US Drama & Theatre Conference

Of Mutability and Malleability: Re-imagining the Contours of US Theatre and Drama

10-13 June, 2026
University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France

"Mutation" became a familiar concept to many of us during the COVID-19 pandemic, as we learnt of the latest developments of the virus that shook the world. At the same time, questions rang loud about the future of theatre: could it survive the worldwide lockdown? How would it adapt and what would its "mutations" look like? A notion derived from molecular biology, "mutation" refers to the breakdown and reconstitution of chemical building blocks that lead to permanent changes in DNA. The four types of DNA mutation are "substitution", "deletion", "insertion", and "translocation". A word we have heard less of in the past years, "malleability"—from the Latin *malleare* or "to hit with a hammer"—alludes to the ability of adapting because of outside influence. Associated words include ductility, plasticity, flexibility, and elasticity. These qualities imply subtler, more impermanent changes than mutation. It is these twin concepts of "mutability" and "malleability" that we seek to interrogate in the 2026 edition of the American Theatre and Drama Conference, which will take place in Toulouse, France. To what extent can US theatre and drama be envisioned as mutable and/or malleable across space, medium, time, and bodies?

Mutation and malleability typically issue from crises—another biological term that entails endings as well as new beginnings. What crises have sparked the reinvention and/or alteration of US theatre and drama? Contributors may turn to the political, social, or cultural shifts in US history ranging from the American revolution and the American Civil War to the advent of television and cinema and its impact on and off-Broadway. Political revolutions may give rise to cultural transformations, ushering in long-silenced voices on the American stage – such as with the 1823 performance of one of the first plays written by an African American playwright, William Henry Brown's *The Drama of King Shotaway*, at the African Grove theatre, in the wake of the American Revolution. Yet cultural reinvention may be in the service of justice or injustice. Daddy Rice's character of Jim Crow, which became prominent in the performance tradition of minstrelsy, lasted well into the twentieth century: how have characters such as Jim Crow mutated across time, oceans (Daddy Rice for instance travelled to London), and performance media? Perhaps such "stock" characters dissolve into a new cultural or temporal broth that enable performers (such as stand-up comedian Margaret Cho whose skits subversively reappropriate "yellowface" stereotypes) to perform their marginality (Gilbert 2004). Alternatively, the survival of stock characters through mutation may constitute "one more way for [the] subject of domination to sustain itself" (Colebrook 2004, 154)—as the case may be when looking at the tradition of sentimentalist performances in "redface", from Pocahontas to Claes Oldenburg's *Injun* (1962), to appease white guilt.

Alternatively, it may be asked whether there is something specifically malleable about US theatre, since it has had to reckon with British cultural hegemony and to find ways to survive in a colonial and postcolonial context where it was despised by Puritans as an immoral art form and by Patriots as a hangover from the British. And yet theatre flourished in these adverse

conditions as satires such as Robert Hunter's 1715 anti-British satire *Androboros* attest. The survivability of US theatre and drama across time and continents returns us to the metaphor of a mutating virus that has to change constitution in order to persist.

Cast as the melting pot nation in Israel Zangwill's 1908 play of the same name, the US has long been idealized in the theatre as an example of an intercultural mutation. And yet the pandemic taught us that the US theatre sector was far from the cross-cultural utopia envisioned by Zangwill. The "We See You White American Theatre" (WSYWAT) manifesto in 2020 published at the height of the COVID crisis denounced white domination across all levels of the theatre industry, from casting and rehearsal to hair and make-up choices that disadvantage BIPOC theatre-makers and performers. To what extent have manifestos such as these served the molecular-level reinvention of this cultural industry? Did the nationwide lockdown and rush to go online prompt a transformation of US theatre into a more just environment, echoing Donna Haraway's 1985 concept of the cyborg who seizes upon technology for her emancipation? The digital theatre festival organized by the Round House Theatre in Washington DC, which celebrated the work of the under-produced playwright Adrienne Kennedy, would seem proof of cyborgian survivability (Haraway 1991). On the other hand, have US theatres really reinvented their practices in their promises to respond to the WSYWAT manifesto and BIPOC injustice? Or is it just superficial talk, an example of malleability that wards off molecular change by hollow promises of flexibility?

As the editors of *Changing Stages: A View of British and American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (2001) note, to "trace the way in which an influence spreads from age to age, from country to country, is to uncover a line of power" (Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, 2001). Thus, the circulation of US drama (or lack thereof) through translations and/or adaptations becomes an indicator of socio-cultural hierarchies. Grove Press played a key role in bringing the European avant-garde playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco to the US. But the publishing house also neglected women's and people of color's voices. How do such cultural biases reflect shifting (or static) socio-cultural hierarchies? What cross-cultural mutations have taken place to generate meaning and resonance in other, non-US contexts? Do new cultural contexts participate to a reinvention of US-birthed performances? Similar considerations may be applied to the countless nomadic US performers that have contributed to the circulation of US drama in the 19th and 20th centuries. While the Living Theatre's exile in Europe galvanized a performance style less centered on the spoken word and more concentrated on the body and its energies in space (Stéphanette 2007), the case of Adah Isaacs Menken who, in the US and Europe, played on racial and cultural ambiguity (Brooks 2006), illustrates that a performer's cross-cultural adaptation may be approached at a level of identity. How do cross-cultural transfers shape performers, performances, as well as ontologies of race and gender?

The malleable, shape-shifting bodies of performers sometimes crash into rigid constraints that can limit their access to certain types of performance: how do new, "nontraditional" casting practices contribute to making US theatre more malleable? In a political context in which transgender or non-binary individuals see their access to gender-affirming care limited and their very existence denied, in a climate generally perceived as hostile to gender diversity, the malleability of US theatre may be turned into a weapon of attack –hammering change onto the stage. Companies such as the Barrier-Free Theatre Company of Maryland are making headway on the subject of disability rights in theatre and performance. To what extent do such examples dialogue with feminist and/or avant-gardist performances of the "mutilated" body ("mutilation" shares the same stem "mut" as "mutation" meaning to "change" or "alter") (O'Dell 1998)?

We invite papers that consider malleability and mutability in US theatre. Suggested topics include but are not limited to:

- The history of mutability and malleability in the American theatre text and on the stage
- Crises and the processes of change in US theatre and performmance
- Cross-temporal, cross-cultural, and cross-medium translation and adaptation on the page and stage
- Ontologies of gender and race in mutating performance and theatrical traditions
- Mutating and malleable performance aesthetics
- Diversity and the mutations of theatre and performance (disability rights, the BIPOC community, gender and sexual minorities)
- Mutability and malleability in the theatre processs, from dramaturgy and translation, to rehearsal and workshopping with sample audiences.
- The mutation of media and theatre and/or performance
- The shadow of Great Britain and mutations/malleable shifts in US theatre and drama
- Hybridity, survivability, and cyborgs in US theatre and drama
- Mutability and malleability and travelling performers
- Mutation/malleability and domination/subversion
- Mutation/malleability and performing marginality: Stock characters, stereotypes, appropriation, reappropriation

Call for Panels

KEY DATES

- Call for panels opens: **April, 7th 2025**
- Deadline for submission: **Sept, 1st 2025**
- Notification sent to panel convenors: **Dec, 1st 2025**

We welcome panel proposals from societies, research groups, or individuals. The session lengths will be 90 minutes. They can be of 3 natures: traditional panels, roundtables, workshops. They will all explore a specific facet of the conference theme: the issue under study will be clearly identified. **Traditional panels** will be composed of 3 to 4 papers followed by a discussion with the audience. **Roundtables** will count no more than 4 scholars, who will discuss particular themes/issues in front of (and subsequently with) an audience. While a roundtable may include short (5-10 min) presentations, the main idea is to create a lively debate, not to focus on any one speaker. **Workshops** are characterized by experimentation, collaboration, interaction or improvisation. They bring a focus to methods and process. Rather than exhibiting already finished work, the aim of workshops is to organize collective research activities that are open-ended and cultivate possibilities for novelty and learning. Workshops will be designed as interactive, reflexive sessions that prioritize exploration, rather than the discussion of already established research results.

English will be the language for the submission and the presentation.

All panel proposals must be submitted by **Sept, 1st 2025** to usdramaconf2026@gmail.com. Proposals consist of:

Panel formats (traditional panel/roundtable/laboratories):	
Panel title :	
Organizer/chair: -For societies and research groups: name + website of the society or research group or name AND name + bio of the coordinator -For individuals: name + bio	
Panel description (no more than 300 characters):	
Participants (names + institutions + 100 word descriptions of their papers/research focus for each):	
Devices required (mentioned your needs: visual and/or sound system, others…) **:**	

Call for Individual Papers

KEY DATES

- Call for panels opens: **April, 7th 2025**
- Deadline for submission: **Sept, 1st 2025**
- Notification sent to panel convenors: **Dec, 1st 2025**

Individual papers on the theme of the conference are welcome. The paper length will be 20 min. Each presentation will be following by a Q/A with the audience.

English will be the language for the submission and the presentation.

All session proposals must be submitted by **Sept, 1st 2025** to usdramaconf2026@gmail.com. Proposals consist of:

Paper title	
Presenter (name + institution + bio of nor more than characters):	
Paper description (no more than 300 characters):	
Devices required (mentioned your needs: visual and/or sound system, others…) **:**	