

# VOICES OFF : A CASE FOR INDEPENDENCE

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An essay written to mark 40 years of the Independent Theatre Council

It would be interesting to know when and how the word theatre won its present ascendancy over the alternative, drama. Both are widely used, of course, and an Internet search will show similar a number of references to each. But in cultural policy, it is always theatre. Arts Council England's 10-year vision, *Great Art for Everyone*, speaks of theatre, not drama. The relatively-recent creations of the National Theatre of Scotland and National Theatre Wales showed a similar preference, although the defining characteristic of both institutions is not to have a theatre.

Why does this matter? On one level, it's not so important, except that language is a signal of how we think and construct the world. And the two words, which we owe—like so much of our culture—to the genius of classical Athens, do have, or at least had, quite different meanings. For the writers, performers and audiences who laid the art form's Western foundations, drama and theatre were not interchangeable. In Greek, 'drama' comes from the verb *drao* (δράω) to do, and is a noun meaning an action. To do, to act in the world, is how human beings create their existence, which is why the representation of people doing is so vital, not just to our culture but to our very humanity. 'Theatre', on the other hand, has its roots in the verb *theáomai* (θεάομαι), to watch: for Athenians, a *théatron* (θέατρον) was a place for watching. So a theatre is where you go to watch a drama, although in 'play', English has its own word, which is a whole other story.

The difference between drama and theatre is the difference between action and observation, between active and passive ways of being. Both are necessary: we observe ourselves as we act: it's how we learn. An experience becomes dramatic when there is someone else to see it. The solitary ordeal endured by Aron Ralston when his arm was trapped by a fallen boulder was an existential crisis: it became a drama when Danny Boyle made a film of it for us to watch in a movie theatre.

Does the widespread preference for the word theatre suggest that the place for seeing now occupies more of our attention than the action that is seen there?

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Peter Brook wrote about the empty space precisely to focus attention on the work of the actor, rather than the décor that, in some styles of drama, is used to support it. But the space, empty or filled, is there all the time and the actor is not. The space needs heating and lighting and cleaning; it needs a box office and a café and a shop to pay for itself. It needs restoring, improving and developing and, since the National Lottery cornucopia began to gush in 1994, there are resources not just to do that but also, with the usual risk of hubris, to create 'iconic' buildings. (And while we're playing with etymology, let's remember that an icon is a religious artefact designed to assist the faithful in their worship.)

In saying all this, I don't mean to suggest that theatre buildings are not valuable, even desirable, resources. Elizabethan drama bloomed when entrepreneurial managers, including William Shakespeare, invented buildings where their plays could be best and most profitably shown. I simply want to remember that a drama does not need a theatre—or at least that drama can make a theatre of any place at all—but a theatre without a drama is a secondhand furniture warehouse or a bingo hall.

It's not a black and white world, thankfully. It's not a case of four walls good, four wheels better. Great theatrical experiences don't depend on forms or structures. They happen in every imaginable style and circumstance. And Britain's rich theatre culture is not divided between palatial monoliths on one side and guerrilla street actors on the other. Thankfully, again, we are enriched by an extraordinary diversity of artists and companies, of places for and ways of making theatre. Above all, because it is about the drama, we have a seemingly endless source of stories we need to tell as we struggle, separately and together, with the incomprehensible experience of living.

So my purpose is not to bury one way of doing plays the better to praise another. Some ITC members run buildings, though usually of the less iconic variety, and all of them use theatre facilities managed by others. Nonetheless, as the artists who collectively comprise the Independent Theatre Council mark 40 years of making dramas from thin air, separately and together, it seems right to celebrate the action rather than the places where the action is seen. One way of enacting the independence that ITC affirms is to ensure that the theatre takes second place to the drama. That was what gave Arthur Miller strength when he was summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956: *'I think part of my reaction was that I was an independent person. [...] I could always put a play on, where—I don't know: England or Germany or France or not at all, the hell with it. But nobody could fire me because nobody had hired me.'*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Richard Eyre, 2009, *Talking Theatre: Interviews with Theatre People*, Nick Hern Books, London, p.124.

That kind of independence has been prized by artists since the pioneer Romantics fought to emancipate themselves for aristocratic patronage in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today, it is an article of faith that an artist must follow her own vision, uninfluenced by anyone. Those who heed the demands of funders succumb to being instrumentalised and are no longer to be considered artists at all. That, I'm afraid, is a self-deluding fantasy. Human beings are biologically, economically, intellectually and emotionally interdependent. They are social creatures, constantly influenced and being influenced by each other, acting and observing, aware only some of the time of only some of what acts upon them and of the effects of their own actions. Indeed, theatre, as the social art *par excellence*, embodies that interdependence: audiences might focus on the leading actor, critics might praise the director, but their experience depends on the contribution of every member of the company. In theatre, the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts.

Independence is only ever partial, and for artists, who depend on funders and punters to pay for their work, and on critics and audiences to respond to it, it is vital not to have illusions about the nature and degree of their creative freedom. Independence is not a given: it must be negotiated, sometime won and always paid for. Independence has a price and any artist who does not what price she is paying has a fragile claim to being independent at all. Those who gather around the ITC's banner should be clear-sighted about what independence means, what it allows and what it costs. They have to decide when to protect it, how and why, and also when it should give way to other needs or demands. Negotiating independence about speaking *and* listening, acting *and* being seen: the drama *and* the theatre.

This is important because independence is important—even the partial, mitigated, sometimes comprised independence that is, if we are honest with ourselves, the most that any of us can achieve in an imperfect world. Independence matters because, without it, the voices that are heard will eventually all sound the same, and the stories they tell will eventually all say why things should stay the same. The strong and the rich have always been good at persuading the eloquent to speak for them. Drama is full of kings and princes, heroes and titans, even if its storytellers have sometimes been able to illuminate their flaws or tease out what is common in them and us. But a culture, a democracy, a society that has no interest in and no way of telling the stories of the poor, the outcast, the weak, the hated and the despised will become increasingly unjust. It will stiffen, atrophy and fall.

Great theatres are rightly at the heart of how a democratic society thinks, imagines, dreams, debates and negotiates with itself. National theatres, major public and commercial stages, the mediated platforms of state broadcasters and film corporation—all are at the centre of our cultural attention. They matter, and the work they produces matters, which is why it is well financed by state and private interests. Those resources allow them to achieve the artistic standards that justify, in aesthetic

terms at least, the admiration they attract. And those resources, attention and admiration are the strings that tie them down, like Gulliver on the beach at Lilliput: lots and lots of little ties that make him, ultimately, dependent on the little king and his little courtiers.

Happily, that is not the only way of creating drama and much creative and moving, unexpected and inspiring work happens far from those centres of national attention. It is produced by people with few resources or attention, whose every production is a struggle against the odds and probably won't be reviewed when it finally does open. Without the security of large grants, these artists have to take practical and imaginative risks to tell their stories, so they are among those most ready to stretch drama's forms. The spaces they occupy are not just empty: they take every imaginable kind of form, from a village hall to a beach, an old factory to a forest, and so the shapes their stories can take are equally varied. And those who watch in these temporary theatres may come with other or even with no expectations. When I researched rural touring, ten years ago, I found that a third of the audiences never saw live performance except in their village hall. The artists I interviewed spoke of the liberation of performing to audiences who did not already have a firm view of what they might see.

Performing in different places to different audiences encourages artists not only to tell their stories differently, but also to ask whose stories are being told in the first place. It's no accident that the experiences of women, working class communities, disabled people, migrants, black Britons, gays and many other people marginalised in British theatre and British society before the 1960s and 1970s have been so consistently and so imaginatively enacted on temporary stages by artists who put a higher value on independence than approval. Here the unspoken and the unheard have been created and, once created, have acquired independent life in our culture.

It is those voices off, the groundlings who will mock and talk as the prince pours out his soul that help keep theatre honest. Not actually wanting to join the club is a good protector of independence, difficult as that position may be for its paid up and aspiring members to accept. Is it really a principled choice or a rejection of the rejecters? Who can tell? Being outside the club can be ethically complicated as well as practically difficult. But if it is a struggle to put on great shows without much help, at least there's less need to seek permission. You may not have the little court but you are free from its little strings.

I don't mean to romanticise. What we tell ourselves is hard-won independence may only be the indifference of others; worse, there's always the possibility that they are right to be indifferent to our work. And, in sketching a picture of the independent theatre sector as committed to telling new stories in new ways, to reaching new audiences and to amplifying new voices, to being adventurous, creative and autono-

mous, I don't want to fall into the trap of selling my own independence by flattering my audience. I know that the everyday life of artists is not full of such highfalutin' stuff. It's a version of the everyday struggle between hope and compromise that all of us live with in different degrees.

But we need artists, among other things, to help us remember what matters about that daily struggle, even if they can't keep their eyes on the prize better than the rest of us. In watching drama, we see enacted all the joy and pain, the hope and fear, the suffering, delirium and ecstasy of human existence in all its incomprehensible wonder. When times are dark—as they are today—we need it to see through the night and the fog, to understand ourselves and each other better, and to strengthen both our values and our capacity to live through the truth that our values are not the only ones and might not even be the best. The untangling of the drama's action presents us with a living mirror of our own experience. When we sit in the theatre we discover, when it's good, that we are watching ourselves. And since those selves are almost infinitely diverse, we need a theatre culture that can make a drama out of everything, for everyone. We need an independent theatre world struggling for us through all the complexity of our lives, so that we can see ourselves and each other a little bit more clearly.