

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ready for Risks? London Theatre Scene Subsidized for More Promise

Tim Sullivan · Thursday, February 2nd, 2012

The London theatre scene has continued to be as vibrant and diverse as it was when I first arrived in 2005. Much of the country's artistic success can be attributed to one major difference between the UK and the US: arts funding. While America's National Endowment for the Arts has an annual budget of \$150 million, Arts Council England has an annual budget of roughly \$535 million to serve a country only 15% of the size of the US. Of this budget, a substantial amount of money is given to regional theatres and companies based in the capital, with London's National Theatre alone receiving more than \$28 million per year. The result of this funding is that subsidized theatres are able to take more creative risks, employ more artists, and create more work than American regional and New York-based theatres which must rely on more sporadic and uncertain donations from individual and corporate donors.

This is not to say that productions funded by the state are prone to artistic flights of fancy that are not commercially successful. British subsidized companies have a long-standing history of success on both sides of the Atlantic, with the National Theatre's *War Horse* and the Royal Court's *Jerusalem* being two recent examples of productions that have been big box-office sellers on Broadway. Particularly in the case of *War Horse*, it is unlikely that these shows would have received the capital required for their extensive development process in the US, where they would have been unlikely to receive any public funding. This kind of play development is a far more common occurrence in the UK and often results in a higher quality and more diverse offering of work than can be found in America.

A number of innovative projects planned for the year ahead have already caught my eye, and perhaps unsurprisingly, most are subsidized by Arts Council England. 2012 looks set to be an exciting year for London in general, as the city is abuzz with pre-Olympics excitement. Shakespeare's Globe has announced its "Globe to Globe" season, teaming up with the cultural Olympiad sponsored by the games. 37 theatre companies from around the world will enact Shakespeare's entire canon in 37 different languages over the course of six weeks. America's intriguing contribution will be *Othello*, performed in Hip Hop by Chicago-based company Q Brothers. Also on offer will be *The Merchant of Venice*, controversial for its potential anti-Semitism, performed in Hebrew, as well as three companies from the Balkans (Serbia, Albania, and Macedonia) uniting to present the three parts of *Henry VI*, which recount England's civil Wars of the Roses. The Globe has also scored a coup with the return of its first artistic director, Mark Rylance (fresh from his Tony win for *Jerusalem*) appearing in all-male productions as Richard III and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*.

Other events this year that I'm excited about are the West End revivals of *Long Day's Journey into Night* starring British heavyweight, David Suchet, and multiple Emmy-award winner, Laurie Metcalf, as well as *Sweeney Todd* with Imelda Staunton and Michael Ball. Josie Rourke will be marking her inaugural season at the Donmar Warehouse, becoming the most prolific female artistic director in London's recent history. Previous artistic directors at the Donmar include Sam Mendes and Michael Grandage. As most Off-West End and fringe venues have quicker turnarounds, few have announced extensive plans for the year ahead. However, given their superlative programming in 2011, it's safe to bet on Soho Theatre for new writing, Southwark Playhouse for up-and-coming companies, and the Landor Theatre for musicals.

Reaction from West End theatre producers to the prospect of London hosting the Olympics has been surprisingly mixed, with the extraordinary influx of tourists causing many Londoners to make plans to leave the country during the games. Andrew Lloyd Webber has led a group of doomsayers, predicting "a bloodbath of a summer" and boldly claiming "nobody's going to go to the theatre at all." His former collaborator Tim Rice has countered, "I don't see why [the Olympics] should be anything other than a plus. There will be a lot more tourists floating around and I simply don't see why they would only want to see the Olympics. They will want to do other things in London and the theatre is one of the things the city is famous for." Many shows that were scheduled to open before the games have postponed until September and beyond, including the massive Broadway hit, *The Book of Mormon*, the Spice Girls musical, *Viva Forever*, and the new Bridget Jones musical with songs by Lily Allen. As some West End theatres are threatening closure for the entirety of the Olympics, no one knows what the exact effect on the box office will be. It's hard to imagine Broadway closing down if New York ever hosts the Olympics though – just one of the differences between the world's major theatre epicentres.

Image: The Royal Court's production of Jerusalem.

This entry was posted on Thursday, February 2nd, 2012 at 6:07 am and is filed under [Theatre](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.