



ARTICOLO

Nobody Knows Anything, But These Things I Guess: Great Theatre and the New Golden Age

By John Freeman

If prostitution is widely held as the world's oldest profession, closely followed by soldiering, then theatre's long history ensures a noble third place. The first recorded theatrical event is of the myth of Osiris and Isis in 2500 BC in Egypt and through its subsequent flourishing in Ancient Greece between 550 and 220 BC our notions of Western theatre have their origins in these faint traces of documentation. Performance scholars such as Ernest T. Kirby, Richard Schechner and Victor Turner have suggested earlier understandings of theatre, beginning with the ur-drama of shamanist ritual, where participants took on and portrayed identities other than their own. Notwithstanding the centrality of these ideas to many approaches to performance study, it is a view that Eli Rozik sees as fallacious on the grounds that it 'overlooks the internal viewpoint of the culture within which the shaman performs the shaman is definitely not enacting the character of a spirit, but constitutes a means for its revelation in the human world.' (Rozik 2010: 120)

Rozik's rebuttal is as emphatic as Schechner *et al's* is suggestive, not least in his determination that to include ritualistic behaviour as part of the history of theatre reflects little more than a postmodern malaise morphing itself into nostalgia. Despite the anthropological appeal of the argument, Rozik is adamant that 'the medium of theatre could not have originated in ritual'. (Ibid.: 139) When it comes to theatre it seems we can only rarely agree on the value of the present; and no less rarely agree on our past.

And yet it is only really on paper and within dusty university seminars (the spaces I habitually inhabit) that theatre's real or imagined past is ever much cause for concern. In the theatre everything is in the moment, and a country's own moment can always be taken in more ways than one. As the cries of 'Theatre in Crisis' that were heard throughout the UK in the latter part of the 20th century have all but died away, a little room has been made for that which we might call (if we



dare to whisper and if we whisper it soft) a new Golden Age.

A great and golden age we may be moving into, but the concept of what makes a particular piece of theatre great is endlessly contestable. Not helped by the fact that the past always manages to hold us back, no matter how stridently we try to let it go. Whether we embrace or deny them, those archetypes are not ready quite yet to curl up and die and our library shelves are heavy with the weight of books written about productions never seen at first hand by the authors. Whilst this form of more distanced and usually historical scholarship is undoubtedly valuable it is not what matters most when it comes to affording work an hour or two of our spectatorial attention, particularly at a time when distractions elsewhere are as numerous as they are.

Great theatre may be linked in text books to notions of universality, but such is not always what matters to the bum on the seat. Wherever we find ourselves, there we are, and in the here-and-nowness of theatre we rarely care much about how a certain performance will play elsewhere. We are brought up to believe that what it is that separates the competent from the good and the good from the great is an act of considered complexity, of theatre's experts engaging in the alchemical transformation of story into art; and yet, as time goes by, I find myself wondering whether things are much simpler than the histories of theatre would have us think, and whether greatness is as much an accident of timing than an act of skill.

The books we write and cite have much to answer for, and, to paraphrase Peggy Phelan, they may well come to represent more than they ever intend. (Phelan and Lane 1997: 302) For many of us the greatest shows on earth have become the shows they we read about but never saw: those performances that the history books tell us were wonderful: Helene Weigel's 1949 portrayal of the title role in Brecht's *Mother Courage*; Marlon Brando's sweat-stained swagger onto the 1947 Broadway stage in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suspended blissfully in Peter Brook's white space; Trevor Nunn's pared-down *Macbeth* of 1976 with the electrifying Ian McKellen and Judi Dench; David Hare and Howard Brenton's mid-80s *Pravda*, replete with Anthony Hopkins' bravura Lambert Le Roux. Even without having seen these



productions live I find myself dropping easily into the language of borrowed praise, so that the performances function as a barometer to other works' standing, tempering the rapture of immediacy with the measure of critical weight and canonical significance.

Lest this article appears to be wallowing in some anti-historical bias, I should stress here that I have no reason to doubt that these productions were as wonderful to witness as literature suggests. Fame is hard-won and the lasting fame these works enjoy can be no accident of mass-hallucination. But until we experience a production at first-hand we do no more, and in fact considerably less, than the Art student whose judgment of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* is based on magazine reproductions, critical text and a tutor's awe.

The etymology of theatre is *theatron*, a place where spectators go to watch. *Theatron* incorporates both spectacle and contemplation and in this way it comprises the location and theory of looking. It is in this meeting of performance as spectacle and spectatorship as a contemplative act that this article functions ... not as an idea of what theatre might be, as some form of cultural medicine, moral good or aestheticised intellectual imperative, but as something made real and made witness in the moment. In this sense, theatre is a term that is approached inclusively here, so that the conventions of theatre, all of those traditions and experimentations, all of theatre's histories and all of its endless potential for change, serve as reference points.

Inclusivity aside, the specificities of my own background mean that within this paper the idea of great shows is wrapped fairly tightly around theatre, if not always around work that takes place *within* theatres. In his seminal publication, Peter Brook wrote that one could take any empty space and call it a bare stage, and that a man walking across this space whilst being watched was all that was needed for an act of theatre to take place. (Brook, 1968) During a post show debate at London's Barbican Theatre on 9th February 2010, Brook went further in suggesting that a physical theatre does not exist at all. That it is no more than a box, a cave, or cavern ... a vehicle, where what is inside it is what matters. Perhaps it is safest within the pages of this article to approach theatre as an invitation based on conventions that spectators might not easily understand, but



which are nevertheless willingly accepted: not so much an empty space as an act of shared faith.

That theatre can exist without this sharing is the stuff of any undergraduate programme in Theatre or Drama, where notions of performance as no more than that which engage our senses are woven into essay questions and batted back and forth in discussion groups. We well know that a lecturer (actor) standing behind a lectern (set), speaking semi-prepared words (text) to seated students (spectators) is possessed of all the salient elements of theatre ... just as we know in our hearts and our minds and – for those who believe it – in our *souls*, that, apropos of the previous paragraphs, a lecture is patently *not* theatre in any real and valued sense of the word, for when theatre becomes a definition based solely on theoretical whimsy then terminology destroys practice and intellectualism serves a death knell on art.

In place of theoretical possibilities and objective world views, great theatre is all about subjectivity and the foregrounding of a profound sense of contact and communication between a responsive spectator and a finely crafted performance. In this way the notion of great theatre is as much about what is created in the minds of the spectators as that which is created in performance and the works' qualities are filtered through the characteristics of personal evaluation; characteristics that stress the attitudes and opinions of the watcher. In this sense too feelings become as important as findings.

If feelings can be defined as that which arise spontaneously rather than through conscious effort, then the emotions of joy, love and rapture become as significant to our understanding of successful performance as the more logical and deductive processes that see each work as a crime scene, each onstage moment as a clue to be intellectually solved and each essay as a flawed attempt to prove ourselves sharper than the artists who made the work.

This drift towards multiple voices is also a drift away from the notion of truth belonging to the biggest mouths; away from the *His Story* of history and towards a questioning of authenticity; towards a questioning of what it might mean for truth to have currency on the modern stage.



Almost as soon as Stanislavski picked up his pen to systematize his approach to acting, theatre makers began pulling away from the idea that on-stage action is primarily about pretense, showing through their work that plays can sometimes achieve more that is real than realism would allow and that the well-made play does not cater particularly well for indigenous perspectives and histories that have been systematically unfixed.

These words are being written to exercise (though not quite to exorcise) a concern with the false certainties those new to our subject field are too-often force-fed, as though the endless reiteration of the qualities of dead men's productions will somehow cut across time. Perhaps it is simpler than that: perhaps those of us who teach (and I am very much part of the problem here rather than the solution) believe our own judgment to be so strong that the work we see and admire should be justly admired by our students.

Typing these words at a university desk, it seems more than a little hypocritical to suggest that deciding on what theatre is great is an activity with no need for academic study's rhetoric of confirmation bias dressed up in erudition. Hypocrisy notwithstanding, my guess is that what matters most, in fact perhaps the only thing that matters is how any given production makes us think and feel. This is not quite tantamount to the old postmodern embrace of relativism: we know that Brecht's work is likely to retain more historical significance than Ben Elton's, and that in *that* type of high culture framework *Mother Courage* will always outstrip *We Will Rock You* ... but that matters little to the spectator whose eyelids grow heavy with all of that alienation and wide with wonder at the chutzpah of a show that makes us sing along.

We can probably say that great theatre allows spectators to discover new possibilities through its own fearless curiosity; that it allows always for the possibility of change; that its concern is with transportation to a place of difficulty, doubt and disorientation; that it is at once real and unreal, extraordinary and familiar, and that its pursuit is the restlessness of truth rather than the very different value of box office receipts. Reasonable-sounding enough, but these are all deeply subjective attributes and one spectator's delight in doubt is another's anger at theatre that fails to



convince.

Writing about performances one has seen is always an attempt to do some justice to the ephemerality of performance through the permanence of words on the page. It all comes down to how we remember the theatre we have seen. Our memories are sent forth to do battle with ephemerality, and yet our memories are always also inventions, re-tellings of the past that tell as much about what we would like to have seen and how we would like ourselves to be seen in the subsequent tellings as what it was that we actually saw. Memory is thus more about illusion than objectivity: subjectivity argued persuasively enough to assume the status of fact.

As Luis Bunuel saw it 'Our imagination, and our dreams, are forever invading our memories; and since we are apt to believe in the reality of our fantasies, we end up transforming our lies into truth' (in Zinder 1976: 40). This is more than mere word play. Subjectivity acknowledges meaning as an act of personal interpretation rather than collective understanding; seeing responses as being generally rooted in a state of mind, whilst objectivity is beyond interpretation, existing instead as something shared to the point of common acceptance. As George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff sees it, in objective art there is nothing indefinite. (In Ouspensky 2001: 295-297), Gurdjieff's statement makes assumptions that take it beyond this article's embrace, which is not to say that I am assuming a shared level of scepticism amongst readers: a resistance to objectivity that does not quite yet amount to a charlatan's faith in relativism, so much as a championing of the individual's right to hold his or her views on performance in spite of a dearth of supporting critical commentary. That the individuals holding these views have an obligation to make their case in the light of resistant opinion is axiomatic. Sometimes these arguments fail to convince, just like arguments favouring instant coffee over ground or sickness over health are pretty much doomed to fall flat. Susan Bennett suggests that the act of theatre-going tells us much about what society affords its citizens; (Bennett, 1997, pvii) in a similar vein, the responses of theatre goers might tell us something about what it is that successful productions afford spectators.

Objectivity refers to a reality that exists beyond singular interpretation, whereas subjectivity exists



within the inner reality of one's mind. That a performance happens in a particular venue and at a particular time amounts to an objective reality based on a shared understanding of time and place. A spectator's belief (perhaps my own) that a particular performance was great is a subjective response. Objectivity and subjectivity are logical-seeming definitions until they cross over. When an entire audience finds the same performance great then a series of singular subjective realities begins to assume the characteristics of a shared objective reality. The performance is now regarded as objectively excellent, and the term 'great' becomes fact. It is through this that the canon takes root. No problem with that, but it is not how pleasure works, and if theatre is not a pleasurable experience then it is a lecture.

The possibility then that individual spectators who thought the work dreadful would find themselves in a minority would not make their opinions 'wrong' so much as singularly subjective in the face of shared objective belief. Many readers will be familiar with being the seemingly sole voice of dissent in response to a production that everybody, *and everybody whose opinions we value*, hails as glorious. When the world is so emphatically against us it would be foolish not to wonder if the world might just be right; and foolish too to relinquish our views because they are so singularly held.

Despite the rapid and already firmly established tenets of artistic research, responses based on emotional and sometimes idiosyncratic connectedness are still seen as slightly suspect or even deeply problematic in performance. Sher Doruff has suggested that creative researchers should engage enough poetic licence to consider research as not just a re-searching, but as *res*, the thing, a circumstance, an affair, a physical emotion, and *arch* as a point of entry. In this way one can configure research as a process of circling circumstance until a way is found in ... research as a port of entry into a thing that matters, into an area of concern. (Doruff, 2010) If this responsiveness to the moment of insight provides avenues of inquiry which lead to new types of knowledge, impossible to predict because performance neither does what it is told nor does it go meekly in the direction one would usually expect, then perhaps spectatorship has much to learn from research: an unexpected outcome in anybody's book. Artistic research has brought with it an embrace of



particular ways of thinking, and of thinking about knowledge; of making a contribution to knowledge in the firm belief that, as Gary Peters suggests, art, and even *thinking* about art, can never arrive at its destination, entering instead into an errancy that draws us towards that which always withdraws; (Peters, 2009) and of artistic research taking us beyond the search for endless knowledge production and towards the more provocative notion of a thesis as a space for thinking. So then might theatre productions be regarded as the provision of spaces for thinking and feeling and immersion and distance.

Notwithstanding our understandings of difference, we slip effortlessly into often historical discussions of an audience as something collective, as a single being responding to performance with commonality. When John Cage famously responded to the question of what was the best seat in the house by stating that every seat was the best he was saying more than the obvious fact that the perspective created by the spectator's position in the auditorium was at once deliberately distinct and equally valuable, he was reminding us that the perceptual frames we carry inside our heads are stronger determinants in the way we see than the seat we see from. Roland Barthes' ideas of readerly work, which seeks out a common response, and his notions of writerly product, which invite spectators to create their own meanings, add the language of deconstruction to Cage's primarily practice-based and practice-informed suggestions.

Contemporary performance has been quick to pick up on this, with shows that make conscious appeals to our individualistic responses acting as the distillation of theatre's inevitable truism: that regardless of written text, *mise en scene* and climactic denouement, each member of an audience will always read work in their own sweet way. One of the great things about theatre is that it is an activity that brings people together, so that we walk into an auditorium as a set of individuals and emerge as a community. If this reminds us that through theatre no man is ever quite an island, then the experience of spectatorship shows us too that in our seated togetherness we could not be more resolutely alone. The *Daily Telegraph* theatre critic Charles Spencer argues that one of the great things about theatre is that it is an activity that brings people together, so that we enter an auditorium as a group of individuals and emerge as a community. (Spencer, 2009) If this is so, then



the experience of spectatorship shows us too that in our seated togetherness we could not be more resolutely alone ... or, as Forced Entertainment's Tim Etchells sees it 'Watching the best theatre and performance we are together and alone' (in Brine and Keidan 2007: 26)

Writing about work in living memory means also writing about the ways in which technology has impacted on the making and receiving of live performance. Despite the telling impact of digital innovations and interventions, it remains the case that we go to the theatre in order to have a (usually communal) visceral connection with (usually live) performers. However, this very notion of liveness has been thrown into relief by approaches to interactivity and doubling that are some distance away from the voice manipulation of Laurie Anderson's 1970s work and the swathe of Wooster Group-inspired television monitors that flanked the newly experimental stages of the late 1980s.

This has resulted in initiatives such as London's National Theatre's NT Live presentation of the Jean Racine/Ted Hughes' *Phèdre*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, which was broadcast via satellite in 2009 to 280 international screen venues and which reached a widespread audience of over 50,000. On a very different level, the internationally roaming performance artist, Stelarc, who sees the organic body as obsolete in a world of technological development, has made work in which his own electrode-covered body was jerked into action via a 60-volt muscle interaction system operated by interested individuals on touch screen computers around the world.

Whichever end of this scale our personal tastes and interests lead us to, the fusing of digital technology and live performance has become a given of our time. The shorthand term "Cyberperformance" can be taken to include work presented entirely online or to an actual audience watching and/or interacting with performers appearing digitally, and it is a term that sits comfortably within much contemporary performance.

Much, but not all. The greatest show I ever saw, Needcompany's *Isabella's Room*, was not overly reliant on technology. Perhaps it was not even as great as I remember it being. What it was, was



work that put me under theatre's spell after a lengthy absence. Describing *Isabella's Room* as the greatest work I ever saw and undercutting that in the same sentence feels like an act of fence-sitting; but what I am remembering is the way the work made me feel when I saw it, and that is not always something that the passing of time is particularly kind to. The show is certainly one on a very short list, and I do not feel that focusing on this work leads to an argument (even with myself) that it is necessarily better than the stellar Brook/Carriere *Mahabharata*, Kantor's *Today is My Birthday*, The Wooster Group's *L.S.D. or Hamlet*, Bill T. Jones' *Still Here*, Wilson's *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, Nederland Subtheatre's *Theatrum Anatomicum*, the wit and verve of Insomniac's 1992 *L'Ascensore*, the exquisite small scale beauty of the Curious production, *The Moment I Saw You I Knew I Could Love You* or the beguiling inventiveness of Teatro Sunil's *Donka: A Letter to Chekhov* What I am saying is that *Isabella's Room* is the piece that made me fall in love with theatre again after a lengthy absence, and that it is possessed of all of those features that, from my own perspective, make live performance the heart stopping experience we always wish it to be and so rarely find it so.

This tells us plenty about what really concerns spectators. We might take pleasure in seeing productions that matter without those same productions mattering to us at all. The flip side of that is seeing work that overwhelms us not because it is considered great but because the alchemy of art does not lie solely in the artist's transformation of the ordinary into the spectacular. What we take from theatre matters at least as much as what goes in, and whilst a 5 star review is an indication of quality from an experienced judge it is ultimately a recommendation rather than a guarantee that what works wonderfully for one person in Row C is having the same effect on you or I in Row B.

William Goldman wrote about film making that nobody knows anything. (Goldman 2001: 39) Every formula has a flaw, and every Sure Thing has a sell-by date that no-one can predict. Maybe the theatre we applaud today will give us a new cultural and aesthetic cringe tomorrow. If so, so be it. Life moves on and if the perspectives theatre reflects will one day make us shudder with embarrassment then perhaps that is the price we pay for a form that positions itself always in the



moment. Always in the now.

Great theatre offers an invitation for us to celebrate theatre that simply works ... albeit not theatre that always works simply, and spectators need to accept that invitation on the work's terms as well as their own. Greatness works only in and through exchange, for if theatre serves as a reflection and representation of life, it serves too to transform the ways in which we engage with a world both of and beyond our own. This is what makes theatre as valuable to us as it is, and this is what binds seemingly disparate theatre experiences into our own back catalogue of the great and the good.

My own back catalogue of great theatre seen has an identifiable if broad postmodern feel, we can see and say this despite the fact that postmodern performance lacks anything close to precise definition. Jean-Francois Lyotard has argued tellingly that postmodern artists and writers work without rules 'in order to establish the rules for what will have been made' (Lyotard 1992: 15) and Dave Robinson suggests that nobody really knows what the term means ... that it is little more than a 'convenient label for a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and feelings about what it means to be living in the late 20th century' (Robinson 2012: 35) Elinor Fuchs agrees, feeling that the sooner we can articulate those methods of postmodern theatre that have eradicated plot and killed off all notions of character we will be 'immediately at a better vantage point from which to view what used to be called "avant-garde" theatre.' (Fuchs 1996: 171) As is often the case, the argument for postmodernism is couched here in terms of its opposition to character, as though embracing one aspect of performance leads automatically to the denial of all others.

Great theatre is unlikely to be theatre that tries to be one thing ... like 'postmodern'; and great theatre is not always theatre that makes us feel great. Sometimes there might be more frustration than satisfaction. We know this because there are certain performances, theatre events, which unsettle us, and which hold us through that very act of disturbance. There might be some intricacy that we cannot quite follow, some strange aspect that sits outside of our customary understanding of what theatre might be, and of what it might do. We might find ourselves mesmerized and also,



perhaps, irritated, angered even; for greatness does not automatically equate with either immediacy or pleasure; conversely, we might find ourselves so utterly delighted by everything the performance achieves that we know, in the act of watching, that like Thomas Hardy's lifelong affection for a girl who smiled at him once as she rode fleetingly by on a horse, our lives will never be quite the same again.

These are the works we think about afterwards, the works that haunt us because they provide some plus-factor ... something that lasts, and something that outlives a work's applause.

My guess is that we do not really care much for reputations and however much we like to tick the boxes of Great Theatre, what makes theatre great has very little to do with what anybody else thinks. Critical frames in theatre are often quite literally those frames erected by critics, and whilst they might shape the way we think, they do not, thankfully, impact overmuch on the way we feel.

Theatre is as old as it is and it has survived with vitality for as long as it has because of its elementary equation: we are usually invited to sit quietly in the dark, watching people performing in the light, and if those involved get it right we are lost and found in glory. Great theatre is as simple and as simply rare as that. The rest is guesswork masquerading as knowledge, talk dressed up as insight.



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Abstract – IT

Questo articolo esplora alcune concezioni di “Grande Teatro” collegandole a nozioni di specificità culturale, invece che di universalità, e delineando delle distinzioni tra spettatorialità oggettiva e soggettiva. Vi sono suggeriti alcuni nessi tra recenti approcci alla ricerca artistica e i modi in cui la performance dal vivo viene osservata.

Pur non giungendo a una totale difesa del relativismo, l’articolo sostiene il diritto individuale di mantenere le proprie vedute sulla performance a dispetto di una mancanza di valutazioni critiche a sostegno. In questa sede, si fa evidente il fatto che gli individui portatori di queste opinioni abbiano il dovere di sostenere la propria tesi alla luce di un parere contrario; inoltre vengono discussi i modi per cui tale difesa viene compiuta.

Abstract – EN

This article explores ideas of “Great Theatre”, linking these to notions of cultural specificity rather than universality and drawing on distinctions between objective and subjective spectatorship. Connections are suggested between recent approaches to artistic research and the ways in which live performance is viewed.

Whilst not amounting to an all-out defense of relativism, the paper champions the individual's right to hold his or her views on performance in spite of a dearth of supporting critical commentary. That the individuals holding these views have an obligation to make their case in the light of resistant opinion is axiomatic, and some of the ways in which this is achieved are discussed here.

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Oltre alle pubblicazioni, le sue ultime ricerche includono le attività presso il *Centre for Aboriginal Studies* sull’*Halls Creek Dreaming Festival* riguardanti la costruzione di storie locali nella produzione performativa, progetti di rivivificazione sociale internazionale e indagini sull’impatto culturale di Festival di Teatro internazionali.



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