

British theatre in a post-national era

By Dan Rebellato

Overseas projection.

Despite the health of its national theatre, Britain was late in getting a National Theatre. Most European countries established their national theatres in the nineteenth century, as part of the wave of nationalist movements that swept through Europe.

Czechoslovakia got theirs in 1862; Greece in 1880; Norway opened the Nationaltheatret in 1899; early assertions of German nationalism came in the eighteenth century with Lessing's attempts to found a national theatre in Munich and in Goethe and Schiller's Weimar Theatre, both cities now boasting a national theatre, with a third in Mannheim.

In Britain, by contrast, calls for a national theatre in the nineteenth century came to nothing and it was at late as 1963 that the National Theatre began operation and only 1976 before it opened its own building. The United Kingdom did not partake in quite the same struggle for nationalist self-assertion that shaped the nineteenth-century history of countries like Norway, Italy and Germany. But perhaps related to that is a sense that Britain, easing into its imperialist role, felt no need to identify itself with as parochial a geopolitical identity as a nation. It had its eyes on global leadership, educating the world in laissez-faire economics and parliamentary democracy. Why be a nation when you can embody the destiny of the world? Well, that's the theory why no national theatre emerged in Britain.

Following the victory of Italian unification in the mid-nineteenth-century, nationalist statesman, Massimo D'Azeglio is held to have remarked "We have made Italy; now we must make the Italians". By that he meant that the political process needed to be matched with a cultural transformation; turning people into a People. In Italy and elsewhere, the theatre played a role, with competition



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for dialect dramas, authentic expressions of national culture that would allow audiences collectively to understand the distinctiveness of their new identities.

Britain, with its eye on a wider role, was perhaps reluctant to admit that its cultural identity was limited to its island shores and correspondingly felt no need for a national theatre. The situation now is quite different. Britain passed its National Theatre Act in 1949, after a bruising war that demonstrated some degree of moral authority but also its inability to play world leader any longer without considerable help. For the architects of post-war Britain, culture seemed a way for Britain to continue "punching above its weight"; its culture would wax as its Empire waned. Of course, it has continued to be an abiding belief of the Foreign Office that Britain's world role lies not so much in its sheer power but in its canny position at the intersection of three great power blocks: North America, Europe and the Commonwealth. By trying to keep them all sweet it Britain is supposed to maintain a balancing role in major world conflicts. Some version of this doctrine can be seen from Churchill to Blair. National self-perception thus continues to be built upon an understanding of Britain as global, or at least internationalist.

There is an obvious conflict between the nation-oriented geopolitical model that so occupied the thoughts of the nineteenth-century nationalist dreamers and the borderless world of today. The latter is traversed by flows of goods, services and labour, encircled by weightless information and characterised by digital, diffuse transactions across the world. Are the borders of a nation meaningful any more?

As international corporations and free-market apologists work to tear down border controls, as we become increasingly international in our populations, our social connections, our dietary cultures, our cultural diets, what is an Italian? What is authentically Norwegian? How do you know you are really British?

There are, of course, morbid symptoms of this change – violence against immigrants, the rise of far-right groups from the Lega Nord to the English Defence League – and yet our cultures are changing. It is a token of how far they have changed that the far-right's iconography has to be pushed ever further back into the past, even further into the imaginary twilight of mist and myth, to find an authentic national identity.

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How has British theatre responded to these changes? Our theatre is, regrettably, somewhat insular. Partly this is because of its success.

Theatre continues to be at the heart of our culture; widely reviewed, cheaply available, popularly attended. We have, of course, a long tradition of theatremaking (though, it is less often noted, a tradition sustained throughout its history by international imports, from the Italian Comedy to Scandinavian Naturalism) and Shakespeare continues to be our pride and our burden.

But there are several ways in which British theatre has responded to the opening up of national borders, the emergence of a globalised world. First, Britain created the first genuinely globalised theatre. In 1981, Andrew Lloyd-Webber opened his hugely successful musical show *Cats*. This was the first of a series of megamusicals that includes *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Miserables*, *Miss Saigon*, *The Lion King* and

Mamma Mia. All but *The Lion King* first opened in London. The key innovation of these shows is that subsequent productions are required to follow the original production to the last note, costume, lighting change, souvenir programme and commemorative key-ring. If you put on *The Phantom of the Opera*, you are not so much opening a new production as opening a new franchise of a successful global chain.



The National. The Royal National Theatre, located at South Bank, central London. The building was opened in 1976, replacing the company's temporary location at the Old Vic theatre. Photograph: David Samuel.

British theatre in a post-national era (cont.)

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For this reason, they are sometimes given the unflattering nickname McTheatre. The connections between this form of theatremaking and the practices of global industrial capitalism are obvious.

It is not merely commercial theatre that has taken this approach, of course. The Royal Court Theatre in London is, undoubtedly, one of the most important theatres in Europe, responsible for commissioning and premiering perhaps hundreds of plays that have gone on to find a permanent place in the world repertoire. In the last twenty years it has understandably capitalised on this brand by setting up workshops in dozens of other cities across the whole world. At best these are opportunities for genuine cultural exchange – the Court has programmed several seasons of work from other countries – but at worst it can seem as if the Royal Court is sending its playwrights abroad to teach them how to write plays properly.

Within the United Kingdom, the geopolitical changes we have seen in the world have led to a number of changes to the very idea of a National Theatre. In 2006, the National Theatre of Scotland began operating, the culmination of at least 60 years of campaigning to have Scotland's national identity reflected in a theatre institution of its own. But, unlike its English cousin – indeed unlike almost all national theatres across the world – this is a theatre without a building. Instead, the National Theatre of Scotland commissions work in partnerships with existing companies and partner organisations, some of them not even Scottish, and allows its presence to be a weightless matter of branding and capital flows. The company thus exists as a pure idea, not tied to the nineteenth-century technology of a cumbersome theatre building.

The idea has caught on; last year a Welsh National Theatre was founded on similar lines and its influence has been visible in Nicholas Hytner's widely acclaimed reign as Artistic Director of the National Theatre of England, opening up more and more connections with other theatre groups and questioning quite

fundamentally how a national theatre can meaningfully reflect a nation unto itself.

And lastly there are the playwrights. Over the last quarter-century British theatre writing has become more and more cosmopolitan. By that I mean that whereas in 1980 one might have expected an exciting new play to be based in a recognisable Britain, placed in some kind of social context, addressing some immediate topic of current concern, in 2010 such plays were a rarity. Instead, it is far more likely that we represent our world through indirection, abstraction, metaphor and formal experiment.

I think of a play like Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) which comprises seventeen scenes all linked only by the name Anna, or variants of it. The lines of dialogue are not assigned to particular characters; the locations are not given. Is this a single play? Or seventeen playlets? Is Anna one character? Or are there seventeen Annas?

This may seem like a recipe for deep theatrical frustration but its openness has allowed it to sweep through the world's theatres generating new interpretations, associations and productions wherever it goes. It was first performed upstairs at the Royal Court to audiences of less than 100 per night. In 2007 its first major professional revival in London was on the Lyttelton stage of the National Theatre, playing to over a 1,000 each performance. Simon Stephen's play *Pornography* (2007) is a series of scenes that can be performed in any order by any number of actors, and received its world premiere in Germany. We look beyond our narrow insularity to

find commonalities across the world.

For me, it is plays like this that have the best chance of capturing something of our contemporary world. And in part they do this through a kind of formal embracing of other world traditions (one can see hints of Michel Vinaver and Heiner Müller in the work, of Gertrude Stein and Stéphane Mallarmé) rather than insisting on British traditions of playwriting. But in part they do this by displaying openness to that world: by creating a playtext that invites participation, collaboration, interpretation, wherever that may be. Much contemporary British writing seems to be trying to find a form that is not narrowly identified with nation but can be understood across the world, will find resonances everywhere, that may even come to point us towards a cosmopolitan consciousness.

This development could be seen as a natural response to a more globalised world, reflecting an admirable sense of innovation in British theatre. On the other hand, it could also be seen as a kind of revived nineteenth-centuryism, a squeamishness at admitting a British identity and a desire to lead the world, if not in imperialism, then through cultural imperialism, power at one remove. Maybe not even at such a remove: culture is less the distraction or relief from industry that it once was; modern work in Europe is about presentation, handling images and information, providing experiences, and telling stories. Work is more and more like culture, which means that culture entails influence, power and growth. Perhaps cultural work is a disguised form of British industrial self-assertion?

I think not, principally because despite the openness of these plays, they carry a distinctive British lilt to them; a characteristic set of emotional defences, a pleasure at the tracteries of our language, a certain ironic self-mockery in its laughter that the British have always delighted in. It seems to me that in its simultaneous Britishness and unBritishness, our theatre is looking hard at the erasure of national identity, asking more profoundly than most of our politicians what we will gain from the new geopolitical dispensation and what we will lose.

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New British wave. Director Martin Crimp (2nd from right) greeting the audience after staging his play *The City*. Paris, 13 February 2009. Photograph: Raphaël Labbé