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In the sciences there is growing recognition of a phenomenon known as “publication bias,” in which studies with positive findings are more likely to be published. It is not surprising perhaps that researchers are more likely to publish results that successfully prove their hypotheses, but this bias can also come from the editorial side. After all, when a technique or treatment cannot be proven to be effective there is less urgency to share that information. When a hypothesis goes unconfirmed it is much more difficult to see how the project answers the inevitable “so what?” question.

The field of theatre and performance studies is hardly exempt from our own forms of publication bias. When selecting the artists, productions, practices, and methodologies to which we give scholarly attention, we frequently use *success*—whether measured in aesthetic, critical, or commercial terms—as a proxy for *significance*. In my own work on theatre history, for example, I have argued that “commercial success . . . indicates the degree to which a given production captured the attention and imagination of audiences in its era” (10). Similarly, we may use critical praise or other forms of recognition (awards, grants, testimonials) as justification for a scholarly engagement with an artist or text.

When it comes to innovations in praxis or pedagogy, it is common (and reasonable) to assess suitability for publication (in part) according to the likelihood that readers will find these innovations helpful to their own work. Of course, in documenting our work through journals such as *Theatre Topics*, we typically acknowledge the parts of the project that did not go as planned, our reflections on errors made, and our suggestions for further improvement. Yet, only occasionally do we see the article that documents the spectacular failure, the uncomfortable failure, the essay that concludes, “Let’s not do *this* again.”

The increasingly and alarmingly tenuous state of employment in higher education is a significant factor here: contingent faculty members whose continued employment depends on meeting the expectations of contemporary data-driven institutions may be understandably reluctant to enter their less successful experiments into the public record. Given the high-stakes up-or-out nature of the tenure and promotion process, tenure-stream faculty also have strong disincentives to acknowledge that a creative or pedagogical experiment failed to produce the desired results, even when that failure provided a valuable learning experience for the faculty, students, and/or community.

Indeed, when we consider the time required to develop and implement historical analyses, production techniques, theoretical advances, teaching practices, and curricular innovations, even tenured professors may reasonably decide to hew close to the path of past successes rather than to blaze a risky trail into the unknown. Beckett’s famous dictum from *Worstward Ho*—“Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (7)—aligns poorly with the bio-bibliographic type of annual review that purports to measure the value of our contributions to the institution and to the field. Thus even when projects do “fail better,” there may yet be pressure to reframe them in triumphalist terms.

While each instance of publication is understandable, even justifiable, the aggregate result is a distorted view of the field, in which success stories appear more common than they really are. As Brian Herrera writes in his note from the field, “Performance historiography is premised on success. Watershed dates, events, and figures focus our narratives, coordinate our periodizations, and anchor our claims for significance” (75). When historians do consider “failures,” it is often in the language of reclamation and redemption. The play that audiences once found incomprehensible we now recognize as an act of genius. The artist who died penniless and underappreciated we now understand was simply ahead of her time. Yet, as Derek Miller writes, “Theatre history can (and I think must) begin to account for the many productions and careers that pass without notice, that are not outstanding either in their glory or their failure, but were born and died decidedly average” (529). In “The Many Middling Failures of Miss Virginia Calhoun,” Herrera provides a case study of one “decidedly average” playwright and producer whose “most sustained accomplishment is her accumulation of nearly fifty years of near success” (75). In narrating his own struggles to tell Calhoun’s story, Herrera highlights the difficulty, and the importance, of working against publication bias in performance historiography.

Whether we consider history or our own contemporary practice, the potential heuristic value of “negative results” too often goes unexplored, despite the observed phenomenon that we often learn as much from our failures (onstage, in the studio, and in the classroom) as we do from our successes. Michael Richardson’s “The Sign Language Interpreted Performance: A Failure of Access Provision for Deaf Spectators” offers a model for how to address a practice that, while common, is less than successful: the simultaneous translation of theatrical performances into BSL (British Sign Language). Despite a significant and ongoing investment of financial and human resources in such sign-language-interpreted performances (SLIPs), he argues that SLIPs have made little progress toward their stated goal of providing equal access to the theatre for deaf spectators. In order to truly improve the situation, Richardson proposes that we must first acknowledge the failure of the existing model; this allows us to consider the specific reasons *why* SLIPs fail, thus opening up a space to consider alternative models.

Taken together, I hope that this special section offers a brief caesura in the otherwise steady march toward what we might call the Lake Wobegone-ing of theatre studies: where all the artists are geniuses and all the faculty are above average. We may never overcome publication bias completely, but if the willingness to risk failure can be considered a virtue, then the occasional artistic or pedagogical failure can only be seen as evidence of that virtue. And may that be a lesson to us all.

Henry Bial is a professor of theatre at the University of Kansas. He is the author, editor, or coeditor of several books, a member of the *Theatre Topics* editorial board, and a past president of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. He has failed many times.

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