

For Seoul: IATC Congress

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The Way Ahead

I should warn you that there is more than a touch of irony about my title. I'm sorry. I can't help it. I'm English from a certain generation and irony was our native language – but not any longer, as I shall explain. I have attended so many conferences with the title of “The Way Ahead”, or something similar, and they have often been alarmingly futuristic or defiantly backward looking – and often both. That is the great advantage of the future: it is like an inkblot. You can see almost anything into it.

Last year, I was with Pavis and others at a meeting in Aberystwyth in Wales, staged by Richard Gough's excellent Centre for Performance Research, which was titled “Towards Tomorrow”. I have rarely been at a more nostalgic gathering in my life. Apart from the fact that it was in Wales, like Ireland, “a land of memories”, its centrepiece was a retrospective of Richard's career. It's always comforting to have a future that you can look back upon.

Many conferences about the future of the theatre start with the ancient Greeks - and where did we all go wrong? - but not all. Some are determined to be futuristic. In London, as in other cosmopolitan cities, it can be hard to escape from those large hotel suites where architects and planners hibernate for much of the year to produce their models of new skylines in the spring, rather like fashion houses. In Hong Kong, there has been much talk about the West Kowloon Cultural District, which is to be built on reclaimed land. It claims to be the largest arts development project in the world with three new theatres, an amphitheatre, seating ten thousand people, and several unplanned spaces for happenings. It will be many times larger than our ill-fated Millennium Dome in London, but that's progress.

Norman Foster, the architect who designed one proposal for West Kowloon, plans to cover this whole district, which includes shopping arcades and towers blocks, in a canopy – to keep out the raw elements of the sun and the rain, and to prevent the smells of humanity from polluting the atmosphere. It will be, according to its mission statement, a “model for a sustainable, socio-economic, cultural, eco-system”.

This may need some translation. It will be an eco-system, because the climate under the canopy will be strictly controlled. It will be “sustainable” in socio-economic terms, because there will be offices and shops to employ the workers, who provide the money, to support the cultural events, to attract the workers, to fill the offices, and so on. The main theatres, subsidised, will present companies of the highest international standard – and we, as critics, can all provide lists as to which these might be - but, at the other end of the scale, there will be spaces for unsubsidised, community groups - so that’s all right.

The Millennium Dome was also supposed to have theatre and culture at its core in the shape of an aerial ballet, depicting the struggle between Good and Evil. Good won. Something else connected the Dome with West Kowloon’s Cultural District. They both had mission statements. “For centuries,” it ran, “the Dome has been the architecture of reverence and awe and Greenwich’s Dome will be the biggest of them all”. It was in visual competition with St. Paul’s Cathedral across the river, that great symbol of the Christian Enlightenment, and, like two boys in a playground, it claimed that “mine is bigger than yours”, but bigger in what? Size? Vision? Vanity?

Or perhaps it was just bigger in confidence. It justified this claim by pointing out that, in the past, when a Millennium came along, the people were so ignorant that they feared that the world might end, but now “in a more confident age, we face a future that we can and must control”. Those were its words, written in 1999, about two years before 9/11, four years

before the illegal invasion of Iraq, months before it was even known what the Dome itself might contain - and without a trace of irony.

When they were written, only eight years ago, the country was basking in the glow of New Labour's election victory in 1997, a landslide victory, which now seems to have come from a remotely distant age. In some quarters, it was considered to be unpatriotic to question Tony Blair's project, and the promise of honest government and national renewal that came with it. Irony was out of fashion. Peter Mandelson, the Minister for the Dome and Blair's close colleague, denounced the Dome's sceptics as if they were the scum of the earth. It was meant to be an icon, the World according to New Labour, showing the glories of science and technology, how the market works, and what makes us laugh, and cry. The whole caboodle!

The way ahead again! And yet no sceptic would have been cynical enough to predict its most probable future- as a giant casino on a desolate stretch of land, from which the poison from a disused chemical factory has not been fully removed. But nobody can pull it down, because it is said to be an "iconic" building; and the fact that this is still the opinion of the Deputy Prime Minister indicates what I mean by the loss of irony! But the greater loss is that the British electorate still seems to see no irony.

I have a secret addiction. I read political manifestos. I have a private collection of them, guiltily hidden from the eyes of the family, pocketbook orgies of bile, vanity and promises, promises. *The Blair Revolution*, written by Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle, is a good example. One of the excuses for having such a library is that it helps you to track the history of the propaganda. In the case of New Labour, the thinking came from several sources: Christian socialism, sociology and from a large number of big mad books that were published in the West in the 1990s, at the end of the Cold War, such as Fukiyama's *The End of History* and Samuel Huntingdon's *The Clash of Civilizations*. The Dome was a theme park version of this visionary twaddle.

These books were big, in that they contained a lot of pages, and bigger in their ambitions. They were building the New World Order, no less, and had the statistics to prove it. They contained a vast range of data from every part of the world, but if these facts connected with an area of which you had personal knowledge, they might seem well informed, but still curiously out of touch. It was as if all this information, masses of it, had been gathered from browsing the Web. Was it accurate to say that China and India *really* the world's new economic Power Houses, when so many of their citizens were struggling to survive?

They shared the same Modernist beliefs – in measurement systems, in science, in “objectivity” as opposed to “subjectivity”, which was considered be a lesser state of mind, and in evolutionary progress, in which Western liberal democracy, according to Fukiyama, would triumph over other systems of government. We sometimes believe that we are living in a post-modernist age, and some of us may, but Anthony Giddens, Blair's *guru*, may have been closer to the mark when he wrote that we really live in an age of High Modernity, where world governments take the assumptions of Modernity for granted. We don't question them. It's waste of time. He described High Modernity as a Juggernaut, an irresistible drive towards the future, and we either climb aboard or get crushed beneath its tank-like caterpillar treads. There's no arguing with it.

High Modernity has no sense of irony. It may like satire, mischievous pranks or the ambiguities of cross-dressing; but true irony implies a social complicity. Satire ridicules the foolish: irony cross-examines the intelligent. We know that our friends will not take everything that we say at its face value. Irony is often hard to translate, because the meaning does not lie in the strict dictionary definition of words, but in the social context in which they are spoken. It thrives in fairly small groups of people, where you can read the body language, catch the intonations of the voice and take part in the improvised tennis match that takes place

between the speakers and the listeners. This kind of intimacy troubles High Modernity. It undermines its faith in the precise meaning of words. It elevates subjectivity above objectivity; and confuses fact with intuition. It comes over badly on television as sarcasm or as the jargon of the in-set.

But the most worrying thought, for High Modernists as for the High Priests in any other religion, is that perhaps people can communicate in no other way. Remove irony and the social context, and you are left not so much with a lesser language but with a kind of instruction manual that you can obey but not question - a one way, not a two way, process. Just as you can never question it, so you can never fully agree with it. You cannot show your approval of something that has been said by clapping, laughing or listening more carefully. This makes life more difficult for the speaker as well as the listener, because he/she does not know what the audience has understood – which leads to exaggeration, hyperbole and the use of statistics as if they were a kind of battering ram on the doors of ignorance and indifference.

I don't want to moralise. I don't want solemnly to point out the dangers of this "mass-speak" – speaking to the masses but not the individual – in terms of alienation or something like that. My aims are more modest. I want to understand things better. I want to know why stuff happens. I still do not know what is meant by the War against Terror. I thought I knew what was at stake during the Cold War. My parents thought that they understood what was meant by the War against fascism. There were issues at stake. There were questions to be addressed.

But the question that is presented to us in the War Against Terror is whether we want to be blown up in tower blocks and metros, and the answer has to be "No", but it's not the sort of question that you need to ask. I still do not understand why in a supposedly information-rich age, it took us so long to find out that there were no Weapons of Mass Destruction and why our Prime Minister was so inadequately cross-examined at the time. It was as if our

defence mechanisms against lying and cheating had collapsed. As a nation, we sat there, our mouths dumbly open, while we were being told that we could be bombed by WMD within forty-five minutes... and irony was nowhere.

But what has all this to do with the theatre? The theatre was a place, where, as a child, I learnt about the power of irony, from the beginning, in family pantomimes. “Oh, no it wasn’t!” from the stage, “Oh yes it was!” from the house. We learnt how to check the probability of what was said on the stage from our experience of real life; and we knew, since these were actors, that we could not take what they said at its face value. We did not need a Bertolt Brecht to explain the Estrangement Effect to us. It was a natural part of the theatre-going experience. Shakespeare wrote with layers upon layers of irony. Who is being teased and exposed in *The Taming of the Shrew*? Katherine, Bianca, Petruchio or Christopher Sly? Even music hall comics knew about irony, which is why someone like the late Max Wall suited the plays of Sam Beckett.

Irony has been the stock-in-trade of British dramatists from John Skelton to Tom Stoppard. It is sometimes called “subversive”, but that is not a good description. It is only subversive, if you want to believe in the absolute authority of the text, but it would be better to say that irony opens out the text to multiple interpretations, so that through an accumulation of possibilities, we can begin to sort out the probable from the merely fanciful; and start to ask better questions. Form is the guiding hand in these deliberations – narrative, syntax, the juxtaposition of ideas, and music. We can do nothing without form and the structure of the English language once favoured irony.

One British critic, Coleridge, described the art of literature as that of inducing “a willing suspension of disbelief”, which makes it sound like a drug. In the case of the theatre, the opposite may be more truthful. We start out with a “willing suspension of belief” and are drawn towards faith, because there is no other alternative. It may be no coincidence that the

most ironic play of all, filled with doubts and ambiguities, is the world's most famous play, "Hamlet". We know that what we are seeing is not real life and nothing that happens on the stage is to be taken literally. Because the social limits of what is true and what is false have not been marked out, so we can explore the options and decide what would be the right thing to do - in short, the way ahead.

I do not necessarily mean religious faith but rather all those assumptions that we have to make, if we are to continue living in relative peace with each other – and on a fragile planet. We call them assumptions because many of them are un-provable; but we need to believe in such things as justice and fair play, because otherwise our societies would fall apart. The ancient Greeks called them myths. But how do we learn about such abstractions except through making models? And questioning those models, and double-questioning them, until what filters through these layers of irony is something that we can all accept, a communal faith, a myth.

This is what I call the "myth-making process". The theatre is part of it and I hope that you will not make too much fun of me if I say with conviction (but also with a dollop of irony) that it is essential to what we call "liberal democracy". If we accept what our leaders say, and just do what they tell us, we are not living in a democracy, but in a Modernist Management System, under the heading of Human Resources. And yet I agree that we should live in a responsible way, and not break too many windows, which means that we should be orderly in our dissent, and act out our disagreements, before taking to the streets. The theatre is an orderly compromise, a solution.

But I have to admit that if I were to say something like this in modern Britain, it would sound ridiculous. "The theatre? Essential to democracy? What rubbish!" The theatre is entertainment, something to bundle with casinos, football and licensing hours in our Department of Culture, Media and Sport. To those without irony, all fiction is mere

entertainment and there is no other truth than fact; and we in Britain seem to have forgotten the lesson that our forefathers drilled into us. Even objectivity is a myth. There are no facts without prior assumptions.

Of course, I do not wish to suggest that the theatre is the only place where the myth-making process goes on; or that every form of theatre relies as much upon irony as the theatre with which I first became friendly, and drew me into its arms. Indeed, some kinds of theatre are little more than crowd control. In Britain, as in other parts of Europe, there is the disparity between the grand theatres and the little ones, often with very little in between. Both can be equally intimidating. In the grand theatres, you can be blasted out of your seats by the amplification, the spectacle, the stars, the hype and the expense of it all. Even classic repertoire can be a tyranny. “This is Culture”, it proclaims, “Trust no imitations!” “In war,” ran the poster for Peter Stein’s “Troilus and Cressida”, a production in ghastly good taste at the Edinburgh Festival, which went on to the RSC’s Complete Works of William Shakespeare at Stratford, “there are no winners!” Well, yes, perhaps, but watch the deathly lack of irony!

But little theatres can also be daunting. There is no room to escape. If an actor tells you at close quarters that eating people is wrong, you can’t back away and say, “Well, perhaps under some circumstances...” You have to agree or stand up and fight. And the poverty of these places may also be daunting. You don’t want to offend those who have gone to such lengths to amuse. Some stand-up comics are so unfunny that they thrive on the way in which people laugh out of sheer embarrassment.

In my ideal theatre, the audience has space, by which I do not simply mean more legroom, although that is desirable too. Rather, I mean a space to think, a space to occupy, a private territory from which you can observe and exchange glances with your friends and neighbours, and actors on the stage. Cramped seats in huge theatres are not only uncomfortable: they confine the mind. The play emerges from the way in which thoughts are

exchanged through the medium of a performance. Anything less is mere television, a video game or, worse, a political rally.

And so I am breaking the code of the critics. I am here under false pretences, because I have already started to dabble in a small way in theatre management and production, and am impatient to launch a new theatre, a dinner theatre in Bucharest. And for me that is the way ahead. I don't know where it will lead, but I know how it will start, and what it should look like, and the kind of plays that it will present. It is a personal gamble, but what is the alternative?

Our friend in the IATC, Ramamoorthi Parasuram, once told me that critics have a special flower, the lotus, because the lotus floats on the top of the water and never gets wet. It is very beautiful, like a delicate piece of ceramic. You cannot even see the veins that bring the life and colour to its petals. We know what perfection is like, we critics. We know how it has been done in the past.

But I am too old for perfection. I want to have irony and conspiracy. I want to have audiences that can think for themselves.

I want to get wet.

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They might differ in their opinions, but share the same assumptions, or myths, for the ancient word, *mythos*, from which the modern word, myth, is derived, meant an un-provable assumption or revelation, not something that was necessarily false or untrue. The myths that they shared were those of Modernity: in measurement systems, the separation of objectivity from subjectivity, and evolution - not to mention all those beliefs and faiths, which came from them, such as in democracy, the free market and Progress.