PICTURES AND IMPRESSIONS: LESSONS FROM THE BRITISH THEATRE

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Eleven months since. And yet their pictures would not leave me. And not merely pictures but the thoughts, sometimes disturbing thoughts which they arouse, thoughts given birth to by the many impressions of the cultural environment of a society that we had all known so well, at least theoretically; and speaking for myself, never really in the flesh.

Encountering Britain's cultural world, and a slice of its cultural bureaucracy presented an opportunity too good to miss, to corroborate and correct long-held impressions acquired from such a lengthy cross-Atlantic distance as Nigeria. What was anticipated the least however was the sheer volume of impressions that needed to be corrected, and far too less, comparatively speaking, to corroborate. But first shall we look at the pictures before we return to the impressions?

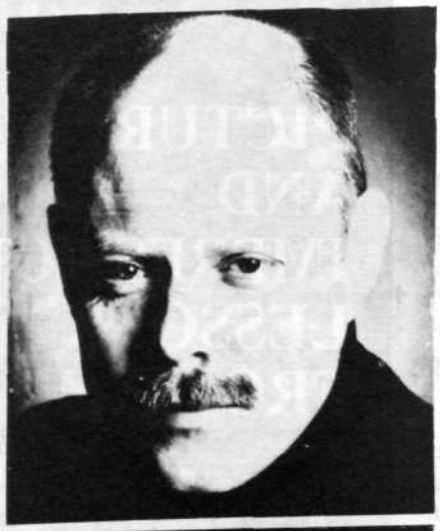
The setting was first and foremost Downing College, Cambridge, where I was serving a short term as a fellow, spilling to down-town Cambridge which in the summertime of July was a beehive of activities, cultural activities, fliers and banners hanging overhead everywhere announcing festivals ranging from musicals to a celebration of William Shakespeare. Open-roofed and storeyed tourist trucks poured in, through and out of town, the whole visage crowded with pleasure-seekers and tourists from far and near, squinting their inquisitive eyes through sun-lit streets to learn something about the grand, centuries-old architectures of the ancient academic town. But quite aside from the bustling atmosphere of the streets, you bumped into occasional street musicians, more often on string instruments and a mouth-organ, their output resonated through miniature electric combos, amazingly melodious. No, 'bumped into' might serve more like an exaggeration; the sound of their music would often trail far to welcome the pedestrian long before he came within their eye-view.

Within the walls of Downing itself, even if quieter and restrained, there was so much to provide insight into the workings of the British Theatre. At the very least, we had the cherished company of great British playwrights like David Edgar and Arnold Wesker. We also had younger dramatists like Charlotte Keatley, Terry Eagleton and Caryl Phillips. These (excepting Phillips) performed bits and pieces from their plays, Edgar and

Keatley more memorable for their joint appearance.

The scene must then change to Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's home-town and birthplace, whose streets proved to be far more rancous in the summer than Cambridge, pouring with tourists. But then, we were awaited by full-fledged theatre performances in Stratford's exquisite theatre auditoria like the Swan theatre and its larger twin, housed within the same walls, The Royal Shakespeare theatre. The Royal Shakespeare Company ensures that productions, albeit restricted to Shakespeare, continued through the season, morning till evening, in each of Stratford's theatres, often simultaneously. This statement should not be taken to mean that purely private dramatic initiatives could be avoided in the 'hallowed' precincts of Stratford. On the contrary. Non-Shakespeare plays would spring up here and there but obviously outside of the borders of the establishment over which the RSC had oversight. An illustration of this fact can be drawn from a description of Christopher Hampton's theatre by London *Guardian's* theatre critic, Michael Billington. Billington described Hampton's adaptation of Les Liaisons Dangereuses as having begun its life humbly in a converted 'tin hut' in Stratford-upon-Avon.

For our own part, we were content to see the production of Shakespeare's last tragedy, *Coriolanus*, in the compact and intimate Swan, led by the actor Toby Stevens. Tickets to any one of Stratford's performances, I'm told, are extremely hard to obtain, in spite of their resolutely high fees. What the Stratford shows thrust at you was a double-edged triumph, so to speak. A triumph of tradition and excellence. Nothing was spared to recapture the mood, the precise historical mood and that native integrity that are the hallmarks of not only Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* but all of Shakespeare's historical plays. Personally I felt the playwright would have deserved nothing less. Here after all was not only a native English performance of a dramatist that has and is being performed in virtually every nation under the heavens but was here being produced on the very soil of his birth, only a few minutes walk away from his birth-house and a shorter distance still from the spot of his entombment. Gusts of smoke and lurid flames of fire erupted at the very appropriate moments through the production, even martial tunes and extravagant thuds of outsized drums which accompanied demonstrative warriors' sword-spars that effectively returned us to the bellicose world of the Romans Shakespeare espied through his own Elizabethan spectacle lens.



From top, Robin Hooper, Michael Billington, The Royal National Theatre with Millenium Approaches

No, that quality is one ubiquitous characteristic of the British Theatre cannot be denied. And I make this point without the mind of pushing the argument far that British actors are quality-minded as such or that Britain's cultural bureaucracy is resolutely efficient - judging from the observations that could be made peering into the vaults of one of its major representative bodies: The British Council (both in the small Cambridge-Norwich outpost manned by the lone figure of Jane Donaldson whose office serviced us at Downing and at the Spring Gardens and Portland Place, in central London). Shouldn't I hasten to add that it was possible to scrape up little bits and pieces which built up into general impressions about Britain's cultural bureaucracy also from casual observations made at such unlikely stations as the Gate Theatre near Nothinghill High, which was producing one of Biyi Bandele-Thomas' plays around the time and the Tricycle Theatre on Kilburn High Street, both in London? Artistic Director, Nicholas Kent bared his doors to me, even laying all of his operational files and company brochures on the table to feed my curiosities. A much similar treatment, but more significantly, insight into cultural administration, was to await me at the prestigious Royal Court Theatre on Sloane Square. Even so, I do not begin to ascribe any of these to the voluptuous quality of the country's theatre as described above. But rather, simply to what Micheal Billington would call, 'a love of theatre'.

Afterall, it is well-known that British theatre - I mean the main theatres and not really the fringe theatres as such - which survives on government subsidies disbursed through the Arts Council and in some cases local Boroughs has for quite a while now lived with threats of strangulation occasioned by official money cuts.

A love of theatre'. Meaning a determined obstinateness to live as expressed by the rugged resolution of the theatres themselves to stay alive. Nick Kent for example tells me that fifty percent of the Tricycle's budget is derived from the box office takings and the theatre's bar. A love of theatre! It implies a resolute audience patronage even in the face of squeezes in individual and family budgets caused by the bites of inflation. A love of theatre.

Robin Hooper, literary manager of the Royal Court would also confide to me that work in the theatre in the last decade was very nearly hampered by the seductions of many young

talented playwrights and actors from theatre to rival media like television and film. But the British theatre survived on the commitment and loyalty of the few who would rather be paid far less in the theatre than abandon 'their first love' for the 'safety' of the television.

Up till now, (factually up till the time of my investigations) the fortunes of the theatre have not improved significantly. But perhaps I should also share a confidence that Hooper whispered into my ear: 'the playwrights and actors who deserted the stage for the electronic media are now returning! The film and television organisations are cutting down, companies are merging. There are lots of repeats on television, forcing the writers back'.

Then there was also the scourge of American musicals which swept across the British stage, according to Robin Hooper. This trend was helped by what he described as a definite decline of audience taste in the 1980s. Theatre-goers were responding more to spectacle than the usual text-based drama. One memorable casualty of this phenomenon was the dramatist Howard Barker who didn't do so well because of his esoteric text-base! And as if to charge at this anti-theatre brute, Hooper, 44, and 25 years in theatre, assured as follows: 'Between now (mid - 94) and early 1995, there will be no American (productions at the Royal Court). No American, no visitors, only this group of new writers'. He had as a matter of fact been describing his theatre's emphasis on new writers, black theatre and the minorities to me, ascribing much of British Theatre's survival to the faithfulness of this crop of contributors.

We may at this point hasten to add that one definite impression is made again to a casual surveyor like myself on the future directions of the British Theatre. This is in the bend towards new writing - which I also came to notice, did not mean exactly the same thing as new writers! In the sense perhaps that a Harold Pinter play written in 1995 would vie conveniently under that banner with an obscure and totally unknown writer. Even so, the theatre's sincerity of purpose is not in doubt. Giants of the nation's theatre like Stephen Daldry, artistic director of the Royal Court and not too long ago the director of the Gate theatre; Richard Eyre, director of the Royal National Theatre and Nicholas Kent of the Tricycle are all on record as having expressed not a mere bend towards, but an outright commitment to, new writing and new writers. (I'm told that a few vocal classicists and traditionalists expressed their feeling of betraval towards National Theatre's observable shift to non-classical drama. And unless the RNT unbends, they would find only the RSC remaining as the sole safe haven and custodian of the unspoilt, unmeddled traditional English and classical theatre, typified mainly by Shakespeare. Even at Cambridge, shadows of classicists hovered over our heads somewhat. They went so far as to refuse to mix with us (living and contemporary authors) for the same reason that they refused to teach contemporary British Literature in the classical vaults of Cambridge! But more on this later.)

Nick Kent's Tricycle evidently is one of the major miscreants on the roll-call of backsliding theatres turning from mainstream dramatists to the young and the untried. And Kent is resolute and unrepentant. But this is not the Tricycle's only vice. The theatre is situated in one of London's most multiracial Boroughs - 46 per cent black and Asians (few Africans). The blacks comprise mainly Kenyan Asians and Ugandans but the Asians, I gathered, had mostly never been to India! The remaining 54 per cent are Jewish and Irish and this is largely responsible for the multiracial stress in the theatre's operational policies. After all, to borrow from Michael Billington again, the main object of any community theatre is to serve its immediate surrounding. Local patronage helps the Tricycle to scoop up 500,000 of the 1,000,000 pounds needed to keep it afloat yearly. Also the investment in young playwrights pays off with time as

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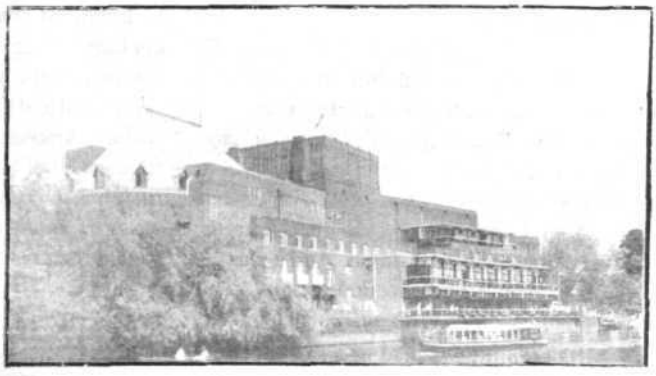

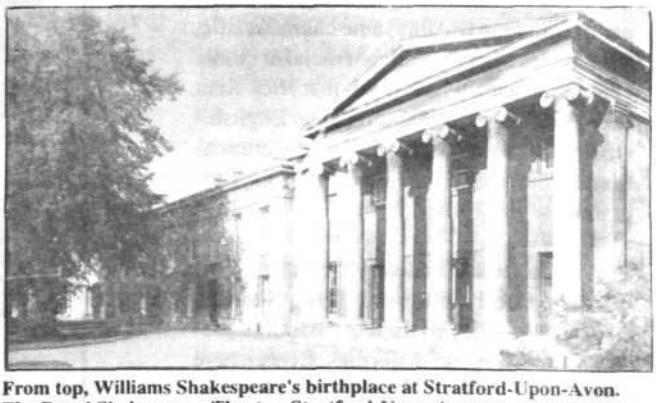

From top, Williams Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford-Upon-Avon.
The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-Upon-Avon
Downing College, Cambridge

some actually become big time. Examples are Howard Barker and Nigel Williams. A love of Theatre.

The cuts in government subvention to theatre, which is probably overdramatised in critical circles to my mind, seems to be the solitary reason for which (the government) would not wear that coveted medal, inscribed with those words: A love of Theatre. Hell! I can imagine the retort. 'Would you go so far as to say those establishment folks love the theatre?' etc. Even so, about forty million pounds are disbursed to the theatre yearly in government subvention. And I came to realise, some more comes in through Britain's main cultural export machine, The British Council. Its very elaborate Arts Division comprises five whole departments-Literature, Music, Visual Arts, Film-TV-Video and Drama and Dance. The theatre gets an enormous boost through the work of this division and its departments, (music and drama being the relevant here). Scores of successful productions within the UK, including more than a handful from the so-called fringe and unsubsidised sector are appointed yearly to tour cities and towns around the world. This no doubt will help brace up listed production teams financially as well as give their work much external exposure. The opportunities that the council's operations offer to the theatre are enormous when one considers that the council's tentacles spread to more than a hundred countries world-wide.

A WINDOW opened into the street in Camberwell, South-East London, revealed a procession of buildings on Coldharbour Lane. Even in the warm afternoon they looked desolate, but this only because the observer's eyes could not plunge down enough to the level of the lower door lintels. And it was not as if he would have needed to look. This region of the city has one striking characteristic—its predominantly black population. It did not also take too long to notice that other parts of London had this same characteristic, namely that of a predominant racial or ethnic population with, what I recall that Nick Kent once phrased as 'little indigenous English.' Of course he was speaking about the international content of his own theatre's programmes.

Yes, in the same vein nearly the entire North London, briefly observed from Neasden through Wembley to Sudbury had this predominance of Asian majorities. Everywhere I was confronted by this strange phenomenon of very little indigenous English. And for a while, it was very disturbing. Was there a carefully orchestrated scheme to annihilate the entire English race?

But it was not really as if anyone complained. Areas like Seven Sisters were mapped distinctly by Jewish and other ethnic colonies, leaving out only what we may be lured once again to pronounce as 'very little indigenous English.'

To return to the south, the entire South-east as mentioned above, has unmeddled Nigerian sections, Caribbean also, spiced by 'minorities' such as Ghanaians, Ugandans, etc. But all black.

The English, it was obvious, lived in serene landscapes and outer recesses beyond the metropolis of London. It thus was difficult to corroborate, which is another expression for 'confirm', all the impressions that, as I said, had been acquired about this society and culture back in Nigeria.

Olu Oguibe is one example among several essayists writing from Europe who constantly alleged the reawakening of European ploys to keep the non-European, particularly the African, world to the fringe. What with the imminence of the unification of Europe. Back home, we are taught and also contantly reminded of Western machinations to recolonise our world.

At one glance, it seemed to me that the case with Britain both the society and the culture, including of course the theatre—is the very contrary. It appeared that it was the very conquerors themselves that I witnessed being conquered and kept to the fringes of their own society. After all, as observed earlier, only the RSC, of all of Britain's theatrical institutions is reserved and protected from the penetrations of international contributors. One alternative way of reading these pictures is to decide that Britain is dancing to the drums of the times and that the unstoppable trend now the world over is toward the universalisation of all culture.

Recalling the encounters at Cambridge, one observation, or probably more correctly, anti-English allegations from some of the British(English) speakers invited to Downing would present yet another viewpoint. Let me first identify the speakers in question. They are no less than George Steiner and Terence Hawkes.

Terry Hawkes, one of the greatest orators I ever heard and so, a headstart contendèr for the crown of 'Cicero of Downing' was especially critical of British Society which he preferred to refer to as 'the Island race'. But his was couched in much humour, differing only in tone from George Steiner's equally magnificent, deep oratory which drew similar references but were more biting. Hawkes remarked that, the Island race does not excrete you but rather would ingest you.

And then he went on to say, 'we can English anything'. Meaning in essence that any culture or idea can be easily appropriated by the English and made to become their authentic own! Opposite to the attitude adopted by Sharespeare's hero in *Coriolanus*, Caius Martius who, about to walk out on Rome, took one last glance at the country that had just expelled him and said: 'I banish you.'

The procession of buildings, seen through the window on Coldharbour Lane were indeed sufficiently 'English'. Would it be correct then to say that the very little indigenous English population down on the High Street was only an example of English ingestion?But enough. Ingestion or digestion, at this stage, I'm afraid,I also have to banish you all!! **GR**

Comedy for youths at the Tricycle Theatre, Summer, 1994