NTQ Reports and Announcements

doi:10.1017/S0266464X0800016X

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'How It Was for Us' – at the British Theatre Conference

Report on the meeting held on 9 December 2007 at the Writers' Guild Centre, London, under the title *How Was It For Us? Theatre Under Blair.*

IF YOU WANT to organize a successful conference, ask David Edgar to invite your speakers. The line-up he assembled for the British Theatre Conference at the Writers' Guild was a starry one, and all gave great value for the day's £20 fee. It was reminiscent of the weekend conferences David ran in Birmingham years ago, although in content closer to the Theatre Forum that British ITI put on when active. The Forum sought to draw up a balance sheet for the year in British theatre – but this event – which was sponsored by Birmingham and Warwick Universities and agent Alan Brodie, and entitled *How Was It For Us? Theatre Under Blair* – had ten years in its sights.

Curiously, the man himself didn't figure much in the day's discussions, having become almost invisible since leaving office. The opening speaker, Tessa Jowell, his last culture minister, did however offer a brave defence of Blairite cultural achievement, flagging up successes such as the £25 million for theatre drummed up by the Boyden Report, and energetic outbursts of civic pride like Birmingham's cultural renaissance and Manchester's new festival. While admitting that the political class of the last decade might have lacked respect for culture, she felt that the culture industry had itself colluded in unduly emphasizing the former's sleaziness. She seemed to feel that the public perception of politicians as 'sleazy, lying bastards' was partly the creation of the arts and media. Michael Kustow took her to task for this.

Peter Boyden himself led off at the next session, with a fact-filled contribution explaining why his report succeeded – it was able to change perceptions of subsidy into thoughts of investment, demonstrating how just ten per cent extra funding could raise twenty-eight per cent extra productivity in regional theatre. As well as figures, he offered a vision: 'Let us celebrate our stories through live performance.'

He was followed by Gemma Bodinetz, director of the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, showing how much that extra cash had helped revivify two very different theatres that had closed. Getting back audiences was a huge battle, but even those Scousers who don't go to the theatre were proud that it existed – 'tours' to community centres within a hundred yards of the theatres were raising the interest of people who would never venture inside the houses themselves.

Liverpool's rebirth contrasted strongly with the recently closed Bristol Old Vic, and there were sharp comments from Equity activist Malcolm Sinclair and the floor on both the 'catastrophe' of its closure and the lack of adventure in its hoped-for reopening. What was regarded as uneconomic for struggling Bristol had yet to be achieved in flavour-of-the-month Liverpool, where Gemma Bodinetz did not dare to look beyond the city's year as Cultural Capital in 2008. In spite of the huge recovery inspired by the Boyden millions, the regions are again heading into crisis, and the man himself pointed to a major cause: when distributing its new-found largesse, the government did not insist that local authorities match and guarantee increases in their contributions. Local authority cuts were now eating away the gains.

Nick Hytner and Nick Starr were able to bring comfort in describing the huge success of the National, which they were gracious enough to admit had been inherited from Trevor Nunn in a stable financial condition. But the Britain of 2003 was a different society from that of 1963, when the NT began. The pursuit of excellence which motivated its founders was no longer enough – and nor indeed were the Blair rallying cries of access and diversity. Conviction was essential. What helped them bring in 80,000 first-time visitors in a year was undoubtedly a rethink of the seating policy, hugely helped by the Travelex sponsorship. Large parts of the Olivier, which never sold at high prices, went rapidly at ten pounds, and over five years 700,000 out of the million Travelex season seats sold were at the low price.

The conference's afternoon sessions moved from arts policy to look more closely at content, with writers figuring more prominently. In a session on political theatre, Victoria Brittain and Robin Soans talked about their differing approaches to verbatim theatre, while Alistair Beaton described his efforts to inform through laughter in plays such as *Feelgood*. Victoria Brittain suggested that the Tricycle's verbatim plays (transcripts like Richard Norton-Taylor's editing of the Macpherson, Saville, and Hutton enquiries as well as her own interview-based *Guantanamo*) were necessary as a reflection of the lack of attention

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X0800016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

such vital topics received in the media. Robin Soans thought that the value of verbatim theatre was that it opened up the debate to voices that are not usually heard, and could act as a counter to the 'official version' of events. With manipulation the essence of today's politics (a true Blair legacy), such voices needed to be heard. Alistair Beaton warned that verbatim theatre, if not shaped by a talent like that of Robin Soans, could be undramatic, necessarily lacking in metaphor. He placed today's satirists in a context where old liberal left certainties were less clear. Can political theatre change anything? It doesn't matter, he said. What matters is to give audiences hope and heart.

Mark Lawson led off the next session, which turned into something of a get-the-theatre-critics event, since his fellow speakers, Mark Ravenhill, Katie Mitchell, and Emma Rice, had all recently suffered at our hands. Mark Lawson hit out at some theatre critics' ignorance of television and film, which meant that they were surprised to see 'new' techniques on stage which were commonplace in the other media. He tracked the change from the early days of TV, when actors recorded on Sunday because they were busy on stage during the week, and TV series credits included mentions of where in the West End their leads were appearing. Now there are few star names, other than film or TV ones, that can automatically fill a theatre; touring productions are sold on the basis of their casts' (sometimes dubious) TV and film appearances. He foresaw a time when live performance would be restricted to Sundays, because actors were devoting their weekdays to TV recording and rehearsal. During the week, the West End could present musicals – most of them adapted from films or TV.

Mark Ravenhill followed with a typically provocative piece, suggesting that there was too much 'new writing', driven by producers' feeling that new writing means new audiences, new consumers for theatre 'product'. He made the plea that we should not cut ourselves off from the canon. Although he regretted that the 'new writing' nineties had supplanted visually oriented approaches to the classics from imaginative groups like Cheek by Jowl and Complicite, he must have had his tongue in his cheek when he criticized the 'jigging around' of today's groups with puppets, mime, technological intervention, and physical theatre – this from someone who has just finished working (to the disgust of some critics) with arch-jiggers Frantic Assembly.

Katie Mitchell, too, regretted that we had lost the eighties' rich seam of physical theatre. Lately there had been an erosion of interest in experiment for its own sake. She loved the European scene, where directors topped the billing, and hated London's 'star-fuck' casting system. Obsessed with such performers, critics could not spot the precision of her own, highly trained actors; they had no interest in the craft of theatremaking. She had a real fear that her work would be killed off by the critics – yet her recent production of *The Waves*, loathed by her elderly tormentors, had attracted the youngest NT audience for years. Her fears were echoed by Emma Rice, another *auteur*. She is not interested in self-analysis, but wants theatremakers to be preachers and doers: 'I wish to retell stories, ones that I have enjoyed, that are a part of my psyche.' She wants to give a good night out, and to create what Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment has called 'temporary community'.

The final session looked at cultural diversity, but began with Michael Boyd telling us a little about the RSC's remarkable recovery, the result of his building trust, rebuilding respect in a stricken company. Under cover of the 'Complete Works' season, he had been able to give the Histories company two-and-a-half-year contracts, and would be hiring for three years in 2008. The season also brought European, African, and Asian companies to Stratford.

Kwame Kwei-Armah declared himself a product of the wave of optimism generated by New Labour, emphasizing its inclusiveness, its desire to create a world that is not simply dominated by the white, male middle class. For him, political correctness changed the quality of his life for good, cutting out the derogatory descriptions he had so long suffered. He did not like the retreat from liberal ideas triggered by 7/7. The window of opportunity had got smaller again, and TV and film in particular only wanted black writers to see through a lens that offered pictures of a violent, drug-fuelled underclass. He had no wish to write about racism, which he sees as 'a white problem'. We must attack this tribal thinking and show the richness of black writing, not ignorantly lump him together with Roy Williams, who comes from a very different black writing tradition, let alone adding a passing reference (as one article did) to Tanika Gupta, the panel's third speaker, as 'one to watch'.

Tanika Gupta pointed out that she had had a long career writing for TV before her first stage play over a decade ago. She followed Kwame Kwei-Armah in calling for more metaphor in theatre writing, less council-estate realism. She also wanted to be judged as a writer pure and simple: the critics compare her to black writers, not to the whole field. Being asked, as she often is, to write 'Bollywood' treatments of the classics gives her the shivers.

The day passed far too quickly, and we can hope for longer events like it to follow, perhaps over a whole weekend. It produced no manifesto, but many challenging ideas, perhaps the most important of which was Nick Hytner's plea for better and more informed governance of theatre companies nationwide.

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