about what even Kustow calls "Brook's impassivity," referring to the hurt he felt when David Hare "took the opportunity to lash out at Brook's evasiveness," are most likely not what he has in mind. "Fright of commitment" is the charge leveled by Hare, actually echoing Bharucha's charges fourteen years earlier: Brook, Hare says, has "set about draining plays of any specific meaning or context to a point where each became the same play—a universal hippie." The Brook-Hare exchange of letters that followed did indeed bring them to a point or two where each seemed to be understanding his opponent. But it reads finally as a moment in which Brook had been lured from his lair: it isn't a pretty observation, I know, but time has caught up with the eternal mind focused on timelessness. He has been the most wondrous of directors in both centuries, but with the world in real ruins rather than the attractively remodeled ruin in Brooklyn, his opaque replies to a question with still another question simply aren't good enough.

Note

1. See Rustom Bharucha, "Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*: A View from India," *Theater* 19 (Spring 1988): 6–20; reprinted in his *Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of Culture* (1990).

Marina Kotzamani

Artist Citizens in the Age of the Web

The Lysistrata Project (2003–present)

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, one of theater history's foremost antiwar plays, recently figured prominently once again in an original activist effort. The Lysistrata Project comprised more than a thousand readings of the play around the globe on March 3, 2003, in order to protest the then-imminent U.S. war against Iraq. The project was inspired by two North American actors, Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower, who used the resources of the Internet to get more than 300,000 people from fifty-nine countries to participate in the readings.[1] Remarkably, this grassroots effort, which would not have been possible in the pre-Web era, grew into something very large very fast and at minimal cost. Within a week Blume and Bower had designed a site that gave information on the project and encouraged participation. They spent only $35 to set up the server space and were able to organize the readings in about six weeks.[2]

Reading *Lysistrata* on the southeast slope of the Acropolis, 2003. Courtesy of Maria Papadimitriou

The Lysistrata Project was designed to attract wide participation. A simple, immediate letter posted on the Web site invited everyone to assume responsibility in preventing war by undertaking "a theatrical act of dissent." It read: "Are you frustrated by the buildup to war? Do you feel as if there isn't something you can do? Well, here's something you CAN do. Do a reading of *Lysistrata* on March 3 and be part of the Lysistrata Project."[3]

What ensured this invitation's broad success was the project's decentralized, flexible framework, allowing great freedom for individual action and expression. Blume and Bower—who, at the launch of the project, described themselves as

poor, unemployed actors—hardly fit the traditional model of the all-powerful theater director who shapes and oversees every aspect of production.[4] Their role in the Lysistrata Project was, rather, that of enablers in the sense that they provided the conditions for others to engage in creation of a collective work. As Blume has explained: "Rather than entertaining and inspiring people from the top down, we set up a situation where they could entertain and inspire each other. We gave people an opportunity to express their own power and their own voice. We told them: 'we are just here to help. You tell this story as you think best. You create this world as you want it to be.'"[5]

Indeed, a "reading" of *Lysistrata* could consist of anything from a full-fledged artistic production to an actual reading of the play to a simple telling of Aristophanes' story in one's own words. It could take place anywhere, from an established theater to one's own living room. An event could be adapted to suit the needs of professional companies prepared to invest time in perfecting their output, or to match the needs of people unconnected to theater with limited time to spare. To further facilitate participation, the project's Web site offered concrete suggestions for putting together a reading in ten easy steps ("Pick a time. Get a translation of the play that you like. Cast the roles. Make the project visible").[6] The site also provided more than a dozen versions of Aristophanes' play translated into several languages for participants to download and use, from faithful unexpurgated translations to a condensed five-minute version appropriate for performances at the office.

This hands-on approach proved effective in encouraging ordinary people, worldwide, to make political statements in an immediate and direct way, employing creative means. The Lysistrata Project inspired richly diverse and imaginative renderings of the drama, ranging in style and content from epic drama to documentary theater to multimedia versions and pure storytelling. The press delighted in reporting on odd, exotic, or celebrity-oriented readings but showed little interest in exploring their aesthetic and political impact.[7] In London actors read an epic version of *Lysistrata* before the Houses of Parliament. They wore blindfolds, which they tore off and waved, becoming what they called "a chorus of disapproval."[8] At Grand Central Station in New York, a storyteller performed a children's version, which began, "In the very old days in ancient Greece, women didn't use to do the same jobs men did. Women swept and dusted and tidied their houses . . . but men knew nothing else but making war."[9] In Hilversum, a small town in the Netherlands, Malrous Laval created a radio documentary combining excerpts from Aristophanes with interviews with politicians and reports from war zones around the world. In Israel one event coordinator mobilized storytellers to go out into communities to tell the Lysistrata story in as many locations as possible.

I have firsthand knowledge of two readings that took place in Athens and Patras, Greece, respectively. They contrasted sharply in approach, giving a good sense of the project's potential creative range. The first, which I organized in collaboration with the artist Maria Papadimitriou, happened on the Pnyx, the original meeting place

of the Athenian assembly on the southeastern slope of the Acropolis. Our choice of space alluded literally and symbolically to the Acropolis not only as the original site of the women's mobilization in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, but also as an enduring and timely emblem of democracy itself. The participants—artists, their friends, and relatives—made for a very festive and humorous crowd; they wore long wigs, huge breasts, and phalluses appropriate to the interpretation of the play as well as to the carnival season that was then being celebrated in Greece. The Acropolis reading was loud, open, and well publicized. It was addressed to the demos, the city at large: passersby, tourists, and the Greek population who could watch excerpts broadcast on national television.

By contrast, the Patras reading was low-key, even humble, and had a certain subversive quality. It was organized by Panos Kouros, an artist and architect who teaches at the School of Architecture at the University of Patras. The event made use of the neoclassical ruins of an old marketplace in the city's center, a site that functioned as a ghetto for Kurdish political refugees, who had occupied the building and used it during the day to meet, watch television, drink tea, go to the barber, pray, or wash clothes. The *Lysistrata* reading engaged about fifty people drawn from the refugees (all male) and Kouros's architecture students. Several students read excerpts from the play while, simultaneously, others held discussions with the Kurds about their political situation. At one point there was a power outage, but the event continued in candlelight and had great intimacy. Kouros has written: "We could see our shadows in the white tent and we could feel more the voices. This created a very strong feeling of humanity, and a sense of sharing the same hopes and fears. We spoke in ancient Greek (text), modern Greek (text and dialogues), some English and Kurdish (through spontaneous translations). We also talked a lot with our eyes, our movement and our body. We drank tea."[10]

Politically, this event held complex significance. As a protest against the war in Iraq, it was ambivalent: The Kurds had fled Saddam Hussein's Iraq and were hopeful that the war would enable them to return. At the same time, they criticized America's war as a nationalist and expansionist project. On another level, as Kouros mentions, the reading created awareness among the student participants that Greece has a poor record in the recognition of political refugees.[11] The two Greek readings also jointly raised interesting gender issues. The predominantly male Patras reading involved trespassing and had a clandestine quality; the female-initiated reading in Athens confidently asserted women's presence in a public space once restricted to men in antiquity.

The *Village Voice* noted that the project proposes an intimate conception of political protest, contrasting with the blaring messages of the mass media and of mass demonstrations.[12] Indeed, the Lysistrata Project is intimate, in the sense that it allows us to hear, at least in principle, the individual participant within the collective, contributing creativity, a point of view, character, and diversity in a global mass protest. In this context the individual can contribute much more than just a voice to make the protest louder.

The Lysistrata Project's fostering of intimacy allows us to see the protesters not as an indistinct mass, but rather as a body composed of individual citizens. In this respect, the project has important analogies to conceptions of popular theater in eras prior to the advent of mass culture. In ancient Greece, for example, the Athenian theater festivals functioned as collective creations that depended on substantial and responsible contributions from citizens, ranging from funding to writing, directing, and acting in the plays. Most important, individual participation had a political goal: it was an exercise in democracy, contributing to the cultivation of citizens' consciences (notably excluding women and slaves).

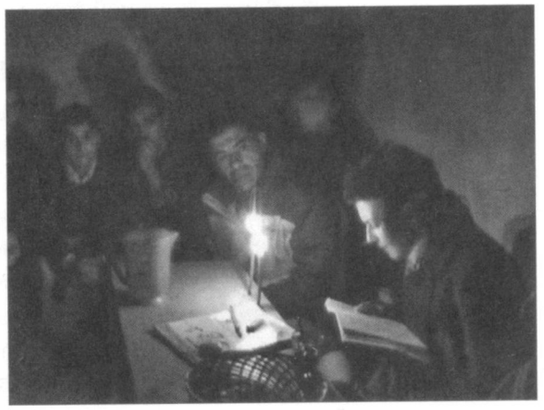
The Lysistrata Project was inclusive by design. "Readings," the Web site reported retrospectively, "resonated as a powerful symbol of world citizens united for peace."[13] The project engaged people on a global scale and encouraged them to explore a new identity through theater, that of world citizens. Equally important, the activism drew participation from disenfranchised and underprivileged groups. As Blume stated in an interview, this was a central organizational goal: "The movement is about providing a voice for people who haven't felt like they've had one."[14] The Lysistrata Project also allowed us to hear the voices of a multifarious community of dissenters, both in and out of the political mainstream. Celebrity readings in major Western cities, such as the reading at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, starring F. Murray Abraham and Kevin Bacon, were mentioned in the press side by side with tiny efforts in small towns, such as Questa, New Mexico (population 3,000), where an improvised reading took place in a trailer converted into a coffee shop.[15] There were readings by homeless people in New York City churches, readings by homemakers in the Midwest, readings by dissidents in Thailand, and secret readings in China (where organizers feared government reprisal).[16]

If the Lysistrata Project shared the ancient Greek popular theater's emphasis on accessibility and active public engagement in collective creation and democratic politics, it parted ways with ancient Greece by introducing reading as a key concept in organizing and defining political art. Reading encouraged people to approach the play in utilitarian terms—as a tool. "Part of what was also great about the choice of play," Blume writes, "is that something 2,500 years old is . . . in the public domain and folks could adapt it freely for their own needs."[17]

Reading, in this event, had two meanings, which are interrelated: First, a reading was any representation or construction using the play. Second, a reading constituted an act of dissent. The Lysistrata Project linked both senses in allowing any representation or construction based on the play to constitute an act of dissent. In presenting reading as a theatrical act of dissent, the Lysistrata Project employed a traditional definition of theater in a nontraditional way: Theater is the representation of action, as Aristotle postulates. And in presenting an act of dissent, the Lysistrata Project also assumes that theater is by definition political: it is an instrument for changing the world. In

this sense, any reading as an act of dissent might constitute political theater. However, a theatrical act—that is, a representation of an act—might include (in addition to mimetic performance) material we are not accustomed to seeing as dramatic, placing the Lysistrata Project firmly on postmodern ground.

The use of *reading* to designate representations or constructions of the play highlights the fact that a classic drama such as *Lysistrata* no longer possesses a single, authoritative meaning readers can aim to discover. Meaning is relevant to who is doing the interpreting and for what purpose. Terms such as *reading* and *translating*, abundantly used in postmodern cultural theory, point out the relative nature of these activities in a transparent way; both require us to designate an agent to create sense. Here, the term becomes wide enough to include all sorts of interpretative excursions around and beyond the play. Indeed, the Lysistrata Project was successful in stimulating insightful public discourse by celebrities as well as by "commoners" on an impressive number of themes ranging from Aristophanes' play to war, the power of popular theater today, and the Internet's role in fostering community. Reading, with its implication of open interpretation, offers a deeply inclusive challenge to the boundaries between the arts, between high and low art, and even between art and life. In linking all readings in one great web, the Lysistrata Project articulated a vision of theater as a global forum, consisting of a rich variety of representations and interventions to prevent war, some of which we may, in a traditional or old-fashioned way, want to call "art," while we might safely declare others "non-art." Artfulness, though, is beside the point in this case. Indeed, in this vision of a theatrical forum, there is no clear-cut distinction between theater and life.



A reading of *Lysistrata*, Patras, Greece, 2003. Courtesy of Panos Kouros

This was closely related to the project's conception of space. The Web site encouraged participants: "Get a location, a living room, a gymnasium, a theater, a massive auditorium, anywhere." Indeed, the event proved supremely adaptable with regard to space. Readings took place in spaces large and small, high and low, private and public, manmade and natural, indoors and in the open. They happened at the National Theater of Iceland and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in parks, high schools, hospitals, churches, and bars, on sidewalks and subway platforms, in London's Parliament Square, and in the jungle in Hawaii. A reading could take place anywhere a reader stood and spoke with passion and conviction. (Blume has reflected: "I love that it was the ritual of theater which generated a safe space, a well bounded sanctuary for the actors and the audience to speak the truth and have unguarded emotional experiences.")[18]

If an individual reading could happen anywhere, the grouping of the readings, which defined the project, meant multiple stages and even simultaneous performances. Thus the Lysistrata Project quite literally treated the entire world as a stage, evoking the Greek festivals, the medieval theater, and the theater of itinerant performers. Beyond that, and further challenging theater's materiality, readings could happen in virtual spaces, connected in the great web or forum through the Internet: a medium augmenting the project's place as popular theater.

This vision of a theater open to any and every participant has clearly been inspired and made possible through the Internet, a medium that is relatively cheap, simple to use, and open to all, irrespective of class, racial or national origin, sex, or level of income. The Internet offers great potential for collective work, an ideal that has strongly characterized twentieth-century popular theater, especially in the 1960s, presenting experiments that did not have lasting impact. The Lysistrata Project's noncentralized framework allowed a lot of initiative to participants in shaping the work, and this relates directly to the organization of Web sites, which have close similarities to theater's live interaction and to the cultivating of a community through interaction (even if it is not live in the theatrical sense). The Internet also resembles the theater in being a composite form, but it goes well beyond traditional or even experimental theater in the flexibility, variety, and range it allows. Indeed the Internet is a hybrid, postmodern medium, combining playacting with narrative, autobiography, and statements of opinion in the text with images, sound, and video. It mixes with ease different media, art and life, high with low culture. Drawing inspiration from the World Wide Web, the Lysistrata Project proposed through readings an ingenious, if simple, way theater could become a maximally composite form, reflecting—and even embodying—important trends in contemporary culture.

As the Internet broadens our conception of space, it presents a rich variety of new possibilities. The immaterial, two-dimensional space of the Web site can constantly change form in unpredictable ways, as happens with our lives in real space. Currently sites can also experiment with giving the illusion of three-dimensional space, with having a concrete, nonvirtual component, or with exploring text as an aesthetic or sensual, nonabstract medium. More directly relevant to the conception of space in the Lysistrata Project is that a site is situated in immaterial, virtual space, but users access it from concrete, real space—which can be anywhere. Thus a site functions as a knot, linking a great variety of concrete spaces around the world into a web. The Internet, then, like the best of the ancient theater, offers promise for fostering a community of citizens and shows potential for cultivating a more democratic, participatory society.

Referring to the Lysistrata Project, Blume said in an interview that "in an ideal world the project would change the relevance of the voice of ordinary citizens and it would make war on Iraq impossible."[19] In the Internet era, that utopia now almost appears to be a real possibility. How close did the organizers of the Lysistrata Project come to realizing their vision? Valuable as it was to stimulate readings of *Lysistrata*

worldwide and to make visible dissent to the Iraq war, the protest event was not enough. The organizers tended to fall back on the slogan that "every reading counts," in the mundane sense that a reading was a unit strengthening a cumulative effect.[20] To do justice to the project's originality, however, we needed to better appreciate the individual character of each reading, its aesthetics and politics, its unique contribution to the debate on the Iraq war. The project did not exploit the full potential of using the Internet for this purpose, but it might have allowed us to hear the conversations happening beyond our locale. In the absence of contextual information about each reading, it is impossible to get a clear sense about the nature of the collective work that *Lysistrata* engendered. The project would have been more substantial had it created a space online providing details about each reading—or a forum for discussion, taking *Lysistrata* and the war as a starting point. To be fair, organizers did ask participants after the readings took place to provide a one-page description of each event, but, to the best of my knowledge, these summaries were never made available online.

Then too, Blume misleadingly insists on the universal nature of the protest that the Lysistrata Project initiated: "Another truth we discovered is that the dynamics between men, women, power and money seem to be both universal and eternal, as is the senselessness of war and the longing for peace. I have a photograph of a *Lysistrata* reading in Nikko, Japan. Look at 25 middle aged Japanese people sitting around the sanctuary of a Catholic church and you know the universality of the human experience."[21] However, as the Greek readings demonstrated, to claim that people all over the world said "no to war" can be as misleading as any slogan, masking cultural differences and differences of perspective. Since the project was initiated in the U.S., it runs the risk of being criticized as a contemporary expression of colonialism with a progressive front.

This is not a criticism, however, that I wish to make. It is understandable that, as the initiator of such innovative work, Blume would sometimes be confused or contradictory about its significance. But the Lysistrata Project shows that reinventing popular theater today might depend crucially on technology and on our willingness as theater people to experiment with the Internet as a model and as a tool. This is an adventure that can revolutionize theater as we know it, reestablishing its vital connection to politics and to life.

Notes

1. For previous scholarly references to the Lysistrata Project, see Harry Justin Elam, "Editorial Comment: Theater and Activism," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 4 (2003): vii–xii; and Marvin Carlson, "9/11, Afghanistan, and Iraq: The Response of the New York Theater," *Theater Survey* 45, no. 1 (2004): 3–17.

2. Kathryn Blume, personal interviews via e-mail, September 26, 28, and 30, 2005. I wish to thank Kathryn Blume for responding to my questions on the Lysistrata Project by e-mail and for sending me the manuscript of her performance work, *The Accidental Activist*, a fictionalized account of her experiences of organizing the Lysistrata Project. The artist has taken *The Accidental Activist* on tour to many cities in the United States.
3. Cited in Kathryn Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project," www.theaccidentalactivist.com/Writing.htm (accessed October 5, 2005).
4. Sharron Bower said, "We're using the only thing we have—as poor, unemployed actors—in the same way the women in the play used the only means available to them" (quoted in Don Shirley, "Can Plays Help Prevent Wars?" www.rudeguerrilla .org/2003Season/lysistrata/masterlysistrata.html [accessed October 5, 2005]).
5. Kathryn Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project."
6. See www.lysistrataproject.com (accessed October 5, 2005).
7. For information on readings around the world, see Tina Kelley, "From Ancient Greece, a Weapon for Peace," *New York Times*, March 4, 2003; Lance Gould, "Staging a Protest at BAM and Beyond," *Daily News*, March 3, 2003; "*Lysistrata*: Ancient War Protest," *All Things Considered,* National Public Radio, March 4, 2003; "Actors Stage Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to Protest War against Iraq," World Socialist Web Site, www.wsws.org (accessed June 2, 2005).
8. From "*Lysistrata*: Ancient War Protest."
9. From "*Lysistrata*: Ancient War Protest."
10. Cited in Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project."
11. Panos Kouros, telephone interview, September 27, 2005.
12. Anya Kamenetz, "Aristophanes vs. Rumsfeld: THAW and the Lysistrata Project's Anti-War Fare," *Village Voice*, February 26–March 5, 2005, villagevoice.com/theater/0309,kamenetz,42131,11.html (accessed December 10, 2005).
13. See www.lysistrataproject.com (accessed October 5, 2005).
14. Kathryn Blume interviewed by Margot Adler, from "*Lysistrata*: Ancient War Protest."
15. Kelley, "From Ancient Greece, a Weapon for Peace."
16. See Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project"; and www.lysistrataproject.com.
17. Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project."
18. Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project."
19. Quoted in Sarah Coleman, "The Lysistrata Project: Theater of Peace," www.worldpress.org/977.cfm (accessed October 5, 2005).
20. For example, Kathryn Blume has stated: "We kept telling people that Every Reading Counts, and it was the cumulative effect of all the readings all over the world that held the true power of Lysistrata Project." Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project."
21. Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project."