

NTQ Reports and Announcements

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'New Theatres – New Writing?'

Report on the International Theatre Institute forum held at the Soho Theatre and Writers Centre Studio, London, on 25 February 2003.

Welcoming the Forum's 50 delegates, ITI director Neville Shulman began with a relatively light-hearted yet informative introduction, which set the tone for the rest of the seminar. The forum was happening as a 'bequest' of the now-defunct Theatres Advisory Council (TAC), which had requested that the ITI hold an annual event – of which this was the first – in which the ethos of the TAC could be continued by bringing together people involved in all aspects of theatre, to discuss current themes and issues in order to promote the medium. He broached the discussion theme of 'New Theatre – New Writing?' by voicing his view that, alongside education's three R's, theatre has three E's: excitement, education, and above all entertainment.

The forum's chairman, Ian Herbert, editor of *Theatre Record*, proposed that the discussion of the topic be divided into its two natural halves – new theatre and new writing – and introduced the panel of speakers: Abigail Morris (Soho Theatre); Adrian Mitchell (writer of children's and adult theatre); Vikki Heywood (who saw the Royal Court Theatre through its refurbishment and is currently on the board of the Young Vic and Lyric Theatres); Jatinder Verma (of Tara Arts, where he both makes and acts in theatrical productions); Jonathan Meth (Writernet); and Louis Fantasia (who, while bringing a US perspective, was also involved from the beginning with the planning and realization of Shakespeare's Globe theatre on London's South Bank).

Abigail Morris kicked off the proceedings by discussing the history, practicalities, and problems of building the Soho Theatre. The first home of the Soho company, which had started in 1960, had been in a basement at the Soho Polytechnic. The company moved to the Cockpit Theatre in 1990, but was given notice of eviction three years later. They made a successful £8 million National Lottery bid to buy and convert a building in Dean Street, and £2.6 million was also raised privately. A key feature of the venue was that that it should

be a writing workshop as well as a theatre, to encourage writing development work and to make writers feel their work should be part of the production process. Also vital is that it is an 'all-day' building, with a restaurant downstairs helping to pay for the upkeep. This offered the additional benefit of allowing writers to be there to hear immediate feedback from audiences as they leave the auditorium after a show, and feeling that they are crucial to the production. The theatre also has six writers on attachment throughout the year. Asked by Ian what snags had become apparent, Abigail smiled wryly and said that in a building designed and intended to be accessible, having the 'hardest front doors in the universe' was a definite drawback.

Next to speak was Vikki Heywood, who felt that the main area of concern in the £28 million revamp of the Royal Court Theatre had been how to spend a lot of money on a building but keep it in context with its history. Presenting audiences with the view that 'nothing had changed' in a building that is 80 per cent new was a major challenge. One way to achieve this was the deliberate use of 'theatrical materials' in the refurbishment work. She qualified the idea of 'wanton luxury' at the Royal Court by offering the opinion that the seats, drinks, and toilets are the things that an audience remembers about a theatre. The leather seats that now grace the Royal Court were surely 'the most decadent theatre seats ever made'!

Another prime consideration was wanting to keep the 'sense of event'. She illustrated the point by mentioning that a cramped foyer before a show creates a real sense of occasion. At the Royal Court, the circle was deliberately made steeper than necessary to add to this atmosphere, while the stairs to the little theatre at the top of the building were deliberately kept narrow, in order to heighten the sense of anticipation, as if the audience were going up into an attic.

Problems the Royal Court faced included a smell of sewage which filled the theatre for a year, although thankfully this was finally resolved. The air-conditioning in the bar had not yet worked satisfactorily, and Vikki also expressed frustration that only 75 per cent of the technical equipment behind the proscenium arch is actually used. To rectify this, she identified the need for theatre managers to talk to writers about how they want to put on productions, in order to use all of the facilities to best effect.

To some amusement, Louis Fantasia began with the observation that decadent theatre seats had certainly never formed part of the Globe theatre's remit. Sitting on the US board of directors of the Globe, which cost £20 million (of

which £12 million had come from the National Lottery), Louis had been involved with the project since 1980, and found the regular requests for yet further funding for the project as almost 'bleeding the board dry'.

He described how there were various different opinions as to how authentic the venue should be, striking a balance between good facilities and fiscal responsibility, between artistic, visitor, and historic expectations. Ultimately the key priority had been identified as just getting the building up, so that people could see how it would look: this would then attract further funding to finish it.

They discovered many things as the project progressed – for example that green oak and wattle-and-daub rot quicker in contemporary pollution than in Elizabethan England. He agreed with Vikki Heywood on how an audience feels on coming into the building. The space makes you react before anything happens on it or in it, whether you are a tourist, schoolchild, or member of the audience. Louis's 'pet peeve' was the way visitors are guided through different parts of the building to the performing space, as opposed to allowing them to discover the different aspects and areas for themselves. This 'institutionalized' guiding of visitors was like 'the Vaticanization of the theatre'.

The conversation then turned to the 300-plus capacity Inigo Jones Theatre, the Globe project's 'second space', which is currently in use as a rehearsal space. Louis, with Michael Holden, executive director of the Globe at the time of its building, described the problems facing the Inigo Jones as based on the economic viability of the size of the audience, sightlines, and the kind of events it is to be used for. Michael confirmed that, while the shell is up, there is nothing yet inside, and that it will not be completed for a 'considerable time'.

He described the Globe as an attempt to recreate an historical artefact with the full intensity of its Shakespearean atmosphere, space, and artist/audience relationship: 'It's about the artist and audience as participants, not an audience coming in and saying "Go on, entertain me".' By contrast, a second new venue in Kingston-upon-Thames, affectionately dubbed 'son of Globe', based on the Rose theatre – costing £8.5 million – was an attempt to combine the Globe's purpose with thorough modernity in terms of facilities. Of its three spaces, the main auditorium will have 900 seats and a standing pit; and a fit-up performance in the shell would be taking place in March. He concluded by saying that many lessons had been learned from the Globe, and that all three projects have made a conscious attempt to identify the core elements of theatre, to rediscover and redefine theatre as a medium.

Chair Ian Herbert then invited Richard Pulford, chief executive of the Society of London Theatres and the Theatre Managers Association,

to comment on the current situation regarding funding for new theatres. Richard confirmed that theoretically there is still Lottery money available for new theatres, but that huge multi-million-pound projects are now effectively a thing of the past. He also mentioned that because of the current lack of big grants, theatre owners are now unable to specify very high quality finishing materials, creating the longer-term problem of theatres having to be 're-finished' more regularly.

The forum followed this theme of the lack of funding and the need to make available money stretch further. Louis Fantasia opined that the UK is relatively well off compared to the USA, where some state arts councils have made a 40 to 60 per cent cut in grants in the past year. He said that the idea of building a new theatre in the USA is 'completely off the table', and cited two recent cases where theatres had been demolished because the land they are built on is worth more for housing.

Jatinder Verma then described Tara Theatre's thoughts about building its own venue – which ultimately they decided would kill them as a production company. He also expressed a keen wish that the era of new theatre building is not completely over because, as he said, 'We need to keep hope.' He offered the view that buildings within which a wide variety of overseas artists can be seen in a provocative and stimulating settings are very important.

Richard Pulford replied to Louis's concerns by saying that it's impossible to pull down London theatres because so many of them are listed. However, because of the listed status, there is no money to be made from the 'stock' of London theatres – paradoxically making the buildings themselves effectively worthless. If the West End was to retain its competitive edge in national and international markets, where was the money to come from to invest in the infrastructure of the buildings? Vikki Heywood added that theatre owners now had to look at buildings in a different way, and perhaps not aim for shows like *The Mousetrap* that run for many years, because they did not provide a high enough level of revenue for reinvestment in the fabric of the building.

Turning more towards the writing focus of the forum, writer Adrian Mitchell then made a warm and passionate speech focusing on the importance of primary school-age children as a theatre audience. He felt that every town should have a theatre which puts on productions for and by children throughout the year. Making the point that provincial theatres which put on an annual production for children need always to present something that is famous, he said that he would like to see children being able to write and produce their own shows and have young children better catered for as an audience, suggesting that the 4 to 11 age group was 'the closest thing to a

classless audience you will get'. Tony Graham, of the Unicorn Theatre, agreed. He believed that the biggest obstacle to the development of children's theatre was the National Curriculum, and voiced concern that schools need to be persuaded to take children to the theatre, the stock response being that, 'It's not in the National Curriculum.' He saw children's theatre as a completely blank canvas, unencumbered by the baggage that adults carry – an enormous space to throw creativity at. He also described progress on the Unicorn's new (£11.25 million) theatre.

Adrian agreed that theatre should be part of a child's education: 'They are the most wide open of audiences. They concentrate intensely, but only if new things continue to happen. Give kids the visions, ideas, excitement, sadness, wonder, and joy. They're the backstage people of the future.' He also hoped that leading children's authors could be encouraged to adapt their stories for theatre.

Concurring with Louis Fantasia's earlier concerns, Adrian spoke about children's theatres in the USA being under threat, before making a wide appeal (to murmurs of approval throughout the room) for children to be given the experience of going to and working in the theatre, bringing the first half of the forum to a close by saying 'Theatre for children can be good, it can be bad, but it can be wonderful.'

Jatinder Verma kicked off the second half of the forum, of which new writing was the focus. His initial comment was to replace Neville Shulman's three E's for theatre with three K's – kicks, kudos, and kash. Part of the long struggle for Asians in theatre was the fact that Asian plays were often about things you didn't know about the Asian culture. He described the economic imperative for writings from other cultures, which he feels distort the true picture, noting that anything vaguely to do with Bollywood 'has a sure fire look-in.'

He hoped that Asian theatre would soon be moving into another phase – where 'kicks' are more important than 'kudos', where individuals are saying 'This is what I want'. Rather than specialist theatres promoting ethnic work, the challenge was that cultural diversity should be represented in work for any theatre, not just those specializing in 'ethnic' theatre.

London offered a totally different cultural scene from the rest of Britain: outside London the fences between cultures were still very high. Using the example of the reality of encounters on the streets of Blackburn, Jatinder hoped that theatre could embrace both the challenge and debate over encounters between black and white. Summing up, he noted that when, in 1999, he had counted the recognized plays looking at post-war Britain and its changing cultural landscape, he

could come up with only five. 'London is one-third black; what is that doing to the character of society?'

Turning to the subject of funding for writers, chairman Ian Herbert mentioned the increased Arts Council grants which are coming through, before asking Jonathan Meth from Writernet to elaborate. Jonathan then described the simplified grants system now in place, and his excitement at the new money coming into the system. The way writers are funded is changing, but it could mean writers either benefiting or losing out, something which needs to be addressed. He raised a number of questions, including those of how economics impacts on aesthetics; whether writers will write more of what they want or of what will generate money; and what theatre companies had to do to make it easier for writers.

He continued with the realistic assessment that there would never be enough money, but agreed with the assessment that the American situation was far worse, describing how Arizona and Boston are withdrawing all theatre funding. 'We need imaginative work, to escape the poverty of our imaginations by how hard it is to get funding – money for research and development, workshops, collaborations.'

Ian then invited the self-styled 'Monsterist' group of playwrights to share their vision of the development of theatre writing. Roy Williams encapsulated the concept of 'Monsterism' as 'a right to campaign for writers to create large-scale productions, with large casts, for large-scale spaces, to allow the elevation of new writers to main stages.' He traced the group's origins to the National Theatre Studio, where a group of writers didn't feel encouraged in what they were doing, describing the Monsterist Manifesto as a way of motivating themselves.

Fellow Monsterist Ryan Craig expanded the theme further, stating that the idea came from a group of writers who felt that they were 'on to a loser'. He described the feeling of encountering a 'negative wall' if there were more than five to eight characters in a play, adding that television writers did not want to write for theatre, because television is far more lucrative than a 'black box'. To smiles from all attendees, Bernie Corbett from the Writers' Guild dryly retorted that the manifesto for all writers should be 'large fee'.

Bernie said that the idea should be of the writer as a worker in the industry, earning a living, not just 'a remote, unseen force'. In response to comments in the first half of the forum, he argued that a good infrastructure in theatre buildings was no substitute for content. The investment should be in the writing, not in millions of pounds spent on a theatre buildings. Also, 'There is a huge contrast between radio, television, and theatre as a way of earning a living. The theatre needs to be restructured to make it a main

force for writers. Writers should be able to earn their living on a regular basis, not hit a lucky streak once in a lifetime.'

Tom Williams, from the Central Council for Amateur Theatre, picked up the theme, noting that the largest percentage of theatre in the UK is amateur. Controversially – for the writers – he asked: 'Does the theatre need writers at all? Are productions bounded by text? Isn't there a form of theatre that doesn't need text? Can performance be the most important thing?'

Continuing the theme developed by Adrian Mitchell and Tony Graham, playwright Brian McAvera added that education needed to train audiences from an early age. He suggested that if the writing is good enough, the way a story is told will ensure a take up. It depends on the 'angle of approach': theatre can challenge children with material that would challenge adults, provided it was written in the correct way. Brian also pursued the topic, touched on earlier in discussion about the Globe, of the necessity of engagement between audience and performers. Finally he aired the idea of a writer's/playwright's levy, asking: 'Why don't people within the creative spectrum band together and work for this?'

Jonathan Meth replied by saying that writers need to be proactive and create a market for their work; they have to be entrepreneurial. He suggested, for example, applying to create a bursary in a local school, saying: 'Don't wait for it to be done for you. If you don't test the funding mechanism and try ideas out, then don't complain.'

Sue Parrish, artistic director of the Sphinx Theatre, offered a more optimistic view, saying she thought a flood of young people were coming through who wanted to be theatre directors, which she feels might herald a revitalization of the theatre. Taking the Globe theme further, she suggested that the most important part of the Royal Court refurbishment had been the reconfiguration of its proscenium arch, bringing audiences and performers closer together – perhaps even looking towards a different form of theatre.

Vikki Heywood voiced support for Monsterism, suggesting that it is actually what producers want – tipping the economics of scale in their favour. The National Theatre's Jack Bradley confirmed that the National currently has a 22-strong play in rehearsal. 'We are doing what we can to raise scales, we want to do stuff on the big stages', he said. Offering encouragement to the Monsterists, he cited a lack of people writing the bigger productions as a handicap.

Steering the forum to the subject of the dead writers' levy, Jack voiced his opposition in economic terms, saying that if a theatre is going to have to pay a royalty, it might as well put on Shakespeare because it will guarantee an audience. He said that the National is committed to building long-term relationships with writers, but

at the same time is unwilling to expose that writing until it's ready, noting: 'If you make a mistake in theatre, people have long memories.'

Louis Fantasia returned to the issue of the funding process by suggesting that it is what has effectively killed theatre in the United States. Plays are chosen that appeal to the funders, not the audiences, which means that the latter have got progressively smaller.

Taking up the thread of young people in theatre, Carl Miller – who is involved with both the Unicorn Theatre and the Birmingham Rep – described the latter's young writers' scheme. 'By keeping going with writers aged between twelve and twenty-four, giving them the experience of having a play produced and having been through it all, those coming back have been a lot more sophisticated the second time round', he said. Wryly describing the scheme as 'financial madness', he felt that it had more than paid for itself, with Birmingham Rep now building a genuine diversity of writers which was creatively very exciting.

Abigail Morris agreed with Carl's sentiments, describing the Soho Theatre's scheme for writers under eleven as 'fantastic', putting the best of the plays on and touring them with the production *Be My Baby*. She then initiated an interesting and active part of the debate by offering the opinion that there's not a lot of new writing in the regions, asking, 'Is there too much new writing in London? Has London reached saturation point with new writing? Should we be putting new writing into the regions, not being so London-centric?'

She was backed by Jatinder Verma, who felt that there is an attitude of 'If it's not happening in London, it's not happening at all.' Ian Herbert offered the view that a major problem is not being able to get theatre critics to travel out of London, while the Arts Council's Charles Hart pointed out that a lot of the new writing put on in London actually has its origins outside.

Vikki Heywood agreed with Ian, suggesting that press coverage made things become London-centric, but from the writing perspective she thought that theatres were opening doors to new writing, which she hoped would push out into the regions. She suggested that the main problem was with the regional theatres' conservative attitude towards new writing.

Writer Penny Gold, concurring with Bernie Corbett's earlier thoughts, suggested that there was a direct relationship between the funding expended on new buildings and that on new writing. She cited the example of the Hampstead Theatre, where she felt money had gone towards employing extra staff and so was not available to invest in new writing. Vikki Heywood responded by saying that the estimates of running costs for new buildings were invariably wildly below the actuality.

Turning to the issue of the involvement of the writer in a production, playwright Peter Whelan talked about the now-closed Other Place venue in Stratford. The six-week rehearsal period there had been 'brilliant', since the writer could work on the play with the cast and director in a manner which was impossible with a shorter rehearsal period. 'Time in rehearsals is very special, but it's hard to convince people that a six-week rehearsal period is a good investment', he said. Fellow-playwright Steve Gooch responded that in the South East Arts area there are no 'grown-up' theatres, and he had little confidence that small venues would know how to use a six-week rehearsal period effectively.

Jonathan Meth felt that the problem was down to each region having its own infrastructure, which meant that successful exports to all of the regions were impossible. He was backed up by Tony Graham, who took a more fundamental view, saying: 'Plays can't be thrown at any space; one that works well in one space can be awful in another.' This was greeted by general agreement.

Sounding a note of caution on the way in which the themes of the forum appeared to be developing along specific lines – 'the regions', 'London', 'young people', etc. – David James, chair of the Writers' Guild's Theatres Committee, reminded the forum that, as an audience, the over-fifties should never be written off. Stereotyping them as old ladies with shopping trolleys meant that the theatre industry would miss out, both in terms of an enormous potential audience and as contributors. Chair Ian Herbert agreed: 'This is a major point – we are not talking about an "either-or" situation. We need to be talking about an "and-and" situation.'

Finally, Christine Payne from Equity was invited to put the actor's point of view, and she responded on similar lines to Bernie Corbett: 'Yes to new theatres and yes to new writing. But for actors employability and employment are highly important. Actors need shows to provide a stable job.' New money for new writers went also to developing new actors. She concluded that Equity members cut into the subjects discussed by the forum at all levels.

In his closing comments, Ian Herbert said it was immensely gratifying to see the enthusiasm that was so evident both in the forum and throughout the industry. He felt that the forum had achieved its aim, having raised a satisfyingly wide range of questions and given all present a great deal to think about. He looked forward to continuing the discussion at a similar event next year.

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'Music and Theatricality in the British Isles'

A conference organized by the CET (Centre d'Etudes de la Traduction) to be held at the University of Metz (UFR Lettres et Langues) on 19–20 March 2004.

This conference will address the interrelatedness of music and theatre from different angles in all aspects of British culture. Specialists in English studies, musicology, and performing arts, as well as theatre practitioners and musicians, are all welcome to join the conference and give papers. The approach can be either diachronic or generic. Genres to be considered will include theatre, opera, melodrama, masque, ballad opera, musical comedy, rock-opera, etc.

The main focus will be on musical adaptations of literary works and on the way dramatic texts and music relate in general terms. But the overall idea of the conference is to scrutinize the dialectical relation between theatricality and music, the way theatre and music interact, how they work on or through each other for a stage event to be achieved. The dramatic and theatrical quality of music, the way it informs drama, as well as the musical quality of texts and voices, whether the piece of work is destined to be spoken or sung in a theatre, will also be of interest.

From a diachronic viewpoint, it will be possible to analyze the varying importance of music in a piece of work studied across the centuries. As the major field of research of the CET involves translation, papers addressing that particular problematics will also be welcome. Contributions on the hybridization of forms and on the blurring of generic frontiers will likewise be relevant.

The proceedings of the conference will be published.

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