

International Theatre Institute ITI

World Organization for the Performing Arts

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Laurence Olivier et Jean-Louis Barrault 1964

LO: I and my friend, Jean-Louis Barrault, are honoured at being invited to say a few words on the occasion of World Theatre Day. For my part, I would like to begin by saying something about our newly-created National Theatre. Last year, after more than a century of struggle, we in Britain were finally given a National Theatre, and I was entrusted with the task of directing it. One of the first things on which my colleagues and I agreed was that we wanted it to be not only a National but an International Theatre; and we intend to plan our repertory so that it preserves a balance between plays of British origins and plays from abroad.

J.L.B.

Dear Laurence Olivier, all those all over the world who have grown attached to theatre culture are enjoying this event and give you their best wishes.

At a time where different parts of humanity are converging towards human unity, it is reassuring to note that different theatrical consciousness are coming together in a shared vision of the role of theatre.

LO: Of all the performing arts, theatre finds it hardest to be international. Ballet and music can cross frontiers almost without noticing them; but theatre—whatever its appeal to the eye may be—is made of words, many of them proud, independent and untranslatable. That is why we must salute the achievement, and marvel at the effort, of the International Theatre Institute, whose exalted dream is embodied in a phrase that is itself a paradox—"World Theatre."

J.L. B.: Dear Olivier, this paradox does not appear to me, I admit, as intransigent. It suffices to observe during trips in countries said "foreign" how much theatre appears as an international property to have proof of this.

Whether it is classics like Sophocles, Zeami, Shakespeare, Molière, or the commedia dell'arte, authors as well as actors and entertainers are only managers of a single realm belonging to the entire world. This comes from the fact that in theatre it does not seem to have solution of continuity between movement and speech, or sight and hearing. Our art is first a magnetic phenomenon. Not only are the eye and the ear reached, but so are all the other senses. In the theatre if it is the eye looking, it is the chest that sees and receives; it is only afterwards that the brain understands. This art is poetic because it is always carnal. When the different forms of theatre cross borders, only the idea that a word encloses goes through a momentary eclipse, but the word itself, this intelligible mouthful, keeps its incantatory and magical power. Beyond the words, the carnal power of Brecht, of Claudel, of the theatre of the Far East or of Shakespeare meets, strikes and penetrates the chest of all men.

LO: We are delighted that Shakespeare has become a the property of the world at large; that he is regularly claimed as the legitimate ancestor of every new movement in drama ('King Lear', I notice, has lately been declared the forerunner of Samuel Beckett). We are delighted; too, that he has been hailed by members of all nations and all creeds as one of them and that no-one, surveying the whole of his work, has ever called him a diehard reactionary. The man who wrote 'Henry V' also wrote 'Troilus and Cressida'; the man who wrote 'Romeo and Juliette' also wrote 'Measure for Measure'.

Within four hundred years, our Shakespeare has become yours, by adoption. Theatrically speaking—and more than ever in his quatercentenary year—he si our major export. No export ever cost us less pain, or gained us more pride. He has cast a tall shadow over our drama since his death; and we ask for your forgiveness if, beside his gaint achievement, ours looks feeble and dwarfish.

J.L. B.: If, as Sir Laurence Oliver notes so well, it is impossible to place Shakespeare politically, it is because as a true man of theatre he was able to remain a witness of his times even in his political subjects. The final goal of theatre is justice. On stage, assassins, victims, attack and defense fight with the excessiveness of their passions. Each spectator is a jury, and it is Life, strong and balanced, that presides over this vast settlement of scores and brings out intelligence, understanding and health. The essential power of theatre is on the one hand to put aside everything that divides men: difference of race, of religious or political education and difference of languages, and on the other hand to highlight everything that men share: laughter and tears, joy and sadness, happiness and fear, in short everything related to the realm of heart. Theatre conjures up the common heart of all mankind and it is in this regard that it is the most efficient vector of peace.