

Theatrical Trade Routes
(1850-1945)
Workshop of the Global Theatre Histories Project

24-26 March 2011, Munich

The notion of theatre as trade is a familiar one to theatre historians. Since the early modern period theatre has in many of its manifestations been carried out as a form of commercial enterprise. Although the commercial operation of European theatre was until the middle of the 19th century strictly regulated in most countries, the operators of theatres regarded their activity as trade rather than art (although claims to the latter could often be employed to good strategic purpose). From the mid-19th century on, however, the theatrical trade expands exponentially throughout Europe and the USA, and in the wake of a colonial empires into most other parts of the then known world. As the colonies expanded, and the settler populations grew, so too did the demand for theatrical entertainment of many kinds. The trade was itself very much a two-way traffic, as ships bearing theatrical troupes from London, Paris, Amsterdam or Madrid, often returned carrying animals and native peoples contracted to appear in a variety of entertainment and pseudoscientific formats.

The purpose of this workshop is to map (perhaps quite literally), characterize and theorize this theatrical traffic as it grew in intensity and density from the middle of the 19th century until roughly the outbreak of the Second World War. Although the bulk of the traffic was commercial in orientation, parallel to it emerged another concept of theatre that has been more closely associated with modernism or even the avant-garde. Amongst colonists and local elites there emerged small groups of theatre artists and a public sphere dedicated to creating a new form of theatre, whether spoken, sung or danced, that was carried by artistic and ideological imperatives usually focused on questions of national identity.

It is clear from the title that investigation of this phenomenon will be primarily, or at least initially, spatial in orientation. The focus on 'routes' directs our attention to connections between nodal points. We can probably safely assume that these nodal points emanate from metropolitan centres, especially those that function as Imperial capital cities, as we know from research into shipping routes, submarine telegraph trajectories, and later telephone lines, that very specific lines of communication were established and maintained primarily to service either the lines themselves or colonial towns and cities. One working hypothesis will be that the theatrical trade made use of these existing routes and provided a kind of cultural superstructure to ensure their maintenance. But it will be equally important to track less obvious trajectories and routes which probably established themselves between colonial centres, and not just between the metropolitan centre and the periphery. Preliminary research suggests that by the early 20th century colonial centres became themselves nodal points connecting centres within a region (Frost 2004).

Papers dealing with any form of theatrical performance in any genre are welcome. These may range from single actor tours through full-scale operatic productions, from dance troupes to circuses, that were moved between continents. As stated above, we are equally interested in the return traffic. What came back and how did this affect theatrical culture in the originating centres? Listed below are a number of possible themes and research questions, which are, however, by no means exhaustive.

Industrialization and commodification of theatre (and arts)

Building on Tracy Davis's work (2000) that investigates the application of industrialisation and the dynamics of capitalist production to the theatre in 19th century Britain, we can ask how the new markets provided by the colonies throughout the world were harnessed by theatrical troops and enterprises. Whether we follow the orthodox Marxist-Leninist interpretation of imperialism as a necessity for the investment of excess capital, or more recent research which tends to focus on questions of self-regulating 'networks' and 'webs' (Potter 2007), in the English-speaking world at least there seems little doubt that the commercial theatre model of the late 19th-century saw in the colonies new markets and potential for profit maximisation.

Closely related to or indeed indivisible from the capitalist model are the interrelated notions of commodification and commodity chains. If we understand the latter as Hopkins and Wallerstein suggest, as 'a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity' then through the study of such networks, as they also suggest, 'one can monitor the constant development and transformation of the world-economy's production system.' (Hopkins/ Wallerstein 1994:17). Although theatre and performance are far from their minds, we can still observe the same dynamics at work. In an earlier article (Balme 2005) I outlined a 'commodification paradigm' as it might be applied to theatre history. Commodification on any level, is not just a profit maximisation process which turns a putative 'critical spectator' into a consumer, but is closely linked to ideological imperatives and discourses that inform it and that it in turn forms. It can be investigated from diachronic, ideological and aesthetic perspectives.

Institutions in motion

Possible follow-on effect of the establishment of theatrical trade routes were concomitant processes of institutionalisation: whether in the form of academies, state-supported theatres or educational initiatives. We need to ask if there were direct or indirect connections between the movement of performances and performers during the high imperial/capitalist phase and the later postindependence initiatives to institutionalise this form of entertainment.

It is especially necessary to trace as precisely as possible the paths of informational exchange, the migration of 'experts', the circulation of ideas, traditions, and aesthetic norms that gradually led to the implementation of globally comparable institutions.

Circulation and mobility

As Ulf Hannerz noted in 1996: 'People, meanings, and meaningful forms which travel fit badly with what have been conventional units of social and cultural thought.' (1996:19f) This has no doubt to do with the fact that the 'container' of the nation-state, as Ulrich Beck (2006) has recently argued, still continues to dominate research paradigms in the humanities and social sciences. Recent interest in questions of circulation and mobility are to be understood as an attempt to overcome these old patterns and restrictions. (cf. Appadurai [1996] 2003) Stephen Greenblatt's recent manifesto on cultural mobility (2010) is a clear signal to engage in research into how the movement of ideas, peoples and institutions have influenced history. It takes therefore little effort to recognise the importance of circulation and the ability, the question is rather how we can design research questions that go beyond just tracing movement (all of this must also be done) and perhaps see circulation as a cultural form or structure sui generis. In a recent article Lee and LiPuma have made such a suggestion: 'circulation is a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them. It is in these structured circulations that we identify cultures of circulation.' (Lee / LiPuma 2002:192)

In the context of theatrical trade routes, it might be useful to see the circulation of theatre and performance not just as a relationship between two nodal points – points of origin and arrival – but also as a phenomenon sui generis. The circulating performance is no doubt subject to different codes and modes of reception than the one located within an established cultural matrix. Recent conflicts over the 'resettlement' of Roma have highlighted once again how deeply unsettling cultural practices of mobility and nomadism remain. The provocation and attraction of the 'travelling circus', once proverbial, is now receding from our cultural memory, but in the period we are looking at, such practices were still highly controversial. As we will be looking at many different cultural contexts, it could be rewarding to examine how notions of mobility, which could encompass movement from and to inhabited cultural spaces, impacted.

Cliometrics of the theatre trade

Would it be possible to pool resources and gather statistical data on the movement of people, resources and money over the period in question? An initial point of departure could be theatre buildings, and there spread along the trade routes. Depending on resources, it might be possible to track the traffic in troupes and persons.

Working method of the Workshop and Requirements:

As already discussed at our first gathering in July, we would like all participants to write **papers of not more than 10 pages**. Papers should not only give an insight into the respective sub-project, but should also refer to the readings (see list of suggested readings below), address the questions and key terms outlined before, and provide/ discuss problems, challenges and possible methods of global theatre histories and historiography. The texts should be sent **by 25 February 2011** to Chris and Nic who shall then disseminate the papers among the group ahead of the workshop.

A **reader** shall be disseminated by end of December at the latest. Please let us know your reading suggestions by 15 December.

At the workshop, papers will not be given in full length, but **commented** on by 1) the author her/himself, and 2) by one member of the group.

References

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