

Helen Gush: The World Theatre Season. Internationalism and Innovation.

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Helen Gush (Theatre and Performance Collection,
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The World Theatre Season

Internationalism and Innovation

The end of the Second World War proved a catalyst for the establishment of two of Europe's most significant international theatre festivals, alongside numerous organisations that identified as ›international‹. The Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama and the Avignon Festival each launched in 1947, while numerous international theatre institutions emerged over the following two decades.¹ The use of the term ›international‹ in this context is indelibly linked to the post-War notion of using culture to bind nations together after the division of conflict, an ideal which was grounded in a humanist belief that artistic expression could transcend difference and appeal to a common humanity. In her history of the Edinburgh Festivals, Angela Bartie suggests that culture was given »new values« (Bartie 2013: 2) in the immediate post-War period. She describes the foundation of the Edinburgh International Festival as »a means of spiritual refreshment, a way of reasserting moral values, a rebuilding of relationships between nations, of shoring up European civilisations and of providing ›welfare‹ in its broadest sense« (Bartie 2013: 2). David Bradby and Maria M. Delgado describe the foundation of the international festival in Avignon in similar terms as having »the explicit aim of healing the divisions caused by the Second World War« (Bradby/Delgado 2012: 5).

The World Theatre Season (WTS) also emerged in this period and was fully invested in the humanist internationalism of the post-War era. Running as an annual season of visiting international theatre companies at the Aldwych Theatre in London between 1964 and 1975,² the WTS brought international theatre to the UK on an unprecedented scale, presenting forty-eight companies from nineteen countries across four continents (for a comprehensive list vgl. Gush 2018:

370–416). It was directed by the impresario Peter Daubeny and presented in partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), running for eight to thirteen weeks every spring as part of the RSC's annual programming.

Despite its affinity with post-War applications of the term ›international‹, the WTS employed the word ›World‹ in its name. Although Daubeny offers no explanation in his autobiography into the reasons why this choice was made, it lexically represents another expression of post-War optimism. In her reflections on post-War political rhetoric, Glenda Sluga observes that,

world government and world citizenship stood for a conception of international politics as a sphere in which international organisations would represent the political ambitions of the world's population for equality, progress, peace and security, and democratic representation. (Sluga 2013: 87)

Sluga argues that the resolve for international peace and change on a political level was proclaimed as ›world‹-oriented and thus had a similar function to the application of ›international‹ in the cultural sphere. No doubt Daubeny's application of the term reflects this usage, rather than its development as an epithet to denote ›non-Western‹ in such categorisations as ›world music‹ or ›world food‹. As Philip V. Bohlman discusses in *World Music: A Very Short Introduction*, this meaning of the term evolved in the 1980s, when it became inseparable from the phenomenon of ›globalisation‹ and was adopted by record companies and advertising specialists to define, and thereby sell, popular music from outside the Anglo-American and European mainstreams (Bohlman 2002). The WTS applied the term to ›theatre‹ before this understanding had gained popular currency and in addition, the breadth of WTS programming does not reflect such a limited definition.

The internationalism of these post-War artistic initiatives is often defined primarily as ›European‹ or ›Eurocentric‹ and the WTS is no exception. Dan Rebellato positions the WTS as ›European‹ within his wider argument for the widespread influence of European drama on the post-War British stage (vgl. Rebellato 1999: 128) and Colin

Chambers characterizes the WTS as a ›European‹ enterprise, framing it as a key part of the RSC's engagement with Continental European theatre. Jen Harvie argues that the ›world‹ presented by the WTS was »unquestionably Eurocentric« (Harvie 2005: 121), despite including non-European categories in her analysis of its programming. She splits countries represented into Western Europe (France, West Germany, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Sweden, Spain); Eastern Europe (Poland, the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Turkey), the USA, the Middle East (Israel), and East Asia (Japan). Though Harvie's account is a relatively comprehensive list of represented countries, it is problematic in two ways. First, it employs disputable categorisations, such as placing Spain in Western Europe. Spain was effectively positioned at the margins of Europe as a military dictatorship during this period. By inviting the Núria Espert Company to present its work, the WTS significantly expanded understandings of Spanish culture among UK theatre audiences. Similarly, Polish and Czech companies came to the WTS at a time when relations between the UK and Eastern Europe were limited by the Cold War. The application of the term ›Eurocentric‹ in this context gives a »present-minded answer« (Burke 1997: 2) to a historical question, as WTS programming significantly expanded understandings of ›Europe‹ among UK theatre-going audiences. Second, Harvie's account misses out Austria, Belgium and – perhaps more significant in terms of problematising her characterisation of Eurocentrism – India, South Africa and Uganda.

The WTS's investment in post-War humanist internationalism was consistently celebrated in its discourses, where it was also discursively linked to the promise of innovation. In order to critically evaluate the historical relationship between the international and the promise of innovation in festival culture, this chapter aims to analyse how these connections are discursively produced in WTS discourses and to examine how the WTS led to innovative practices on British stages, while shaping the practices and discourses of subsequent international theatre festivals.

Discourses

Daubeny was a Second World War veteran and lost an arm in service in Italy. His wife, Molly Daubeny, suggests that the war influenced his programming, recalling that, »Peter was very keen that companies came from Poland... because of the war he felt that the Poles needed help and publicity« (Daubeny 2014). An examination of WTS discourses reveals that they were akin to those which evolved in the immediate post-War period, when the Edinburgh International Festival was founded, suggesting that Daubeny was invested in the value of international cultural exchange as a way of building and rebuilding relationships between people of different nations. In the Introduction to the 1964 WTS programme, RSC director Peter Hall advocates for the WTS's value as an ambassador of understanding between different cultures, writing »the union of actor and audience can achieve a flash-point of communication which penetrates every barrier, even that of language« (WTS 1964). An understanding of theatre's potential to form friendships across cultural and linguistic borders is again invoked in the programme for the 1965 season by Peter Ustinov, in which he writes, »We are nearer the hearts of these people when we see such companies than we ever are as tourists« (WTS 1965). This sentiment is repeated by Hall in the 1966 programme, where he states, »Language is no barrier to the union between actor and audience. And an understanding of the work of these visiting companies can perhaps broaden into a better understanding of the countries from which they come« (WTS 1966). This is also a discourse that has emerged from interviews with individuals involved with the festival. Joyce Nettles, who worked as Daubeny's secretary between 1972 and 1973, reflects:

If you love Zulu theatre, it would be difficult to hate the Zulus, and therefore it would be difficult for me to take part in a war against the Zulus. That's very simplistic, but likewise, if I love Polish theatre, I will think twice before I volunteer to fight against Poland... The theatre can be an instrument for the improvement of the lot of mankind, in a kind of microscopic way, but that's better than nothing. (Nettles 2015)

Nettles is drawing on her experience of seeing the Zulu production *uMabatha* and Poland's Cracow Stary Theatre in *The Possessed*, two productions which she describes as »almost as fresh today as they were then« (Nettles 2015). Her choice of these examples in this context suggests that she felt the humanist potential of the WTS particularly keenly in relation to cultures experiencing oppression. Similarly, director David Gothard observed »the wonderful thing about a substantial part of that programme is it is helping oppressed art in Eastern Europe – the Poles and the Czechs and the Russians« (Gothard 2016).

The value of this internationalism was discursively linked to the promise of innovation, in terms of funding structures, working practices and aesthetics, from the opening season. In the inaugural programme, Hall used this promise strategically to embed the WTS firmly into his wider campaign for public subsidy, which is where the economic and sociological undertones of the term ›innovation‹ are perhaps most keenly felt. In the 1960s, Hall was campaigning for increased public subsidy of the arts, particularly in relation to the RSC and the nascent National Theatre (NT). In the WTS programme, Hall overtly frames the WTS as further justification of public subsidy for the RSC. He argues that »a strong and popular cultural life can enrich us far beyond its cost« (WTS 1964). He frames the WTS as an exchange, drawing on details of the RSC's planned tour of Eastern Europe, America, and Canada, and concluding, »politically, it should draw our countries together: artistically it should provide capital that can be used in the future« (WTS 1964). Further, the invited companies embodied the kind of funding structure that Hall aspired to attain for the RSC: repertory companies with a pool of permanent actors who were well-funded by their respective governments. This comparison is made explicit in Hall's »Welcome« in the 1965 programme in which he states

After many years of anguish and idealism, Britain at last has two theatre ensembles of character which can hope to return the compliment this international WTS pays us – the extraordinarily successful National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company... the subsidised theatre has arrived. (WTS 1965)

Hall's discourse constructs the RSC and NT in the image of the companies at the WTS, demonstrating how these visiting companies and their high production values were held up as examples of what British theatre could achieve if it were to receive the same level of government subsidy. In *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company*, Chambers argues that the outcome of the RSC's appeal for increased public subsidy »not only determined the kind of future the RSC could enjoy but also moulded the pattern of the nation's major performing arts funding for the next four decades« (Chambers 2004: 23). The international companies presented at the WTS lent considerable weight to the RSC's cause, contributing significantly to models of UK arts funding that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

Beyond funding, the promise of innovation was consistently framed in terms of aesthetics. In his article for the 1965 programme entitled »The Way Ahead« (WTS 1965), Charlie Chaplin calls the increased presence of international theatre a »Renaissance« and this presence is directly linked to »the renewed vigour and life of our theatre« (WTS 1968) in the 1968 programme. The WTS regularly inscribed its own historical significance into its discourses, positioning the visiting artists and those who witnessed them as privileged witnesses of historic moments in British theatre history. Articles in many of the programmes framed the WTS as a watershed moment for British theatre. The introductory article to the 1966 programme proclaims that,

before these seasons started, the British theatre was not particularly conscious of international theatre... only since 1964 have the world's most exciting theatre companies been regularly on show in London. (WTS 1966)

In the press, similarly, critics often positioned the season as pivotal to British theatre finally catching up with other arts forms. In the *Observer*, in 1966 Hilary Spurling wrote,

Week after week, to right and to left of me, other people are scrupulously weighing foreign films, foreign sculpture, foreign paintings, foreign orchestras. Only the theatre is starved of contact with the

world beyond this island – except through the miracles of financial and diplomatic tact performed each year by Mr. Peter Daubeny. (Spurling 1966)

Film critic Penelope Gilliat similarly observed that »the London stage suddenly has its own National Film Theatre« (Gilliat 1966), drawing a parallel with such an analogy to the world cinema focus of the NFT and the London Film Festival (LFF) (vgl. ebd.). This sense of transformation is present in the repeated idea that the WTS raised the profile of London into an international theatre capital. In his introduction to the 1968 season Peter Hall introduces this idea, which is then immediately reinforced by the press cuttings which are reproduced in the margins (vgl. Hall 1968).

This discourse of its own historical significance is accompanied by regular evaluations of the WTS's legacy alongside other moments of self-memorialization. The 1973 programme features three commissioned articles, by Ronald Bryden, Charles Wintour and Peter Ustinov, which evaluate the WTS' impact and potential legacy, outlining examples of how it influenced professional networks in the UK as well as repertoires in leading theatrical institutions. Each programme contains statistical updates which serve to underline the magnitude of its achievements. In the 1968 programme, Hall remarks on the »24 companies and 65 plays« (WTS 1968) that London has seen. The publicity leaflet for the 1972 WTS states »the total number of visits by foreign companies to the World Theatre Season is now over 60. They have brought in all more than 100 different productions« (WTS 1972) and in the production programmes for the 1973 WTS, it states »the 10 seasons, by the end of this present one, will have staged 43 companies from 19 countries in nearly 150 different productions« (WTS 1973). The WTS also had two anniversary seasons – the first in 1968, celebrated its 5th anniversary and the second, in 1973, its 10th. The 1973 programme was particularly invested in evaluating WTS achievements to date because it was to be the last in the series. Daubeny was to take a period of »enforced rest« (WTS 1973). In his article for the 1973 programme, Ronald Bryden explains that »Peter Daubeny has designed his tenth World Theatre Season as a retrospect of the nine fat years before it«

(WTS 1973) and the programme mainly comprised companies who had previously appeared and were met with great success. The notion of a retrospective was reinforced in the programme by the »Index of Companies and Plays 1964 to 1973« in the back pages.

The value of internationalism and the promise of innovation are tightly woven in WTS discourses, which consistently reinforce WTS influence on British performance culture. The cultural diplomacy aspects celebrated in post-War discourses sit alongside arguments for economic influence, in terms of public subsidy and improved funding structures for the arts, and claims to enriched professional networks and aesthetic transformation.

Innovation

The connection between internationalism and innovation that was constructed by WTS discourses is borne out by scholarly evaluation of its influence and legacy and is revealing of significant genealogical lineages between the WTS and contemporary international theatre festivals.

The WTS had a tangible impact on professional networks in the UK. Many practitioners showcased at the WTS were invited to present work at the nascent NT under the leadership of its first Artistic Director, Laurence Olivier. The work of Czech designer Josef Svoboda was first seen in London in *The Insect Play*, the opening production of the 1966 WTS. Svoboda was subsequently invited to work on three high-profile productions at the NT, demonstrating the immediate impact of the WTS on working practices and approaches to design in one of the UK's leading institutions. Svoboda collaborated with director John Dexter on *The Storm* in 1966; with Laurence Olivier on *Three Sisters* in 1967; and with Anthony Quayle on *The Idiot* in 1970. Further examples include Jacques Charon, who was invited to direct Feydeau's *A Flea in her Ear* at the NT in 1966 following the success of his WTS production of *Un fil à la patte* with the Comédie-Française in 1964; Ingmar Bergman, who was invited to direct *Hedda Gabler* for the NT in 1970 with Maggie Smith in the title role, two years after his production of the play

with Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theatre was performed at the WTS; and designer René Allio who was invited to collaborate with director William Gaskill for productions of *The Beaux Strategem* and *The Recruiting Officer* in 1970, after Allio's work was showcased at the WTS in 1968 with the Théâtre de France and in 1969 with the Théâtre de la Cité.

Hall also invited international directors to stage productions at the RSC after their appearance at the WTS. In 1967 the Greek director Karolous Koun directed *Romeo and Juliet* at Stratford-upon-Avon, after his productions with the Greek Art Theatre in 1964 and 1965 (he also returned to the WTS in 1967 and 1969) and Italian director Giorgio de Lullo was invited to direct at RSC in 1968 after his productions with the Compagnia dei Giovani in 1965 and 1966. Influence also went in the other direction, with UK practitioners being invited to work overseas. Director Terry Hands, for example, presented a production of *Romeo and Juliet* with the Comédie-Française at the 1973 WTS, a collaboration which came about as a result of Daubeny's contacts. Subsequent to his position as RSC director, Hands worked as consultant director at the Comédie-Française between 1975 and 1980, an appointment which was followed by work at Burgtheater in Vienna. Hands reflects, »one thing led to another but the origin was Peter Daubeny and the World Theatre Season« (Hands 2015), positioning the WTS as a significant factor in the development of his prolific career as an international director.

The WTS led directly to further international programming on British stages. When Hall left the RSC to become Artistic Director of the NT in 1973, he invited Molly Daubeny³ to work with him as consultant on theatre companies from abroad. Between 1976 and 1977, she organised the first visits from an international company to the new NT on London's South Bank.⁴ The Théâtre National Populaire brought productions of *Tartuffe* and *La Dispute* in November 1976 and the Núria Espert Company returned with *Divinas palabras* (*Divine Words*) in 1977. This ongoing engagement with international work at the NT continued through the appointment of producer Thelma Holt as Head of Touring and Commercial Exploitation, a role she assumed in 1985. Holt drew on Molly Daubeny's contacts and expertise to organise two international seasons at the NT in 1987 and 1989. INTERNATIONAL

87 comprised a series of four visits to the NT from Berlin's Schaubühne with a production of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, directed by Peter Stein; Stockholm's Royal Drama Theatre with a production of *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg and *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, both directed by Ingmar Bergman; Tokyo's Ninagawa Company with *Macbeth* by Shakespeare and *Medea* by Euripides, directed by Yukio Ninagawa; and Moscow's Mayakovsky Theatre Company with *Tomorrow was War*. Holt received the Olivier/Observer Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Theatre and a special award from *Drama Magazine* for this season. This was followed by INTERNATIONAL 89, a second series of four visits by international theatre companies: *Tango Varsoviano*, by Buenos Aires's Teatro del Sur; *The Grapes of Wrath*, by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company; *Uncle Vanya*, by the Moscow Art Theatre; and *Suicide for Love*, a return visit from the Ninagawa Theatre Company. Some of these programming decisions directly reveal Daubeny's influence, such as the Moscow Art Theatre and the Royal Dramatic Theatre, which he introduced to the British stage in 1958 and 1968 respectively. Holt remembered that Molly Daubeny's advice was particularly useful in relation to the Russian companies. She also recalled Molly Daubeny giving her »the best piece of advice« when she experienced her first cancellation, saying, »I'm telling you what Peter would have said, because it happened all the time: just go and get something else« (Holt 2014). Holt reflects, »it just needed somebody to press the button rather than think the man that does it is dead« (Holt 2014), positioning herself as representing a continuation of Daubeny's international initiatives. Holt continues to present international companies on British stages with her own company, Thelma Holt Ltd, founded in 1990, including most recently, a return of the Ninagawa production of *Macbeth* to the Barbican in October 2017 (The Barbican Centre o. J.).

The WTS had a profound impact on international theatre programming at the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF). Before the WTS began, the theatrical strand of EIF programming had mainly presented companies from France, as well as single appearances of companies from Germany, Canada, Italy and Australia.⁵ From 1965 onwards, a year after the WTS began, there was a marked diversification, with

companies from the USA, Greece, Russia, Poland, Ireland, Czechoslovakia, Japan and Sweden being invited to present their work. This suggests that the WTS provided the impetus for more ambitious international theatre programming, an observation that is given further weight by direct examples of influence. Those examples include visits from the Abbey Theatre, which appeared at the EIF in 1968 after visits to the WTS in 1964 and 1968; the Theatre on the Balustrade, which appeared at the EIF in 1969, after visits to the WTS in 1967 and 1968; and the Noh Theatre of the Hosho Company, which appeared at the EIF in 1972, after the WTS had introduced Noh to the British stage five years earlier. This influence was formally recognised under the directorship of Frank Dunlop, whose directorial practice had been influenced by the WTS (Gush 2018: 151–153) and who organised a tribute to its enduring impact on his work by reformulating the international theatre strand of EIF programming as a ›World Theatre Season‹ in 1986 and inviting back several companies that were first introduced to the British stage at the WTS.

The WTS also influenced repertoires in several key UK institutions, including the RSC and the NT. At the RSC, for example, the Polish Contemporary Theatre's production of Mrożek's *What a Lovely Dream* inspired the English-language premiere of a Mrożek play in the UK, *Tango*, directed by Trevor Nunn in 1966; the RSC staging of *The Government Inspector* in 1966 came after the Moscow Art Theatre's Gogol production in 1964; a production of Boucicault's *London Assurance* in 1970 after the Abbey Theatre production of *The Shaughraun* in 1968; and the Núria Espert Company's production of *The Maids*, which came to the WTS in 1971, was the impetus behind Terry Hands' revival of Genet's *The Balcony* in the same year. The influence on the NT's repertoire is also visible in the 1966 revival of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, following the Abbey's production in 1964, the dramatization of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* in 1970 after the Leningrad Gorky Theatre's production at the WTS in 1966, and the first UK staging of a Pirandello play with *The Rules of the Game* in 1971, after Italy's Compagnia dei Giovani brought their production of the same play in 1966.⁶

After the WTS ended in 1975, new international festivals emerged, including the London International Mime Festival (LIMF), founded by

Joseph Seelig in 1977, and the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), founded by Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal in 1981. The precedent set by the WTS proved particularly productive for the latter. Fenton and Neal invited Molly Daubeny to become their patron and was described by Neal as LIFT's first »key champion« (Fenton/Neal 2015). She invited Fenton and Neal to parties at her home, which Fenton recognised gave them »credibility within the theatre Establishment who admired what Peter had done« (Fenton/Neal 2015). Although Fenton and Neal were clear that the WTS was not the initial impetus behind LIFT,⁷ they suggest that it was significant to have Molly Daubeny on side as »a blessing from history« (Fenton/Neal 2015). Neal recalls that it had proved particularly useful to learn from Molly Daubeny and from reading Daubeny's obituaries »that somebody had struggled, as we were struggling« (Fenton/Neal 2015), particularly in relation to funding. Like Daubeny, Fenton and Neal were faced with an Arts Council that was resistant to funding international work on British stages (Khan in Fenton/Neal 2005: 67). Whilst they took LIFT in a different direction to the WTS, particularly in relation to its multi-site format, education programme and practices of co-production, Neal suggested that it had »absolutely the same spirit running through but manifested in a different way for different times« (Fenton/Neal 2015). On LIFT's website, it states that the festival is »at the forefront of ground-breaking international theatre« that »has the power to unite strangers« and »celebrates our shared humanity« (LIFT o. J.). These values are bound together with a promise of innovation, which reads »we advance contemporary thought, introduce new forms, ideas and ways of experiencing art« (LIFT o. J.). This striking similarity to WTS discourses suggests a genealogical link between the humanist internationalism and the promise of innovation that shaped the WTS in the post-War period and the discourses that define LIFT's vision to this day.

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Archive Collections:

Peter Daubeny World Theatre Season Collection, THM/85.

Notes

- 1 The International Theatre Institute (ITI) in 1947; the International Association of Theatre Critics (ITAC) in 1956; the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) in 1957; and the International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians (OISTAT) in 1968.
- 2 There was no WTS in 1974 due to Peter Daubeny being unwell.
- 3 Peter Daubeny's wife Molly played an important and uncredited role in the organization of the WTS and had a particularly significant role in safeguarding the WTS's legacy and continuing to develop UK links in international theatre networks in the period after Daubeny's death in 1975. For more information, see Gush 2018: 336–338.
- 4 The building on the South Bank opened on October 25, 1976.
- 5 La Compagnie Juvet de Théâtre de l'Athénée in 1947; La Compagnie Renaud-Barrault in 1948; Düsseldorf Theatre Company in 1949; Le Théâtre de

l'Atelier in 1951; Le Théâtre National Populaire and La Compagnie de Mime Marcel Marceau in 1953; La Comédie-Française in 1954; La Compagnie Edwige Feuillère in 1955; The Stratford Ontario Festival Company and the Piccolo Teatro, Milan in 1956; La Compagnie Renaud-Barrault in 1957; Perth Repertory Theatre in 1959; La Compagnie Roger Planchon in 1960. For more information on Edinburgh International Festival programmes, see Miller 1996: 159–327.

- 6 For more information on WTS influence on repertoires at the Young Vic, the Greenwich Theatre and the Riverside Studios, see Gush 2018.
- 7 Fenton and Neal recognise a student festival at the University of Coimbra in Portugal as their inspiration. For more information see Fenton/Neal 2005: 15–16.

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