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*Introduction*

April 23rd is an important date in the UK for two reasons. It is St George's Day, which commemorates one of the UK's four patron saints; and it is the anniversary of the death in 1616 of William Shakespeare. More than that, 23 April is also traditionally the date given for Shakespeare's birthday. There is no record of when Shakespeare was actually born, we only know that he was baptised on 26 April 1564, but St George's Day seems a good day for the birthday of the nation's most famous man of the theatre who, four hundred years after he flourished on the stage, is still relevant to our society. The Mayor of London's website, for example, proudly announced during April 2008 that the Greater London Authority supported events to celebrate both St George's Day and Shakespeare's birthday.

This coincidence of events is not entirely fortuitous, for as this essay will demonstrate, theatre is vital to the lifeblood of the UK. Shakespeare is well on his way to becoming a secular saint, at least in England, and will no doubt eventually take over St George's Day completely, particularly since he offers the opportunity for so much merchandising, be it of bone china mugs or fine editions of his collected works. But the Shakespeare industry is merely the most visible aspect of our theatrical culture.

This essay deals deliberately with 'theatre' rather than 'drama' and takes theatre in its broadest sense to include opera and film. It is a truism that humankind has always felt the need to act, from the ritual drama of ancient Greece to the Kabuki theatre of classical Japanese theatre to the Broadway musical. But theatre is more than scripted drama: it is any situation in which a person carries out a role beyond what is normal. Thus we talk about the 'theatre of war' in which armed forces move outside of the normal social conventions that prevent us from harming each other and set out to inflict harm; we talk about the 'operating theatre' in which surgeons inflict injury on the human body in order to heal. Theatre is both a place and an activity. In its narrow sense of a play on a stage, British theatre is a major tourist attraction and the study of the economics of theatre is an important aspect of, for example, the Mayor of London's strategy. But research into theatre in its broader sense contributes much more to life in the UK and, I will argue, is important for the psychological health of the nation and for understanding the ways in which our society may develop as the twenty-first century progresses.

*Economic impact*

There is, however, no point in ignoring the economics of theatre; even the most idealistic of arts needs a funding base to survive; and it is a paradox that although the majority of theatre professionals still tend to live a hand-to-mouth existence, as

jobbing actors always have done, the theatrical economy is flourishing, especially in London. The London Development Agency has recently carried out a survey of cultural provision in the city, published by the GLA in March 2008 as *London. A Cultural Audit*. The research studied the cultural landscape in London (including theatre) and made comparisons with four other world cities: Paris, New York, Tokyo and Shanghai. The strength of London's theatre was obvious and, as the report noted, "... there were 111 different theatre productions (not performances) staged [in London] in just one week in October 2007" (p. 50). The focus here on London is appropriate, since one third of jobs in the performing arts in the UK are in London, but the demand for cultural experiences such as theatre is national: to quote again from the *Cultural Audit*, "By 1996, UK demand for creative products ... exceeded demand for food" (p. 26).

London represents the UK in the global financial market – it is the only UK city which is indisputably a world city, and the heart of its global influence is still concentrated on a tiny patch of the UK: the Square Mile of the historic City of London. The *Cultural Audit* compares London not only with established world cities but also with Shanghai, a city which has aspirations to be a global financial centre. In her foreword to the *Cultural Audit* the Mayor of London's advisor for culture, creative industries and tourism, Judith Woodward, explains the importance for Shanghai of developing a cultural hinterland:

... building its competitive position means not only advancing its business and finance sector, but its cultural sector also has to catch up. A globalised workforce demands access to the world's culture. So if international business is to make its long-term home in a city, it doesn't just require the economic opportunity, it needs a rich environment in other respects, not least cultural life. (p. 3)

This is one explanation for the curious fact that the City of London Corporation is the third biggest sponsor of the arts in the UK, after Government and the BBC. It built, owns and runs the Barbican Arts Centre, which receives no funding from central government but for which the City provides a subsidy each year of some £20 million. The City also owns its own conservatoire in the Barbican, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama which it founded in 1880, for which it is currently providing a substantial capital investment and which it co-funds with Government from its private endowment funds. As it says in the statement printed on all the Barbican Programme leaflets, "The City of London Corporation provides the Barbican Centre as part of its contribution to the cultural life of London and the nation." And it does so not just out of a sense of altruism or philanthropy – although that is part of the story – but because the City understands the need to provide a "rich environment" for its workforce if it is to retain its standing as a global financial centre.

The cultural and creative industries of which theatre is a vital part are, then, important partners in the maintenance of a healthy economy in the UK. We have been looking here at London but the west Midlands, for example, depends on Shakespearean theatre for tourism, musical theatre in the form of the Welsh National Opera has been a contributor to the regeneration of Cardiff, the Chichester Festival,

the Buxton Festival, the summer season at Glyndebourne and the Edinburgh Festival are all major factors in regional economies, to give just the most obvious examples. Theatre is not a 'nice-to-have' in economic terms, it is a significant industry, a factor in attracting and keeping qualified, motivated work-forces and a subject of increasing interest to economists.

### *The social role of theatre*

Anyone who goes on a training course at work will be familiar with the role-play exercise. Some relish it, some fear it. But all role-players will have had the sense that they are stepping outside of their normal self, either because they are acutely embarrassed at what they are doing or because they have become caught up in the spirit of the activity and are entering into the part. Role-play, as psychologists are aware, releases inhibitions: think of the story of the Brontë children being given a mask by their father from which to speak behind, so that they would have the courage to voice their thoughts; or the cliché of the actor who becomes tongue-tied without a character to hide behind. Society needs to understand this basic human impulse, and research into its different manifestations contributes to this understanding.

Studying theatre makes us reflect on our own social role. Successful performances, and great plays, raise questions, provoke debate and free the audience to consider questions that would otherwise be unacceptable. In C.P. Taylor's play *Good*, first produced in a small studio theatre, the audience was face to face with a good man who by a series of tiny steps became an agent of the Holocaust: within the liberty of the theatrical space, it was possible to examine how a good man – or a civilised nation – imperceptibly slides into evil. In Dennis Potter's television play *Blue Remembered Hills*, actors playing the roles of children demonstrated how close is the idyllic innocence of childhood to thoughtless malice. *The Disappearing Number*, a play about algebra, attracted an audience of 40,000 at the Barbican Theatre in autumn 2007, dramatising complex ideas about number theory and also about racism. It was so successful that, unusually for the Barbican, it will return for a second run. A recent class in my own university on *Othello*, taught alongside a play from the same period about a Muslim convert, has encouraged discussion among Muslim students about their own place in contemporary society. Understanding theatre helps us to understand the world in which we live, but we need to understand the mechanism by which this happens. Why can we say things when we act out a character that we cannot face as our normal selves? Why does the audience collude in what is very obviously a deception?

Let us take a specific example. In April 2008 the Pit Theatre in the Barbican hosted a play called *Molara*. The play is an adaptation by South African director Yael Farber of the ancient Greek myth of the fall of the House of Atreus, in which a cycle of revenge and punishment repeats itself in succeeding generations of Atreus's descendants. In the section of the myth that Farber replays, Klytemnestra has murdered her husband Agamemnon. She did this because he had killed one of their daughters as a sacrifice to the gods in the course of a war. Two of the surviving children of the marriage, Elektra and Orestes, grow to adulthood and then take their

revenge on their mother and her lover. The myth is some 3,000 years old, dating back at least to the time of Homer, and was staged in the great age of Athenian drama in the fifth century B.C.E. In her foreword in the Programme, Yael Farber explains what attracted her to this ancient story:

The ancient *Oresteia Trilogy* tells the story of the rightful heirs to the House of Atreus, dispossessed of their inheritance. Forced to live as a servant in the halls of her own father's house, Elektra waits for her brother Orestes to return from exile to the land of his ancestors and take back what is rightfully theirs. The premise of this ancient story was striking to me as a powerful canvas on which to explore the history of dispossession, violence and human rights violations in the country I grew up in. I had long been interested in creating a work that explores the journey back from the dark heart of unspeakable trauma and pain – and the choices facing those shattered by the past. (p. 6)

Farber's cast has a cast of three main speaking parts, accompanied by a Chorus of Xhosa women (here, the Ngqoko Cultural Group). This casting structure matches that of the Athenian playwright Sophocles, but there is nothing else that is obviously classically Greek about this performance. Klytemnestra and Elektra give their opening speeches in the context of a meeting of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Xhosa Chorus plays African music on traditional instruments, Klytemnestra is played as a white woman who has married a black warlord. And yet the basic form of the myth gives a perfect analogy for the struggle in South Africa, the difference being in the conclusion: for the ancient Greek dramatists, reconciliation could only come when Orestes had revenged his father by killing his mother, but in Farber's version, Orestes finally rejects his sister's pleas for revenge and prefers, if not forgiveness, then at least an attempt at understanding. In the final tableau of the performance, the ashes of reconciliation that give the play its name – 'Molora' being the Sesotho word for ash – trickle from above on to the protagonists and indicate a hope that the cycle of revenge and retribution has been replaced by truth and reconciliation.

The Greek plays about the House of Atreus were written when Athens was at war; Yael Farber's play portrays a country coming to terms with the aftermath of apartheid. It is often the case that theatre comes to the fore particularly in times of conflict and repression. Theatre as an activity is Janus-faced, an instrument of propaganda – as in the Third Reich's use of the theatrical universe that Wagner had created in his operas – or a weapon of subversion, as in the case of Václav Havel's resistance to Soviet rule in Czechoslovakia. Because it takes place in the here and now, traditional theatre (as opposed to film) can evade censorship, at least until the censor sees the show, because the actors' impersonation on stage can lend more meaning to a character or an action than seems to be there in the script. In 1624, for example, the King's Men acting company played *A Game at Chess*, the script for which had been approved by the censor and seemed a harmless enough allegory. On stage, however, the actors impersonated recognisable political figures, and the Black King suddenly became the King of Spain, the White King, King James. The allegory became an explicit, dangerous satire of English foreign policy but the satire was only apparent when the lines of text on the page were inhabited by a living body and given costume and gesture.

The impulse to act, to represent a different reality, is irrepressible and has surfaced in the most astonishing surroundings. In 1941 the Jews of Vilna in Lithuania were herded into a ghetto and were only too well aware that they would not survive. In January 1942 the community decided to establish a theatre and maintained it until the ghetto was destroyed on 23 September 1943. For the occupying forces, the theatre was a way of reducing tension in the ghetto; for the inhabitants of the ghetto, it was an opportunity to maintain the dignity of a civilised community. One of the inhabitants, Herman Kruk, kept a diary through the period, and notes that his neighbours, despite knowing they would in the morning be put on trains to the concentration camps, would still dress up the night before and go to the theatre. On 25 March 1943, he recorded both that the Nazis would be reducing the population of the ghetto by “some six or eight thousand people” and that, “I am reliably informed that tickets for tomorrow’s performance as well as the following three evenings have been sold out.” I choose this example in particular because the ghetto theatre of Vilna itself provided the material of theatre, in a triptych of plays by the Israeli writer Joshua Sobol of which one, *Ghetto*, was staged at the National Theatre in April 1989.

### *The theatrical memory*

Why did the Jews of the Vilna ghetto feel obliged not only to act but even to commission new work for their theatre? Was it escapism? Kruk’s diary makes plain that they were aware of their inevitable deaths. A solace to make intolerable conditions of deprivation seem bearable? This essay cannot begin to attempt an answer but only to point out that to understand this question goes to the heart of the human condition.

Theatre is a vector that carries cultural memory. The Ngqoko Cultural Group that performed the Chorus in *Molora*, for example, formed itself originally as a way of preserving tribal traditions of performance. It may seem a long journey from the ancient Athenian theatre to contemporary South Africa, but the drama that the Xhosa group performs resonates across continents and across centuries: it explores the fundamental dilemma in society of how to react to a violation of one’s self-worth. The myth of the House of Atreus is an enactment of the transgressing of taboos: father killing daughter, wife killing husband, children killing mother. In an earlier generation of this cursed family, Atreus killed the sons of his twin brother Thyestes and served them to him in a banquet – the Thyestean banquet itself transgressing the taboo against cannibalism.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, considers how the unclean food may be turned by ritual into a sanctified substance, and it may be that theatre is performing a similar function, by performing the unsayable. One of the many roles of theatre is to push at the boundaries of what is acceptable, and in the twentieth-century that has been most obvious in its treatment of sexual mores. Howard Barker’s play *The Romans in Britain* was, like *A Game at Chess*, an allegory, this time of the British

Army and Northern Ireland, but the debate it provoked when it was staged at the National Theatre was about how far sex acts could, or could not, be represented on the stage. When the dust had settled, society had come down on the side of a liberalisation of attitudes. This does not mean that *The Romans in Britain* was solely responsible for a change of standards; it was one element in a shift in society which was arguably driven more by film and television than the stage; but it was also a turning point.

Social mores rarely change over night, but the theatre illustrates starkly the incremental change in attitudes. Research into theatre history thus offers a perspective on the changes in a given society, a fact recently demonstrated by the theatre critic Michael Billington in his latest book, *State of the Nation*. One reason for writing it, he says, “was to try and discover the links between theatre and society.” He goes on to explain:

It is obvious that politics has been a recurrent theme of modern British drama. But I began with an insatiable curiosity about the extent to which theatre was influenced by the political temper of the times and about the way it may even have propelled social change. Does theatre simply reflect modern society? Or does it, in any way, help to create and modify it? (p. 3)

There are numerous examples of criminal acts that allegedly were inspired by watching drama, film or television, usually with tragic consequences: the fear that life will imitate art is one justification for censorship. Does theatre ever influence the participants to do good? Does taking part in theatre take hooligans off the streets or reduce rates of re-offending among prisoners? Just what is the effect of subversive theatre, be it underground theatre railing against a dictatorship or *Beyond the Fringe* railing against the class-system? The implications of these questions quickly go beyond the theoretical to become political and intensely practical.

Shakespeare pushed at the boundaries of good taste as much as any playwright, and he confronted the cannibalistic taboo of the Thyestean Banquet in one of his early plays, *Titus Andronicus*, a notoriously violent play that also features rape and mutilation. Ben Jonson, in a poem at the beginning of the First Folio, described Shakespeare as being “not of an age but for all time” and one reason why his works are still relevant is precisely because they touch on archetypal themes that are common to all societies. Take *Coriolanus* for example, a play based on Roman history, about a military leader who unsuccessfully turns to politics and is eventually destroyed by a decision made in response to a plea from his mother. This play has been performed as an example of totalitarian regimes of all political persuasions from the far-right to the far-left and, in our post-Freudian age, as a psychological study. But the fundamental question – can a military leader become a civil leader in peace-time? – remains relevant, whether the leader be Dwight Eisenhower, Colin Powell or John McCain. Catherine Belsey, in her book *Why Shakespeare?*, sees one reason for Shakespeare’s continuing relevance as being the materials he uses, many of which have the structure of fairy tales – neglected younger daughter, wicked stepmother, reward for generosity. These themes reflect timeless, universal concerns, and Professor Belsey remarks:



Now, nearly a hundred years after James Joyce, fifty years after Samuel Beckett, or in the light of Tom Stoppard, we are surely ready to see that fiction may be exactly the place for fears, anxieties, dreams and desires. Those of the past may not be identical with ours in the present, but the adaptability Shakespeare shares with fairy tale has allowed successive generations to uncover their own concerns in the fiction of a vanished epoch. (p. 17)

The same point could, and should, be made with conviction about any aspect of the arts. What is crucial about theatre is that it is a collaborative activity that engenders a sense of community, as the play *Ghetto* demonstrates so poignantly. In the era of open-air theatres such as the Globe, the City of London Corporation was wary of theatre precisely because it was a space in which large numbers of people gathered together. Four hundred years later, that same City of London Corporation, as we have seen, encourages cultural gatherings within the Square Mile. Across the river, at Shakespeare's Globe in Southwark, another community has been built, of playgoers who go to the open-air performances and collude with the actors in suspending their disbelief. Performances often take place for school children, for Shakespeare's Globe has a strong commitment to outreach and Globe Education was founded before the theatre was even built. In an open-air theatre there are no visual clues for when a performance is about to begin – no dimming of the house-lights or lifting of the curtain. Yet as soon as the actor steps to the front of the stage, even the noisiest audience of children, students or the playing public, pays attention, switches into a different mode of consciousness and enters into the spirit of the representation.

Psychology has long been aware of the power of representation, and various theatrical techniques have been used with more or less success in the treatment of mental illness. As Lisa Appignanesi describes in her book *Mad, Bad and Sad*, the nineteenth-century French psychiatrist Charcot would regularly hypnotise his female patients in sessions at the Salpêtrière hospital to which the public were admitted. The painting *Charcot's Lesson* (now at the Freud Museum) shows Charcot with a swooning woman in front of an audience – literally giving a performance. We come back to the concept of role-play, except that in this case, the theory has it that the patient's role is their everyday self, a role that is hiding their true self which hypnosis, or some other form of inducing re-enactment of a traumatic incident, is intended to release. In the practice of Freudian psychology, the analyst becomes complicit in the role play by encouraging the patient to discuss matters that would normally, again, be taboo and by adopting an unnaturally neutral attitude, expressing no emotion or judgement on what the patient says. Theatre is at the core of the practice of psychology.

As we have seen with taboos, theatre offers a legitimate space in which the audience can participate in fantasy, in which performers and spectators create their own world. It may be a world of Computer Generated Images in the darkened cinema, it may be an actor standing on a sunlit afternoon stage at the Globe and asking, "How goes the night, boy?" as Banquo and Fleance convince the audience, against the evidence of their senses, that it is actually a dark night with no stars. It is always a collusive experience, and one that can be therapeutic, joyous, cathartic, traumatic, but

forms a bond between, and among, the performers and audience. For that reason it is a powerful tool in achieving social cohesion.

### *The theatre of the future*

At the start of the twenty-first century, new societies are being built in cyberspace, in the virtual world of Massive Multiplayer Online Role Play Games (MMORPGs, or MMOs). To begin with, these online spaces were quite clearly games, in which players took on a role – an ‘avatar’ – but followed the rules, just as if they were playing a traditional game. The change came in 2002 when Second Life was created, a game in which there are no rules, only roles, and in which new social systems are created among the players. As Mark Stephen Meadows explains in his description of his own interaction with Second Life, *I, Avatar*,

In 2002 a company called Linden Lab ... implemented an idea ... It believed that if it offered people the appropriate tools and infrastructure and gave them free access to these tools, users of this system would create a parallel, virtual online world ... Second Life offers .. the ability for users to create their own narratives from the ground up. (pp. 24-25)

Curiously, though, although the virtual inhabitants of Second Life can build whatever form of society they wish, the language used to describe by Second Life is the language of theatre. Meadows comments that, “... the driver of the avatar is the director, actor, and audience” (p. 23) and that, “Virtual worlds are interactive narratives, and the avatars are actors in a kind of street theater where the audience helps improvise the plot” (p. 67).

The Second Life avatar – that is, a character created by the player and which the player controls or ‘drives’ – is in every respect a mask, behind which the player sits in the real world. Meadows’s description of driving an avatar recalls the Brontë children being encouraged to speak out from behind the mask:

... when we are using our avatars online we feel emotionally safer to connect, and also more protected in doing so. Avatars are an amazing way of controlling the intensity of intimacy.

So games such as Second Life can release inhibitions, and that may be a dangerous aspect of the cyberworld: it is clear that as a society we are still defining our relationship with the internet, a form of communication where the person with whom we interact online may be a fictional personality with sinister motives.

Equally, however, the virtual world offers new possibilities for expanding our knowledge. Players in MMOs may use the freedom of cyberspace to resolve complicated ethical questions. Meadows cites an example from the *Eve Online* game about whether or not there should have been a funeral in the online game space for a player who had recently died, and if so, did other players have the right to attack it? In the virtual world, it is possible to do things that would be impossible, or unrealistic in the real world. For example, the Visualisation Lab at King’s College London has

bought an island in Second Life on which it recreates important theatrical buildings from the past, exchanging data with archaeologists to test hypotheses in a way that would not be feasible if archaeologists had to wait for someone to build a 'real' theatre based on their data.

Second Life and other MMOs are more than recreational space or tools for theatre historians. They are big business. According to Stephen Mark Meadows, there are more than ten million avatars in Second Life alone, who between them have constructed 270 square miles of virtual islands, ten times the size of the real Manhattan Island. Virtual worlds have virtual currency which can, however, be traded in for 'real' money: Meadows notes that, "As of August 2007, the total GDP of virtual worlds is estimated to be around \$28.15 billion" (p. 70). Clearly, this is a form of theatre that policy-makers cannot afford to ignore.

### *Conclusion*

Theatre is an important art. That is not the same as saying that research in theatre is important or beneficial. Research into the causes of cancer has a very obvious pay-off, as does research into the environment or engineering: how do we justify taking resources from these other disciplines?

My argument is that the sciences and the arts are not in competition but are complementary, that we cannot make progress in one without the other. Theatre enacts the fundamental myths of society, and here I quote from Mary Midgley's introduction to *The Myths We Live By*:

We are accustomed to think of myths as the opposite of science. But in fact they are a central point of it: the part that decides its significance in our lives. So we very much need to understand them. (p. 1)

Society in the UK has lengthening life-expectancy and increasing leisure time. Theatre is one of the activities that will fill benefit our lives, be it improvised street theatre, a DVD of a Hollywood blockbuster, a play at a theatre or an enactment in a virtual world. It is also an activity of great economic value. It needs research just as much as the pharmaceutical industry does, because without research there cannot be understanding. And that research must have intellectual rigour: as the *Irish Times* noted in talking about a virtual theatrical reconstruction, "... viewers tend to accept it as face value ... yet it could be based on weak evidence. How would the viewer know?" On the one hand, if theatre is not to deceive, then we must continually probe its workings; and on the other hand, if theatre is to continue to be a net contributor to the UK economy, then we must ensure that it is still the best that we can create: and that too requires research.

In Brian Clark's play *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* the bed-ridden protagonist wonders why life is worth living. This question is at the very centre of the argument

for research into the arts and humanities: it is the job of medicine to prolong life and the role of the arts – including theatre – to make that life worth living.

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