NTQ Reports and Announcements

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Crisis at the Theatre Museum

As this issue of *New Theatre Quarterly* was going to press, we learned of a threat to the continued existence of the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden. The following personal response by NTQ Contributing Editor Ian Herbert may well have been overtaken by events by the time this issue is published, but we felt the situation should not go unrecorded or unprotested. Any interested readers who have not yet added their voices in support of the Museum should visit http://theatremuseum.org/news_and_views/phpbb/viewtopic.php?t=3582 where up-to-date news is, at the time of writing, being posted.

Last week I went twice to the Theatre Museum, not a place I visit often, but worth the trip on both occasions. It is now under an unspoken but very real threat.

First, I went with some fellow critics to Blythe House, behind Olympia, where the Museum's huge library and many other hidden treasures are kept, including thousands of costumes, tons of photographs, a mountain of press cuttings, yards of journals including complete runs of *Theatre Record* and *Time Out*, and the archives of individuals such as Henry Irving and Michael Redgrave and of organizations such as the Royal Court and Windmill Theatres. Ask nicely and they will show you Ivor Novello's visitors' book. The study room, where scholars and researchers can get at all this material to work on, has been moved – logically enough – from the Museum's more visible exhibition site in Covent Garden, where I went later in the week for the opening of *Two Way Mirror* – for the Museum has cunningly carved out a separate theatre entrance and a foyer (rather a substantial one for the fringe, complete with box office and bar) from its ground-floor exhibit 'A Great Night Out', a striking visual survey of the West End past, present, and future that makes intervals more interesting than usual. Downstairs, the theatre is much more usable now that its stage is at floor level and its seats no longer fixed, although its four obtrusive supporting pillars remain.

It was at Blythe House that someone pulled out Richard Brooks's paragraph in the previous day's *Sunday Times*: for, now that the Museum's second application to the Heritage Lottery Fund had failed, their masters at the Victoria and Albert Museum are considering closing the Covent Garden site. This was the first the Blythe House staff had heard of it.

The lottery rejection makes an interesting story in itself. I gather that the Museum put in a small local bid, after the first, rather too ambitious one was rejected: the London HLF came back and said, in effect, 'This looks fine – why not ask the main board for more money?' So they did – I think the new request was for an extra half million or so – and this got turned down as not being value for money. Talk about a double bind.

One can only guess at what is going on here. Lips are contractually buttoned at the Theatre Museum, and the V&A seems to be working through leaks to the press rather than public statements. Their Press Officer merely says that the Museum is 'conducting a review of the best way forward', but the implication is that someone at HQ has it in for Covent Garden.

In the last financial year the Theatre Museum attracted 225,000 visitors. If we assume a hundred researchers a week at Blythe House, that leaves 220,000 going through Covent Garden. This year's figures, it must be admitted, are noticeably down at 135,000 so far (they halved in August after 7/7), though one wonders whether they include the evening theatregoers who are now flocking to sell-out shows. The V&A's own attendance is down ten per cent, too, which may be behind some of the threat to Covent Garden. All the same, here is an underfunded, specialized museum which can still pull in quite a crowd.

The awkward, pillar-ridden site, most of it under the Transport Museum, is not the easiest to use, but for the theatre community it would be a tragedy to lose. You're in the heart of Theatreland, in sight of both the Opera House and Drury Lane, in an area thronging with tourists. As a point of contact for London's theatres with the visitors who bring so much to them and to the capital's broader economy, it should be crucial.

The present director, Geoffrey Marsh, who has been tied up with the lottery projects ever since he arrived, is well aware of the need to stress links with live London theatre, as you can see from a cursory glance at the programme of talks, tours, performances, and educational activities on the Museum's busy website. It's hard to pick out from published figures what its true costs are, but I'm told that the overhead for Covent Garden is about a million a year. The unexpired lease could

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raise about a million quid on the open market, a tempting economy for a cash-strapped V&A.

What we'd get in its place, if HQ had its way, would be a few galleries in South Ken containing the gems from Covent Garden, the occasional special exhibition (which would presumably have to fight for space with displays of Fabergé eggs or Art Deco), and maybe some touring shows. The public face of a separate, identifiable showcase for our theatre and its history would disappear into the home of 'an ace caff with a museum attached'. Any educational activity would become part of a broader design-based programme, not particularly performing arts-oriented.

There is an interesting moral side issue here: the Theatre Museum took on not only the V&A's theatre collections, but those from the privately founded Theatre Museum in Leighton House. Many of the gifts to this establishment, and probably some subsequent gifts to the Theatre Museum itself, were made on the understanding that they would be part of a dedicated Theatre Museum, not some all-embracing arts and crafts collection. The V&A might have to give some of them back.

But what should concern us more is the possibility of losing a prime site in the West End for the theatre and its wares. If the Lottery can't give it money, there are surely other donors, from the Society of London Theatre and its individual members to the London Development Agency, who should see it as a good cause. It wouldn't cost all that much to endow it and set up a programme that would develop even more the outreach that is now well in place.

It seems to me that the biggest problem, which has dogged the museum ever since it opened, is its link with the V&A. There is enough backstabbing among curators there for an Agatha Christie thriller, but otherwise its links with theatre are tenuous. Because the V&A has its own fundraising and its own Friends organization, the creation of similar activity for its 'branch' has been frowned upon. The Theatre Museum's first curator spent more than a decade within the confines of South Kensington before getting the separate site, and remained a known thorn in the V&A's side rather than an independent, energetic separatist.

Yet there have been vigorous campaigns in the past whenever the Museum's solo status has been threatened. In 1982, five years after Leighton House had closed, when the Rayner Report recommended scrapping the Covent Garden plan before it had even got under way, 32,000 signatures were collected in its support, largely as a result of a campaign by the *Evening Standard*. It may be time to start another campaign – if the V&A still doesn't like the Theatre Museum, let's find someone who does. Later, we can consider theatre history's pressing needs for the future: real development of the Museum's pitifully small video archive, more large-scale exhibitions, a parallel large space for a Museum of Theatre Design and Technology (Battersea Power Station?) and many more ideas kept down by V&A inertia or downright opposition. For the present, we must make sure that we hang on to the Covent Garden site, pillars and all.

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Odin in the UK

From 21 October to 6 November 2005, Odin Teatret, comprising director Eugenio Barba, actors Augusto Omolù, Julia Varley, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Roberta Carreri, Torgeir Wethal, Tage Larsen, Jan Ferslev, Kai Bredholt, Frans Winther, and administrator Patricia Braga Alves, toured the UK with their ensemble performance *Inside the Skeleton of the Whale*. The company also presented performance demonstrations, workshops, masterclasses, conferences, seminars, and lectures. In a less usual format, Eugenio Barba also took part in a public interview-conversation with Professor Maria Shevtsova at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

The full programme of the events consisted of *Inside the Skeleton of the Whale (*Tobacco Factory and Alsager Arts Centre); Julia Varley's solo performance, *Dona Musica's Butterflies* (Belfast Festival, Nuffield Theatre at Lancaster University); the ensemble performance demonstration *Whispering Winds* (University of Plymouth); the performance demonstrations *Text, Action, Relations* with Julia Varley and Tage Larsen (Alsager Arts Centre); *White as Jasmine* with Iben Nagel Rasmussen (Goldsmiths College); *Traces in the Snow* with Roberta Carreri (Nightingale Theatre at Brighton, University of Manchester), *Paths of Thought* with Torgeir Wethal (Nightingale Theatre, Tobacco Factory, University of Glasgow, Manchester Metropolitan University); *The Flying Carpet (*Rose Bruford College, University of Manchester), *The Echo of Silence* (Belfast Festival, Nuffield Theatre), and *The Dead Brother* with Julia Varley (Alsager Arts Centre and Lancaster University).

The public workshops were *Body and Words* led by Tage Larsen (Exeter Phoenix, University of Manchester), *The Dance of Intentions* led by Roberta Carreri (University of Bristol), *Shoot the Arrow around the Corner* led by Torgeir Wethal (Tobacco Factory), and *The Dance of the Orixà* led by Augusto Omolù for performing arts students

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at the University of Plymouth. Masterclasses with Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Roberta Carreri, Julia Varley, Torgeir Wethal, Jan Ferslev, and Frans Winther were held at Alsager Arts Centre.

In addition, Eugenio Barba opened the Clive Barker Library at Rose Bruford College, received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Plymouth, gave lectures at the Belfast Festival, the University of Manchester, and Alsager Arts Centre, and held the interview-conversation noted above at Goldsmiths College.

The tour was organized by Organic Theatre, founded by John Dean and myself in 2001. A small-scale independent cross-cultural company, half-British and half-Italian, we seek our collaborators internationally, and the ethos of our practice is based on a lifelong training-to-learn belief. In order to benefit from a rare opportunity to sustain our processes of artistic growth, as well as to provide the sense of security, familiarity, and support so necessary and appreciated by a theatre company in transit, we followed the Odin tour from the South to the North of England – from Exmouth and Exeter to London, via Bristol, and then up to Manchester and Crewe.

The practitioners and artists who have invited and organized Odin events around the world know that it is always a challenge to oneself and to one's own mental habits to decide to accept such a task, due to the precision and quality of the Odin Teatret work ethic and practice. We had predecessors in the UK who created the artistic environments in which valuable threads of contact with Odin's work started to unravel for many in this country. The Cardiff Laboratory Theatre and the Centre of Performance Research, run by Richard Gough and Judie Christie, first brought Odin for a month-long tour of Wales and a presentation of work in August 1980. This was followed by workshops, solo productions, talk, and collaborations throughout the 1980s, leading to 'Odin Ten Years On' in Cardiff in 1990. In 1992, CPR produced a session of ISTA in Brecon and Cardiff, and continued throughout the 1990s to invite Eugenio Barba and individual members of Odin to present a variety of projects.

Carran Waterfield, artistic director of Coventry-based Triangle Theatre, then organized two Odin Teatret visits to Coventry in collaboration with the Belgrade Theatre. The first, in 1994, hosted by the Belgrade, Warwick Arts Centre, and the Centre for Performing Arts, Coventry, showed *Kaosmos*, *Judith*, *The Castle of Holsterbro*, and *Itsi Bitsi*, and held masterclasses. The second, in 1997, was at the Warwick University Department of Education, where Odin presented work demonstrations, a directing workshop and an outdoor piece.

The present tour was made up of 24 performances and 27 sessions for education and training activities involving 308 participants. It was built upon contacts with a number of theatre programmers, academics and artists with a specific interest in Odin Teatret's work, some of whom had been spectators as well as participants in workshops and training activities at their venue in Holstebro, or during the company's previous visits to Britain and elsewhere. All recognized the value of Odin's alternative theatre practice and were keen to generate participation so as to transmit their experience to their students and the general public. It was thanks to all our partners in the hosting venues and institutions,[1] and to their interest, their commitment, and their support, together with their sensitive hospitality and professional care, that this almost inconceivable programme happened as smoothly as it did.

Why did we spend days on motorways and in institutions dealing with many practicalities and technical problems, and meeting and welcoming people not directly interested in our own work, but in Odin Teatret? Eugenio Barba observed in a lecture at the University of Manchester that 'the Big Bang of contemporary theatre begins with Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg introducing new challenges within the established theatrical culture', and in a way this tour may be regarded as a challenge to 'the established theatrical culture' of our time, for it is an example of a lateral way of thinking and organizing our role as practitioners in our current system. Odin's lateral approach allows us to see beyond the structure of the so-called mainstream and to integrate practice and reflexivity, collaborating with few human resources, and questions the usual idea that a project not mediated by innovative technological means or backed by a substantial amount of money cannot produce something 'exceptional'.

In a personal conversation, Eugenio Barba gave John and myself some feedback on the tour, saying that the Odin Teatret tour in Great Britain organized by Organic Theatre had clearly demonstrated the interest, not only from 'normal' theatregoers but also from students and more specialized practitioners, in theatre experiences that are clearly outside the canon, and which are often neglected not only by funders but also by the critics, due to their incapacity to perceive such needs.

There exists in England an alternative environment capable, even without regular funding, of running activities that permit collaboration between alternative companies and theatres and the academic environment, where new experiences can merge with theoretical reflection – something that no other type of theatre in cities large or small is capable of doing.

Odin Teatret has developed these aspects both in Denmark and in other European countries. They have contributed to enriching the theatre's ecological system with its diverse and multiple niches, thanks also to the capacity of funders and politicians to take on fully the vision of a demo-

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cratic theatre culture that does not consider only the tastes of the general audience.

The Odin Teatret UK tour gave us the chance to undergo a process of embodied knowledge through working hard and in silence, and listening to the inner flow created day after day by the building of relationships and the pace of events. It has also been an extraordinary opportunity to encounter other practitioners with whom we share the same values of creation and creativity regarding our craft.

A remark made by Eugenio stands out, among many others, in my notebook: 'The real revolt is against our own compromises, our tendency to be indulgent and find excuses. Theatre is a path of excellence, a way to keep ourselves alive.'

Note

1. Nesta Jones (Rose Bruford College), Alister O'Loughlin and Miranda Henderson (Nightingale Theatre), Terry Enright and the department staff at the School of Art and Performance (University of Plymouth), Stephen Hodge (Exeter Phoenix), Dan Danson (Tobacco Factory), Pete Bailie (University of Bristol), Maria Shevtsova (Goldsmiths College), Matt Fenton (Nuffield Theatre), Nigel Stewart (University of Lancaster), Maggie Gale (University of Manchester), Jane Turner (Alsager Arts Centre and Manchester Metropolitan University), Stella Hall (Belfast Festival), Benno Plassmann and Pippa Hill (The Working Party, Glasgow).

Organic Theatre (www.organictheatre.co.uk) is engaged in the production of devised performances as well as educational and training activities in the UK and abroad. Its most recent production, Sheepskin, *is currently touring Britain. The company will continue its residence at the University of Plymouth in the academic year 2006–2007.*

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