Theater Studies

Theatre encompasses the globe
by Maximilian Burkhart

LMU researchers Christopher Balme and Nic Leonhardt are tracing the international cross-currents that stirred the history of theater, and forged surprising intercultural links, during earlier phases of globalization.

All the world’s a stage // And all the men and women merely players  
(William Shakespeare: As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7)

The audience was enthralled when choreographer Pichet Klunchun presented his latest creation at the highly regarded international festival Theater der Welt in Mülheim an der Ruhr in July 2010. In “Nijinsky Siam”, the Thai dancer combines the vocabulary of contemporary dance with elements of khon, the classical dance-drama of his homeland, in which the performers wear masks.

However, “Nijinsky Siam” is much more than a post-modern potpourri of styles from different traditions. It is, to quote the review in the Straits Times of 29 May 2010, “an Asian dancer’s interpretation of a Western interpretation of a traditional Asian dance”. This formula captures a complex story of encounter and adaptation, but it also defines the core of theater itself.

“Theatre as an art has always been international”, says Christopher Balme, Director of the Institute of Theatre Studies at LMU. The problem faced by theatre historians is that play texts are the domain of philologists, while evidence of theatrical practice – prior to the advent of modern recording techniques – is hard to come by. This explains why they devote so much attention to theatres as such. “The primary aim has been to situate theatres in their culturally specific contexts,” says Balme, a New Zealander who has spent most of his professional career in Germany. One result of this emphasis, however, has been an unacknowledged and ideologically loaded constriction of vision, which has sometimes caused researchers to take the picture-frame for the portrait.

“Theatre as an art has always been international”

To help change this, the DFG-funded, international project “Global Theatre Histories” was initiated four years ago, with Balme as Principal Investigator and the declared aim of studying “the emergence of the theatre as a global phenomenon in the period from 1860 to 1990”. This definition may sound like typical “grantspeak” but, as Associate Director Nic Leonhardt explains, it enunciates a new perspective with broad implications for how theatre history is actually studied.

Here she cites “Nijinsky Siam” as a test case. Its title posits an ostensibly unlikely link between the Polish dancer Vaslav Nijinsky and the ancient kingdom in Southeast Asia. Nijinsky was the superstar of Sergei Diaghilev’s world famous Ballets Russes, which performed regularly in Paris in the years around 1910. Renowned for his technical prowess, Nijinsky also choreographed Igor Stravinsky’s ballet Le Sacre du Printemps, which provoked a notorious scandal at its premiere in 1913. However, Pichet Klunchun, the creator of “Nijinsky Siam”, was struck not by Le Sacré, but by the many resemblances between the Danse siamoise in Les Orientales, put on by the Ballets Russes in Paris on 25 June 1910, and aspects of khon. These similarities implied that Nijinsky must have been acquainted with the Thai dance form.

So he began to investigate. And, as he told Leonhardt in an interview, he came across photographs, and even a painting, which proved that Mikhail Fokin and Léon Bakst had come into contact with the Boosra Mahin Theatre Troupe from Bangkok, when it visited St. Petersburg in 1900. Fokin would later choreograph the Danse siamoise as a solo for Nijinsky, and Bakst had designed the costumes for Les Orientales.

Against this background, Leonhardt wondered why an elite troupe of dancers from Thailand, a country that had not been colonized by any imperial power, should turn up in St. Petersburg in 1900. To find the answer, she undertook some online research of her own, and unearthed sources dispersed around the globe that allowed her to reconstruct a
fascinating episode in theatre history, which will appear in “Theatre Research International”. It begins with Crown Prince Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov’s voyage to the Far East in 1890-91 to inaugurate construction of the Eastern segment of the Trans-Siberian Railway. The trip also took the later Tsar Nikolai II, via India, Ceylon, Singapore, Java and Siam.

On arrival in Bangkok, he was especially struck by the Prince’s Theatre, which could accommodate 1,000 people. Here he attended a performance by the Boos-ra Mahin Troupe, which impressed him so much that he invited the dancers to St. Petersburg. Years later, the company set off on a tour which brought them, via major venues in Singapore, Paris, Vienna and Berlin, to St. Petersburg. Fin-de-siècle Europe was passionately interested in the exotic, and the tour was a triumphant success. It was not only visually documented (as mentioned above), even some sound recordings survive. These sources together formed the basis for Pichet Klunchuns “Nijinsky Siam” scenario.

Nic Leonhardt’s study reveals that the theatre had taken on a markedly international character much earlier than had previously been assumed. It forms part of the research for her Habilitation, which explores transatlantic theatre networks in the years between 1900 and 1930, and is being carried out in the context of the “Global Theatre Histories” project. “Even 10 years ago,” says her mentor Christopher Balme, “such a study would have been impossible.” Actually, “Global Theatre Histories” is the fruit of two changes that have occurred over the past decade or so. The first is the gradual rejection of much of the ideological bal-last that had accumulated in the field of theatre studies. This process began with the emergence of Post-Colonial Studies in the 1990s, when, as Balme puts it, “the major objective was to uncover subver-sive structures.”

Balme himself wrote his Habilitation under the influence of the theories that underpinned Post-Colonial Studies. But, as he says, every theory is played out at some point. And, in a certain sense, even the strategies provided by Post-Colonial Studies failed to address the specifics of everyday practice in the theatre. After all, the great majority of theatre productions in Europe and elsewhere fall into the category of entertainment – and are anything but subversive. Balme’s own change of direction is linked to the second development, the digital revolution in which the Humanities are now caught up. All over the world – Germany is one of the rare exceptions – archives have begun to digitalize their holdings, opening them up for remote full-text searches. Hence it is now possible for online readers anywhere to undertake extensive archival research without leaving home. Twenty years ago, a project such as Nic Leonhardt’s on “Nijinsky Siam” would have been out of the question, both in terms of cost and time.

At some point, Balme rediscovered the long-forgotten impresario Maurice E. Bandmann (1872 – 1922), son of a once well-known German-Jewish actor and an English actress. His curiosity was aroused, and Balme began to go through the digitized files of leading Asian newspapers dating from the 1910s and 1920s: “And all of a sudden, I could discern a personality; a single click was enough to bring it into existence,” he says. Balme had stumbled on a hitherto ignored world of touring theatre companies. In the early 1890s a very young Maurice Bandmann had already made a name for himself on the English stage, as a member of a touring company alongside his mother. By the mid-1890s, he was managing two companies of his own on the English circuit. At the turn of the century he set out on a tour that would take him round

Mikhail Fokin choreographed the ‘Danse siamoise’ as a solo for Nijinsky, while – as the sketch shows – Léon Bakst designed the costumes. Source: AKG
the globe, via Gibraltar, Malta, Alexandria and Cairo, South Africa, South America, the West Indies and Canada. He subsequently went on to venues in India, Burma, Malaysia, China, Japan, Java and the Philippines, and by that stage, the former Shakespearian actor was specializing in English operettas.

In 1908 Bandmann opened his own playhouse, the Empire Theatre, in Calcutta. This was followed three years later by his Royal Opera House in Bombay, with a seating capacity of around 1,000. Ten years later, Bandmann was associated with no less than 50 theatres in the Far East, primarily as a leaseholder. And at any one time, up to five theater companies under his management were on tour somewhere. These troupes spent 7 to 10 days in each city they visited, were up to 50 strong, comprising actors, musicians, technicians, and had their own publicity departments. The repertoire consisted of the works of Shakespeare – which were particularly popular with Parsee audiences in India – contemporary European comedies and operettas, but also included local plays.

The principle of Free Trade was a major pillar of the British Empire – it didn’t matter whether the product was cotton, tea or theatre. So for colonial administrators, Bandmann was a producer like any other. However, without fast steamships, which came into service in the second half of the 19th century and drastically reduced travel times on overseas routes, such tours to the farthest corners of the Empire would not have been possible. The sea passage from England to India, which had taken several months in the early 19th century, had shrunk to 10 days by the 1910s. Similarly, without the invention of telegraphy, Bandmann could not have directed his travelling companies here, there and everywhere. Industrialization and colonization were the necessary conditions for the impresario’s success beyond the borders of Europe, says Balme.

One of the founding fathers of Bollywood

Bandmann not only profited from the progress of modernization, he contributed to its advance. Interlocking tour schedules enabled his various ensembles to utilize the capacity of his large playhouses to the full, allowing him to meet the insatiable demand of the Asian market for entertainment. Bandmann also mounted highly professional media campaigns. As Balme’s research revealed, Bandmann’s own promoters formed the vanguard, supplying the local press with exciting copy in advance of the arrival of the actors, while internationally known stars – both on stage and off – ensured that his companies never lacked publicity.

From 1908 on, when not hosting one of his acting companies, his theatres served as cinemas. “Bandmann was no fool; subversive material was not on his programs,” Balme remarks. Quite the opposite in fact! During the First World War his houses put on lots of patriotic propaganda, which, of course, did their popularity no harm. The films shown in his cinemas struck a chord with Indian students in particular, and Bandmann can be regarded as one of the founding fathers of Bollywood. In light of his extraordinarily broad influence, it is astonishing that his career has for so long been ignored by theatre historians.

“We need a new approach to theatre history, and a different methodology,” says Balme. This is why the major outcome of the “Histories” project will not be a set of written reports, although such a volume will also appear. Instead, the results of the work being carried out by four doctoral students and four affiliated junior researchers from Serbia, India, the Philippines, Germany and Austria, will be incorporated into an interactive map, which will be accessible to interested parties all over the world. With the aid of special filters, users will be able to call up different segments of the entire
Like Bandmann’s ventures, Balme’s project depends on technology. The most difficult hurdle was finding the financial resources. No one wanted to invest in “Global Theatre Histories” – far too risky. In the end, the project was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), as the sole Reinhart Koselleck Project in the Humanities. This program, says the DFG, provides “more freedom for particularly innovative and … high-risk research.”

The 5-year grant provided ends next year. But Global Theatre Histories is still in its infancy. It has just begun to probe an unexplored sphere – the whole world of the stage. Moreover, the last 150 years, with which the project is concerned, has been a period of incessant change. There is so much to be learned about the beginnings of globalization, says Christopher Balme: It is incredible how many commonalities one can discover between the farthest parts of the world.

Prof. Dr. Christopher Balme
Professor of Theater Studies and Director of the Institute for Theater Studies at LMU. Balme, born in 1957, studied at the University of Otago in his native New Zealand. Since 1985, he has taught and researched in Germany, at universities in Würzburg, Munich and Mainz. Before moving to LMU in 2006, Balme was Chair of the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of Amsterdam.

Dr. Nic Leonhardt
Associate Director of the DFG-funded project “Global Theatre Histories” and Project Leader of “Theatrescapes” at LMU. Leonhardt studied at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, and obtained her doctorate and conducted post-doctoral research in Mainz. She has also worked at the Music Schools in Cologne and Leipzig, at Columbia University (New York), and in the Excellence Cluster on “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” at Heidelberg University.