



ARTICOLO

## The Gap in the Fence:

### Austerity Cuts, Retrenchment and European Theatre's Wake-Up Call

by John Freeman

As the world well knows, austerity cuts in Europe mean that small-to-medium theatre companies are facing an uncertain future, to the extent that the golden age of funding is coming to an end. But has the theatre this funding has produced been golden in itself? And are we Europeans turning a drama into a crisis when we use the term "austerity"? Some spending cuts have been implemented in a few countries, and some of these have been undoubtedly harsh, particularly (and particularly well-documented) in Greece and Spain. If the data of spending cuts was adjusted for inflation, which would make for a more accurate picture, we would probably see a slight decrease and certainly a flatter line for all countries, but it is clear that funding for the arts is being cut down, cut back and in some case cut off. All good things must come to an end, and in terms of funding, and certainly in the UK, the last decade has been one of the best times to work in a small scale touring theatre company since the easy cash-for-arts days of the 1970s. In fact, the Arts Council of England funding has been relatively stable for a number of years, with smaller companies enjoying an increase in base financial support. Funding has largely been maintained and many theatre companies have proliferated in the last decade. It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the fact that these small-to-medium sized companies are the backbone of the performing arts in Europe. Collectively they make a lot of work, producing more theatre than the major performing arts sector. It is worth pausing too to consider exactly why these companies are referred to as "small-to-medium" and what their size really amounts to. A medium-sized touring company is one of the vagaries of the sector. Most such companies turn over considerably less money than anything approaching a medium-sized company in any other field. Companies that the Arts Council of England and other funding bodies call medium-sized are generally small in any objective sense of the word; nearly all of them are run with perhaps one or two members of administrative staff and these are often on temporary or part-time contracts. This smallness of scale makes many theatre



companies particularly vulnerable to funding cuts. Most have few assets and little in the way of cash reserves. If the funding disappears, most cannot survive in the long term...at least in the manner to which they have become accustomed. In the spirit of pause, it is perhaps a good time to warn the reader that whilst this article will offer many big claims, these will be supported with evidence that is often as anecdotal as it is detailed. In offering a broad perspectival overview the article is as much about feelings as findings, as much about an emergent sense of what might remain when the smoke of austerity clears as about the chapter and verse of particular public policies. If this means that the article is at its most effective where its claims are strongly supported by evidence, where relevant data from Creative Scotland's Theatre Sector Report is included, for example, it is hoped that other sections are not regarded as *ineffective* simply because their justification is less academically respectable. A reasonable amount of quantitative data is supplied at the start of this paper, and again toward the end, with personal testimony and historical examples fleshing out much that remains. It is to be hoped that this path of argumentation concerning the nature, value and purpose of public theatre subsidy is not regarded here as a route to either conservatism or a totally free market economy. Relatively short papers combatively assaying large problem areas are necessarily selective in their use of evidence and are often confronting in their conclusions. To this end, I make no early apology for the impressionistic claims made in these pages about the current situation, nor about the advancing of views that can potentially illuminate a contested terrain. If the paper's bombast could be better scaled back so that the article's more serious critical points emerge more clearly, then this bombast should be seen as a weakness in the skills of writer rather than that which is written. In Europe, if not always in the USA, theatre companies are almost always reliant on government funding and it is inevitable that they are going to face real challenges in the coming years. Many are already against the wall and falling. Governments have huge statutory responsibilities in the arts, running large galleries, libraries and theatres. These major institutions are considerably less likely to be left to collapse simply because every city knows that it is measured in part by the size and health of its arts provision. A touring company working out of a particular city is never going to be as significant a factor in the way that city sees itself as a repertory theatre in a fixed location, regardless of the quality of the work produced. In the UK the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Coventry's Belgrade Theatre will always outpunch any mid-sized touring companies



those cities produce, not least because large theatres are constant reminders to citizens that the arts matter. No matter that UK's leading touring company, Forced Entertainment, have changed the landscape of European theatre more tellingly than anything that was ever produced at the Sheffield Crucible; no matter that a massively disproportionate amount of funding goes on the buildings the theatre gets shown in rather than the theatre that gets made; no European city with serious intent will ever willingly sacrifice its theatres. Subsidized theatre in the UK has then had it very good in recent years. In 1997 the Arts Council's investment in regularly funded performing arts organisations was £149 million, and this grew to £344 million in 2010. The decreasing settlement from the government means that even by 2015 the figure will still be in the region of £380 million. Thanks to the setting up of the National Lottery, more than £2 billion of funding flowed into the arts from the middle of the 1990s. Over £1.4 billion of this was spent on buildings. This resulted in around 100 new theatres, galleries and arts centres, while another 500 buildings enjoyed significant renovation programmes. Of the capital distributed to regularly funded organisations by Arts Council England in 2011/2012, 43% went to just ten institutions<sup>1</sup>. Little wonder that this can read as the financing of comfortable, even complacent existences for a select group of the governments' pet artists. The austerity cuts have plenty to slice into, and a fair percentage of what gets sliced off is fat<sup>2</sup>. Of course, many of us would have preferred that there would be no cuts to the arts and culture sector at all. But it would be unrealistic to expect cuts to be made in all other parts of public life except the arts. Not everyone agrees. A museum director in Italy has determined to set fire to his art collection in the hope that politicians will sit up and take notice. Perhaps the term "austerity cuts" causes as much harm as it describes? Perhaps the older Gladstone-popular word "retrenchment" might be a better term to use. It is, after all, more active and participatory and work-oriented, and it has the appropriate connotations of systematic recovery. Retrenchment means rationalisation of the functions of the state, and perhaps we need to see arts-funding in the larger context of techno-economic change. Certainly it seems simplistic to bemoan the fact that a particular theatre company's funding is being cut back rather than to consider why funding is

<sup>1</sup> John Knell – Matthew Taylor, *Arts Funding, Austerity and the Big Society: remaking the case for the arts*, Royal Society of Arts, in [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/RSA-Pamphlets-Arts\\_Funding\\_Austerity\\_BigSociety.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/RSA-Pamphlets-Arts_Funding_Austerity_BigSociety.pdf) (2011).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/xls/nationalportfolioorganisatios280911.xls>



automatically required in the first place. If this sounds like heresy (and I am aware that it will) we should pause once more to consider this: unlike the situation in continental Europe, the development of the arts in the UK was until recently an almost exclusively private matter with only very occasional royal patronage and government intervention. During World War II, and primarily to boost morale, the UK government began to get involved in the part-funding of concerts. As a development of this Lord Keynes established the Arts Council for England in 1946, in the belief that public investment in the arts would yield both cultural and economic dividends. Since that time UK expenditure on the arts has grown in real terms some seven times faster than all other uses of taxpayers' money. On the face of it this seems more than a little unfair. The people who consume the arts in general tend to have higher social status, more education and larger incomes than average; a consequence of which is that we can describe the subsidy of UK theatre as a transfer of money from the poor to the rich. Whilst much work produced by artists can be legitimately termed as being created for the public good, theatre *in theatres* remains an activity that many people are denied access to; and just as this is clearly not a literal members only policy it is about the ways in which people who are not white, not middle class, not theatre-literate and not university-educated often feel unwelcome *in any serious numbers* at many UK theatres. The area I grew up in was mixed-race, urban, working class and cash-poor; our houses were rented from the council and those people in work wore blue collars every day. This was in Coventry, the city whose Belgrade Theatre is credited as having pioneered theatre-in-education (TIE) and I speak from experience when I say that the Belgrade's best efforts notwithstanding ours was not a part of the city where theatre was a part of our lives. In the spirit of fairness I should declare a certain interest here: the council flats my father spent his last years and died in was sold off to make a more attractive commercial frontage to the Belgrade Theatre; a theatre, we should note, that prides itself on staging many plays about working class life. My father liked a joke as much as the next man, but I'm not sure whether that would have made him laugh or cry. Whilst many publicly funded theatre companies do look to programmes that are premised on community engagement and participation, most public money still goes to subsidize middle class spectators sitting silently in the dark watching middle class actors doing their theatre things in the light. The Royal Shakespeare Company recently redeveloped its two Stratford upon Avon theatres as part of a £113-million transformation project; The National Theatre



of England recently celebrated what its artistic director Nicholas Hytner called a “spectacular” summer of shows playing to “all intents and purposes 100% audiences” on London's South Bank and in the West End. But, he said, the government must “restore our funding”<sup>3</sup>. Why? The National Theatre has recently been awarded £70m for a building redevelopment and it still receives 38% of its funding from the government. There is a place for excellence, and the National has a history of producing great work. But is it truly national? I had lunch with a friend at The National recently and realized, as I ate my scallops with crispy pancetta and listened to the blonde girls playing their cellos that the only black faces in the room belonged to the people serving us our food and drinks. Colour is one thing, funding is another. The huge financial profit from a show like *War Horse* doesn't get paid back to the people whose taxes fund The National, other than through a tax on tickets; neither does that profit mean that The National will fund itself for a year or two from its own purse. The Arts Council of England does not function as a theatre angel, and its funding is not investment in the hope of any financial return; nor should it be doled out as a reward for doing good work in the past, like some sort of cash-prize awards ceremony *sans* long speeches. The sole reason for the Arts Council to exist is so that artistically important work is delivered in places, or to audiences that otherwise would not be served, or in a few cases to support work that otherwise would not happen, irrespective of whether there is an audience for it; which is to say that Arts Council funding is not meant to be about rewards for success. In practice it is not always easy to see evidence of this. Like the National Theatre, the Royal Opera, the RSC and English National Opera all receive a large amount from the public purse and Arts Council England will receive £2.3bn over the next four years<sup>4</sup>. The Royal Opera House gets nearly £30 million, and how many working class people (who still make up the bulk of Britain's population) ever feel the benefits of that? As ever, it is easy to speak dismissively of London's West End, to see it as tourist fodder, pandering to a low-grade audience who are doing little more than ticking a box marked “culture” after an afternoon spent at Madame Tussauds and a bite at the Hard Rock Cafe. Be that as it may, or be that not, in the West

<sup>3</sup> Lyn Gardner, *Do theatres have to close down before the government acts on the arts?*, in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2012/dec/12/theatre-arts-council-budget-cut?INTCMP=ILCNETXT3487> (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Lloyd-Webber, *Creative industries are being strangled by “Austerity Britain” cuts*, in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/culture-cuts-blog/2012/jul/10/arts-funding-public-sector-cuts> (2012).



End almost all of the shows have been privately funded and the aim is to make a profit. The one thing that the West End does not have is the luxury of coasting along on taxpayers' money. There is a great deal of honesty in that, and much to applaud long before the actors take their bow. Quality is always defined by context. For those engaged in the commercial theatre considerations of return on investment are crucial and judgements are made on the attractiveness of the title and the popularity of the cast as well as the talent of the producing team. The West End model notwithstanding, there may well be right and wrong ways to fund theatre. One right way would be to help develop the necessary training infrastructure and then step back in order to let the people decide for themselves exactly what kind of theatre they want to see, and how much they are prepared to pay for it. In this context, a wrong way would be to fund theatre practitioners for their product, so that agencies decide which companies will receive which amount for which work. The government decide then what kind of theatre the people get instead of individuals making those decisions for themselves. Just as the UK produced beautiful architecture and public places long before town planning became an industry in itself, so did it produce abundant examples of great art without state subsidy; and any argument that the free market cannot produce great art flies in the face of the historical fact that the British canon owes much of its existence to patrons and fee-paying audiences, not the bureaucracy of government subsidy. Subsidies go a long way toward determining what theatre gets produced, and this sponsorship is not always for the better. One can mount a reasonable argument, for example, that subsidized performance is at such a massive advantage over unsubsidized work that theatre without subsidy, not least for marketing, publicity and length of time to rehearse, is quite simply crowded out. More than this, when subsidized theatre no longer needs to worry about what its customers want then the recipe is less for great art than for self-indulgence and complacency. Of course, the exception to this rule is found in those companies who make work that is so ahead of public taste and perception that it needs a helping hand. By definition the experimental can never know its results in advance and constructively flirting with failure in pursuit of the genuinely new is always a worthy aim, and worthy of its country's support. Support for innovations in performance, though, has always been relatively small. Cutbacks or not, and as we have seen, the largest share of UK Arts Council funding goes towards supporting organisations that it has always been supporting, and as a result the same



things are done again and again. This means that there is little scope for innovation or any effective renewal in the performing arts sector. The subsidized status quo remains largely untouched: patriarchy continues to be foregrounded; white privilege continues to go largely unquestioned; writing against injustice continues to be popular, so long as the cast is pretty and RADA-trained; and to question an audience's most deeply ingrained assumptions is usually deemed unproductive, unpopular and impolite. Even when things are different, they are still largely the same. And little wonder: the noted playwright, Howard Barker spoke out recently about the Arts Council's decision to cut funding for The Wrestling School, a company that regularly stages his own work: "Given that I find it impossible to get my work staged in any major theatre in the UK, The Wrestling School was the sole means through which it could be represented to the public. In killing The Wrestling School the Arts Council has silenced a voice"<sup>5</sup>. Barker's work will outlive him. He has written plays that matter and which theatre would be the poorer without. But should limited public subsidy really be going in his direction? If, after two decades of operation, a company cannot sustain itself, even when its *oeuvre* is the work of one of the world's few genuinely famous playwrights, isn't it *right* that The Wrestling School's funding is redirected to sponsor the emergent work of other, newer companies? Of course, the term "right" is heavily loaded; easier, perhaps, to question Barker's own argument of entitlement. Why, for example, is it an issue that no major UK theatre wants to stage Barker's plays? Is his argument that his work serves some form of public good? If so, what form of public good might we be referring to? Is Barker's work some form of aesthetic cultural medicine? It is difficult to mount an argument that the British public will be worse off if The Wrestling School goes under. Maybe the opposite is true? Maybe another company will come forward and find ways of making Barker's plays popular with the public without diluting their strength. Truth be told, it is often impossible to understand Arts Council decisions about where its funding goes, just as it is impossible for the Arts Council to fairly choose which are the most deserving projects to fund. Panels of experts attempting to determine the preferences of the public and anticipating future trends is no easy matter. It is inevitable that most people will be unhappy about the decisions that are arrived at when such a comprehensive overhaul takes place. Under these circumstances it is

<sup>5</sup> Howard Barker, *The Olympics Killed my Theatre*, in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2007/jun/05/theolympickilledmytheatre> (2007).



inevitable that there will be anomalies and that decisions will be made that will prove to be highly contentious. Mike Alfreds' legendary company Shared Experience has recently lost all of its funding, when, for no obvious reason, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art has seen its funding raise by 143%. But I am a theatre man, and I know something of Alfreds' work, and I do not live in Middlesbrough, so my claim of "no obvious reason" is largely bogus. Shared Experience has a richly earned legacy, but was seen to have no real currency in the immediacy of today's climate, despite its collaborations with other companies providing opportunities for emerging practitioners. Shared Experience was formed in 1975 by Mike Alfreds, and Nancy Meckler has been in charge since 1987. They are still touring their adaptations of novels to what appear to be increasingly small audiences: small in numbers, but significant in personnel. Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Sir Michael Boyd has employed Alfreds and Meckler. That is his choice, and no-one is questioning his qualifications for occupying the position he does. Thirty-five years ago Shared Experience was a very popular company with a generation of predominantly left-leaning theatre practitioners who were in their youth at that time. Boyd was in his youth at that time. And so it is and so it goes. Not what the public wants but what those in power think the public should have. And as in England, so it is in Scotland: the establishment of the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) has had a huge effect on theatre in that country. It is consistently admired for its support for new work; its impact on the profile of theatre at home and abroad; its work in developing new artists and its commitment to working across Scotland. Nevertheless there is a widely held view that NTS is "closed" and works only with a select group of companies and individuals<sup>6</sup>. In the UK, Oxbridge graduates run the Arts, Culture and Entertainment industries. It follows that the theatre they control reflects their interests and concerns, just as it follows that their interests have kept UK theatre relentlessly middle-class and predominantly white; kept it fundamentally conservative, literate, intellectual and referring to their ideas of a Golden Age rather than to ours. This paper is not a call to arms against the Arts Council *per se*. Neither is it an argument that taxpayers should not fund other people's interests and activities. We know that non-smokers are taxed to fund the medical care of people who smoke; that people who have no interest in athletics are still taxed for the Olympics (funding pumped into the London Olympics came out at about £4.3m per GB medal); that pacifists' taxes still fund wars. The

<sup>6</sup> Creative Scotland, <http://www.creativescotland.com/about/sector-reviews/theatre-sector-review> (2012), p. 31.





list could go on indefinitely. We know that this is what living in a society is all about: we support each other when in difficulty and we support people's rights to choose what they do. However, subsidising the arts is not neutral and there is some reason to believe that much theatre can flourish well without subsidy, indeed the lack of subsidy can liberate theatre. There may be relatively less funding for theatre in Europe, but it is still public money, and the public has every right to be reassured that its taxes are being spent more wisely than ever and to be actively guided towards the best experiences the arts have to offer. It is, I would suggest, a mistake to equate a period of recession with a decline in the well-being of a society, and to equate prosperity with an improvement. The reverse is true if one considers that prosperity is likely to breed a false sense of security and wastefulness. In times of recession innovation begins, and in terms of theatre it is hard to see how any innovation can be a bad thing. In Italy, between 2005 & 2011, theatre audiences grew by 17%, twice the growth of cinema audiences during that time. It is tempting to see this as an indication that the lower the subsidy the bigger the audiences. Spaniards are flooding into theatres in record numbers. 2011 audience figures in Barcelona were 2.8 million, the highest ever. And this is not just happening in Barcelona. Ticket sales in Spain increased last year by 8%, bucking a consumer slump that is gripping almost every other sector of Spain's economy<sup>7</sup>. As hard times sweep Europe, artistic and cultural institutions have been among the first to face cuts, with theatres, opera houses, orchestras, galleries and educational programmes all facing threats as their budgets and public subsidies are slashed. Yet as far as audiences are concerned, things could not be better. At a time not just of economic crisis but when the world has become more and more virtual and people have lost their political, community and philosophical bearings they are turning to the culture and the arts. Theatre is not in crisis. It just thinks that it is, because it so regularly has been. Almost all Spanish and Italian theatres have cut their ticket prices. As a knock-on from this they have improved their marketing and looked to provide a more varied offering to their audiences. In the past a theatre that did serious drama was likely to produce only serious drama. A theatre that did dance only did dance. Now Spanish and Italian theatres are mixing plays with ballet and musical concerts, and people are attending in record numbers. Now, this may well be because theatre provides

<sup>7</sup> John Hooper – Giles Tremlett – Kim Willsher, *Theatre audiences flock to plays despite the economic squeeze*, in <http://concedes.rssing.com/browser.php?indx=1113241&item=4378> (2012).



comfort in tough times, but it may also, or alternatively, be because theatres are losing the security blanket that allowed them to cater primarily for their interests rather than for ours. Theatre prices in mainland Europe have dropped to fit the times, to an average of €25 a ticket. Many Spanish theatres have no public funds this year and are having to survive purely off ticket sales. That means focusing sharply on what people want and it means focusing hard on quality, and it means trimming the administrative fat. We can see a precedent for this in the work of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. The company began in England in 1945. Touring was not successful for the company, and in 1953 they took the gamble of taking a lease on a permanent base at London's Theatre Royal Stratford East. No funds were available for renovation and members of the company cleaned and painted the auditorium between rehearsals. To save money the cast and crew slept in the dressing rooms. In April 1953, a request for funds was met with the following response: The Finance Committee at their last meeting was unable to recommend any grant for the purposes you have in mind. However, the Committee indicated that they would be prepared to assist, where possible in the matter of publicity, providing this could be done without cost to the Committee<sup>8</sup>. Following an invitation from Claude Planson, the director of the 1955 Paris International Festival of Theatre, Theatre Workshop represented England at the event. The company travelled to Paris with costumes in their suitcases, and scenery under their arms. At the same festival in 1963, and in receipt of very limited Arts Council funding, Theatre Workshop won the *Award of the Grande Prix du Festival* for *Oh, What a Lovely War!* Finance continued to be tight, but the company managed to keep afloat with transfers of many successful plays to the West End stage and film productions. The absence and near-absence of funding did nothing to prevent Theatre Workshop from creating an early body of work that is testament to what can be achieved on a shoestring: 1957 *The Quare Fellow*, 1958, *The Hostage*, 1958, *A Taste of Honey*, 1959, *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*, 1960, *Sparrers Can't Sing*, 1963, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* Things were not markedly different in the US at that time. The Living Theatre was founded in 1947 by Judith Malina and Julian Beck. The difficulty of operating an experimental company within the climate of the time led to the closing by the authorities of all The Living Theatre's New York venues: the Cherry Lane Theater was closed in 1953, The Living Theatre Studio on Broadway at 100th Street in 1956, The Living Theatre on 14th Street in 1963, and The

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.stratfordeast.com/the\\_theatre/history\\_1953\\_1979\\_page3of4.shtml](http://www.stratfordeast.com/the_theatre/history_1953_1979_page3of4.shtml)



Living Theatre on Third Street in 1993. In the mid-1960s the company began a new life as a nomadic and largely hand-to-mouth touring ensemble. The landmark productions of this period include *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*, *Antigone*, *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Now*. No small feat for a company that was often trading theatre for a place to sleep. There is clear evidence from Creative Scotland's Theatre Sector report that at the same time as increased subsidy was paid out to theatres there was considerably less money being spent on creative practice. In an average year in the 1990s building-based theatre companies in Scotland spent 39p of every £1 on making theatre and 61p on other overheads. By the 2000s this had reduced to 28p in the £ on theatre and increased to 72p on other overheads. Over the same period the average number of in-house productions created by building-based theatre companies reduced by 48%. The number of performances they gave reduced by 30% and attendances for their shows dropped by 68%<sup>9</sup>. Whilst the Creative Scotland report is only a sample, rather than an analysis of the sector as a whole, it does represent the five key theatres to which the bulk of the ongoing Scottish subsidies are invested: as such the information gives a genuine perspective on how theatre funding works. The difference in spending between English regions can be stark, as much as six times more money per capita is spent in London than in other UK regions. Putting this in different terms, if one goes to the theatre in London the average subsidy per ticket is £24: in a regional theatre the subsidy per ticket is less than £6. This approach to theatre subsidy is not worth keeping. It is not helping the cultural diversity of the country, and it is absolutely not supporting regional arts. It is not good value for money for those who live outside London (a little like the Olympics) taxing those who have too little access to the arts to give to those who have the most heavily subsidized theatres on their doorsteps. A theatre that aims to be of and for its people can no longer hide behind grandiose rhetoric, entitlement or complaint. It needs to demonstrate the value it provides to the public which pays for it. There are valuable lessons we can learn from a situation of funding cuts. Where one door closes, another opens: turning bad news into good is difficult but it is something that can be achieved through creativity. If not, we had better all pack up and go home. Home for me, at the time of writing, is Western Australia, and the university I am employed at houses a venue for undergraduate work called the Hayman Theatre. Funding for student shows is about \$200,000 per

<sup>9</sup> Creative Scotland, <http://www.creativescotland.com/about/sector-reviews/theatre-sector-review> (2012), p. 29.



year, additional to building costs. For this the university gets 5 major shows, which few people outside of the Performance Studies ever watch. Having seen student work at numerous universities in upwards of twenty countries I can say with some confidence that very few of these productions are better in any significant sense than work made elsewhere by students for no money at all, and that none of the Hayman productions demonstrate any thought to audience development. The funding works against imagination and in doing so it works against an audience. More than this, in buying the illusion of quality it legislates against any kind of risk. Students queue up to appear in Hayman Theatre shows but very few people queue up to watch their work. It is all a bit of a waste. Not of time but of opportunity. And what it prepares graduates for is a world of subsidy where quality does not really count because nobody is counting the bums on the seats. And this is really rather tragic, because when we look around at theatre audiences we see too few young people. This is not always the case with theatre in or near to universities but it is true elsewhere. Statistics differ, and none are completely accurate, but the consensus appears to be that on Broadway the under 35s make up no more than 20% of the audience; musicals for children and families apart, the average spectator age in the US and UK is 53. And if we look at theatre audiences we see something else: female spectators make up the largest percentage of spectators. Women buy 70% of all theatre tickets and they tend to make up two thirds of any audience. Women go the theatre in even greater numbers, and often in groups, when plays reflect their experiences and yet most theatres are reluctant to produce more than one play each season that is either written by a woman or which has a large cast of female characters. The *Guardian* found that during 2010-2011 women only comprised one-third of working UK actors, writers and artistic directors, and that women only made up one-quarter of all directors. The study also found that the two male directors of the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company have never directed a play written by a woman throughout their careers<sup>10</sup>. More peculiar still when we note that women outnumber men on almost every drama school and university theatre programme. As for young spectators, the title 'Generation Debt' might be reason enough to explain their absence. But perhaps cost is not really the issue. Perhaps it's about what theatres stage and what they stand for. In Boston there are

<sup>10</sup> Jessica Wakeman, *Women Underrepresented in British Theatre*, in <http://www.blackbookmag.com/women-underrepresented-in-british-theater-guardian-study-1.55976> (2012).



around 250,000 college and university students between September and June. The huge majority of these students are under 26 years of age and their vast scale does not at all translate into significant numbers of young people attending Boston theatres. But, at the American Repertory Theatre's second stage, The Oberon, programming tends toward late-night shows designed for the under-25s. And that is who they get<sup>11</sup>. So, there is evidence that young people do want to go to the theatre; they just do not want to see the shows that theatre programmers think they should see, staged in the ways they think they should be staged. Spectators after all tend to connect with work that reflects their own world view and experiences. Theatre managers tend to commission work that reflects their own world view and experiences. Spectators experience kinaesthetic empathy when they feel they are participating in the work they observe. Spectators experience inner mimesis when they feel as though they are enacting the actions they observe. They are also acutely sensitive to effort. Maybe what keeps the young away is not just theatre content but their sense of theatre's complacency? I have taught Theatre, Drama and Performance Studies for a quarter of a century, turning out graduates into a theatre world that in reality has little need of them. This is because vocational acting schools simply offer a more rounded preparation for the mainstream stage, whilst university programmes in the UK have traditionally prepared graduates for the type of experimental practice that struggles to survive. If intellectual curiosity, empathy and a spirit of cultural adventure are the cornerstones of higher education, particularly in the arts and humanities, and if our young graduates are not even going to the theatre, let alone working in it, then we appear to be getting things wrong. How then might we get things right? Traditional western performance tends to focus spectators' attention on sensations in front of them, often through the use of the proscenium arch; other forms expand this model, taking advantage of our ability to simultaneously perceive action arising from multiple directions. Employing spectator-performer proximity and unconventional seating arrangements might be an answer. Breaking the familiarity of spectatorial frames so that we can focus attention on the ways in which spectators construct meaning might also be an answer. All that we can say for sure is that artistic invention cannot be governed by funding regulations and that subsidy augurs in part against urgency. Theatre is usually live, spontaneous and unique to the time that we see it. It is, or should be, innately experimental, progressive and dynamic, rather than

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.americanrepertorytheater.org/oberon/mission>



normative, reactionary and static. It has become something of a syndrome in the theatre to blame the audience that doesn't come and to blame the young who couldn't care. But maybe it is theatre that's wrong. Maybe we need to do a better job of making theatre that speaks to communities, rather than theatre that speaks to itself. Maybe we should open up the definition of what theatre is? What if, in the Oberon spirit, theatres became exciting spaces for events, for local performers, beat poets, sketch artists, dancers, gender bending sketch troupes and hula-hooping burlesquers? What if shows started at midnight? What if they lasted 8 minutes, or 8 hours? What if theatres became drop-in centres for the homeless? What if rehearsals were always open to the public? What if local communities chose the plays they wanted staged? What if theatres were to move toward spectacle, experience and event? What if theatres focused less on breaking the fourth wall and focused instead on breaking down the other three? What if? Ultimately, this is about making theatre that responds to people. Nothing particularly new in that; but theatre is a collective idea within a rapidly individualized society. It is an institution at the heart of world cultures for millennia that is now facing a period of unprecedented change. In Europe we assume that theatre needs heavy subsidy to achieve its ideal state; but what if it doesn't? What if we are misreading theatre's ideal state? What if? What if theatre was at once epic and intimate? What if it traded on the ability to surprize and delight and perplex and seduce? What if it was fuelled not by government subsidy but by energy and confidence, by fragility and beauty, by spirit and risk? A recession is like a gap appearing in a seemingly impenetrable fence. We worry the fence that has been standing for years is going to collapse and we focus desperately on looking for ways to put things back the way they were. And then, if we look hard enough, we see that on the other side of the fence is a world we never knew existed. And this world is not necessarily worse.



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### Abstract – ITA

Com'è ampiamente risaputo, per le piccole-medie compagnie teatrali i tagli dovuti alla politica europea di austerità significano affrontare un futuro incerto. E questo proprio mentre l'età dell'oro del finanziamento pubblico si avvicina alla sua fine. Ma è stato aureo, di per sé, il teatro che questo finanziamento ha prodotto? E gli Europei, quando usano il termine "austerità", fanno di un dramma una crisi? Questo articolo avanza la provocatoria ipotesi per la quale, con probabilità, se il sussidio da un lato sostiene il teatro, dall'alto ne sopprime l'innovazione e che, forse, il teatro funzioni al meglio come genere fuori dalla legge, libero dal controllo pubblico mascherato da sostegno.

### Abstract – EN

As the world well knows, austerity cuts in Europe mean that small-to-medium theatre companies are facing an uncertain future, to the extent that the golden age of funding is coming to an end. But has the theatre this funding has produced been golden in itself? And are Europeans turning a drama into a crisis when they use the term "austerity"?

This paper puts forward the provocative argument that subsidy is as likely to suppress innovative theatre as it is to support it and that, perhaps, theatre functions best as an outlaw genre, free from public control masquerading as support.

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