

International Theatre Institute ITI

World Organization for the Performing Arts

World Theatre Day Message 2017



Isabelle Huppert, France

So, here we are once more. Gathered again in Spring, 55 years since our inaugural meeting, to celebrate World Theatre Day. Just one day, 24 hours, is dedicated to celebrating theatre around the world. And here we are in Paris, the premier city in the world for attracting international theatre groups, to venerate the art of theatre.

Paris is a world city, fit to contain the globe's theatre traditions in a day of celebration; from here in France's capital we can transport ourselves to Japan by experiencing Noh and Bunraku theatre, trace a line from here to thoughts and expressions as diverse as Peking Opera and Kathakali; the stage allows us to linger between Greece and Scandinavia as we envelope ourselves in Aeschylus and Ibsen, Sophocles and Strindberg; it allows us to flit between Britain and Italy as we reverberate between Sarah Kane and Pirandello. Within these twenty-four hours we may be taken from France to Russia, from Racine and Molière to Chekhov; we can even cross the Atlantic as a bolt of inspiration to serve on a Campus in California, enticing a young student there to reinvent and make their name in theatre.

Indeed, theatre has such a thriving life that it defies space and time; its most contemporary pieces are nourished by the achievements of past centuries, and even the most classical repertoires become modern and vital each time they are played anew. Theatre is always reborn from its ashes, shedding only its previous conventions in its new-fangled forms: that is how it stays alive.

World Theatre Day then, is obviously no ordinary day to be lumped in with the procession of others. It grants us access to an immense space-time continuum via the sheer majesty of the global canon. To enable me the ability to conceptualise this, allow me to quote a French playwright, as brilliant as he was discreet, Jean Tardieu: When thinking of space, Tardieu says it is sensible to ask "what is the longest path from one to another?"...For time, he suggests measuring, "in tenths of a second, the time it takes to pronounce the word 'eternity'"...For space-time, however, he says: "before you fall asleep, fix your mind upon two points of space, and calculate the time it takes, in a dream, to go from one to the other". It is the phrase *in a dream* that has always stuck with me. It seems as though Tardieu and Bob Wilson met. We can also summarise the temporal uniqueness of World Theatre Day by quoting the words of Samuel Beckett, who makes the character Winnie say, in his expeditious style: "Oh what a beautiful day it will have been". When thinking of this message, that I feel honoured to have been asked to write, I remembered all the dreams of all these scenes. As such, it is fair to say that I did not come to this UNESCO hall alone; every character I have ever played is here with me, roles that seem to leave when the curtain falls, but who have carved out an underground life within me, waiting to assist or destroy the roles that follow; Phaedra, Araminte, Orlando, Hedda Gabler, Medea, Merteuil, Blanche DuBois....Also supplementing me as I stand before you today are all

the characters I loved and applauded as a spectator. And so it is, therefore, that I belong to the world. I am Greek, African, Syrian, Venetian, Russian, Brazilian, Persian, Roman, Japanese, a New Yorker, a Marseillais, Filipino, Argentinian, Norwegian, Korean, German, Austrian, English – a true citizen of the world, by virtue of the personal ensemble that exists within me. For it is here, on the stage and in the theatre, that we find true globalization.

On World Theatre Day in 1964, Laurence Olivier announced that, after more than a century of struggle, a National Theatre has just been created in the United Kingdom, which he immediately wanted to morph into an international theatre, at least in terms of its repertoire. He knew well that Shakespeare belonged to the world.

In researching the writing of this message, I was glad to learn that the inaugural World Theatre Day message of 1962 was entrusted to Jean Cocteau, a fitting candidate due to his authoring of the book 'Around the World Again in 80 Days'. This made me realise that I have gone around the world differently. I did it in 80 shows or 80 movies. I include movies in this as I do not differentiate between playing theatre and playing movies, which surprises even me each time I say it, but it is true, that's how it is, I see no difference between the two.

Speaking here I am not myself, I am not an actress, I am just one of the many people that theatre uses as a conduit to exist, and it is my duty to be receptive to this - or, in other words, we do not make theatre exist, it is rather thanks to theatre that we exist. The theatre is very strong. It resists and survives everything, wars, censors, penury.

It is enough to say that "the stage is a naked scene from an indeterminate time" – all's it needs is an actor. Or an actress. What are they going to do? What are they going to say? Will they talk? The public waits, it will know, for without the public there is no theatre – never forget this. One person alone is an audience. But let's hope there are not too many empty seats! Productions of Ionesco's productions are always full, and he represents this artistic valour candidly and beautifully by having, at the end of one of his plays, an old lady say; "Yes, Yes, die in full glory. Let's die to enter the legend...at least we will have our street..."

World Theatre Day has existed for 55 years now. In 55 years, I am the eighth woman to be invited to pronounce a message – if you can call this a 'message' that is. My predecessors (oh, how the male of the species imposes itself!) spoke about the theatre of imagination, freedom, and originality in order to evoke beauty, multiculturalism and pose unanswerable questions. In 2013, just four years ago, Dario Fo said: "The only solution to the crisis lies in the hope of the great witch-hunt against us, especially against young people who want to learn the art of theatre: thus a new diaspora of actors will emerge, who will undoubtedly draw from this constraint unimaginable benefits by finding a new representation". *Unimaginable Benefits* – sounds like a nice formula, worthy to be included in any political rhetoric, don't you think?...

As I am in Paris, shortly before a presidential election, I would like to suggest that those who apparently yearn to govern us should be aware of the *unimaginable benefits* brought about by theatre. But I would also like to stress, no witch-hunt!

Theatre is for me represents the *other* it is dialogue, and it is the absence of hatred. 'Friendship between peoples' – now, I do not know too much about what this means, but I believe in community, in friendship between spectators and actors, in the lasting union between all the peoples theatre brings together – translators, educators, costume designers, stage artists,

academics, practitioners and audiences. Theatre protects us; it shelters us...I believe that theatre loves us...as much as we love it...

I remember an old-fashioned stage director I worked for, who, before the nightly raising of the curtain would yell, with full-throated firmness 'Make way for theatre!' – and these shall be my last words tonight.

Thank you.

Translation Malory Domecyn and Tom Johnson.