

Traditions and Challenges of Modern British Theatre: The Proper Role Played by the British Government

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ABSTRACT

Modern British theatre performance is proud of its tradition in the history of theatre. Facing the challenges from the visual technological innovation and the Covid-19 pandemic, the commercial playing industry has faced a clear decline in the past three years. The government accordingly works in several ways to guide and stimulate British theatre to regain its audiences. By comparing different departments of the government or parliament of the UK, this article argues that the basic features to improve the British theatre market lie in the development and collaboration of the tourist industry, the immersive theatre innovation and financial support of government. The role of the guiding government is gradually becoming more aggressive.

Keywords: British Theatre, British government, commercial performance market, audience

1. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greek and Roman theatre is an important part of European theatre history, laying the foundations for the subsequent dramatic art of all European countries [1]. After a long process of development, the ancient Greek theatre reached a period of prosperity in the 5th century BC. Ancient Greek plays were numerous and of a high artistic standard but very few have survived. The Roman drama was not as developed as ancient Greek drama and most of the tragicomic plays were imitations of ancient Greek works. It played a pioneering role in the history of European theatre and influenced the development of European theatre with its artistic achievements. Ancient Roman drama flourished between the third and second centuries B.C. Greek theatre has its roots in the rituals of the god of wine [2]. To pray for and celebrate a good harvest, the ancient Greeks celebrated the sacrifice of the god of wine in spring and autumn. From the seventh century BC onwards, this ritual meteorically rained down on many cities, and later, as democratic forces rose, the ritual became more and more solemn, and in the sixth century BC, Pisistratus made it a national festival. When the festival of the god of wine was celebrated, the people formed a grand procession and a chorus to sing the hymns

of the god of wine. The chorus has a captain and when the chorus stops at the altar of the god of wine, the captain begins to tell the mythical story of the god of wine and the chorus sings the praises of the god of wine. Later, with each addition to the chorus, the story he describes expands to include myths other than that of the god of wine, with the chorus asking and answering questions, thus gradually creating a tragedy. Comedy, too, like tragedy, was formed out of the rituals of the gods of wine. The performance of feasts and songs and dances at festivals was the prototype for the later comedies.

While the structure and choice of the subject matter of ancient Greek tragedy were well established, the character of comedy continued to take on different characteristics as it developed. During the Renaissance, knowledge of ancient drama was widely disseminated in English universities, and humanist scholars concentrated on the study of ancient comedies and tragedies and their translation for performance [3]. During this period, England produced not only playwrights but also literary theorists. By the 1680s, several professional writers had emerged in England and the theatre was beginning to flourish. Shakespeare was the most prestigious and leading figure in the theatre of his time. After

Shakespeare's death, the humanist theatre was nearing its end. During the English bourgeois revolution, the English theatre was destroyed by the Puritans. After 1688, the bourgeoisie realized that theatre could be used as a vehicle for the dissemination of criticism of the aristocracy. The first bourgeois play in England was George Leroy's *The Merchant of London*, staged in 1731 [4]. In addition to bourgeois drama, a more prestigious opera that was also critical of the aristocracy was the ballad opera, with its extensive use of ballads, interspersed with harsh criticism of society in a light-hearted mood. The ballad pattern was popular in England and had a positive impact on the development of English theatre. In the eighteenth century, techniques such as stage sets, costumes, and lighting were reformed and audiences no longer enjoyed performances on stage. The monopoly on performance also greatly inhibited the development of theatre. In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's plays were staged again and the monopoly was finally lifted. At this time, however, apart from Shakespeare's plays, most of the theatre catered to the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. At the same time pantomimes were becoming popular. The artistic value of these plays was not high. In the nineteenth century, Romantic drama was gradually taking the place of classical drama. At the same time, there was a certain amount of development of realist drama. At the end of the nineteenth century, English drama began to enter a new phase of development, moving from a long period of backwardness into a period of prosperity. The achievements of this phase are marked by the realist works of George Bernard Shaw, and there are also strong links with Wilde and Goldsworthy. The First World War caused great damage to the development of theatre in Britain, so that the best plays of bourgeois interest became popular again, in opposition to the work of George Bernard Shaw [5]. In the 1980s, theatres of all sizes in Britain began to stage a wide variety of plays, in a flexible and eclectic range of formats and times, mostly reflecting social issues.

There are several features in the development of British theatre that cannot be ignored. They are, respectively, the diversity of thrust, the mass of their audience, and their inclusiveness towards creators. These advances have freed the art of theatre from the constraints of the past and have brought about change, but they have also undermined a certain amount of tradition. The audience is vital as a target for receiving the main conceptions conveyed by the play. Theatre as one of the traditional arts cannot be divorced from its audience. Its existence depends on the audience, and the audience needs artistic activities that meet their aesthetic needs. It is not the content that binds the audience to the play, but the values and culture behind it. In the past, the biggest shift in theatre audiences was, in a word, a change in identity class. The values conveyed by the content of theatre have shifted from pandering to the bourgeoisie to

romanticism and then to popular themes tied closely to social issues.

Next to value and culture, the most important factor is the sense of experience. The theatre as a closed environment, a play can provide an escape from reality, leading them and their close friends to an environment that the audience has not been exposed to in reality.

At present, many studies have found that the connection between the audience and the theatre is not the first consideration for theaters and writers. They prefer to maintain the aesthetic standard of their content and a certain level of artistry. But this makes some of the traditional old stories fail to resonate with modern audiences. The challenge for some theaters today is to improve the experience for the general public and to attract more people. The act of entering the theatre, finding a chair, and sitting down for the performance is a pre-theatre ritual. The ritual of these acts is very different from watching on electronic media. The audience is then transported to another world by the staging of the play, the stunning lighting and sound effects.

In addition to this, it is clear that another of these eight elements is to give the audience a sense of dissolving, a sense of flow. In other words, this can be understood as the extent to which a play can immerse the viewer, a successful performance should be able to make the viewer forget his or her existence and become completely absorbed in the impact at hand as if experiencing a second life. Total immersion allows one to leave behind the elements of reality and empathize with the plot, thus allowing for intense emotions that are rarely explored. Walmsley learns that modern theatre audiences seek such emotional swings, such ups, and downs that can give people a real experience of being alive [6]. Surreal fantasy provides a space for people trapped by the mundanity and dullness of everyday life to release their innermost feelings.

All of the above factors point to the fact that audiences' expectations of theatre in today's climate are very different from those of the past. People want to feel in the theatre not just to enjoy a story anymore, but to experience life in a completely different way and to put themselves in the shoes of the characters. Moreover, for the performers, the audience also forms part of the performance. Their feedback, such as cheers and changes in facial expressions is the most direct. In this context, immersive theatre has become a major trend in theatre today. The advantage of this is the unparalleled interactivity. Rather than clearly dividing the stage, the audience, and the actors, immersive theatre chooses to break down the so-called 'fourth wall', allowing the people on stage to put themselves in the shoes of the story. In this context, cognition becomes the biggest issue facing the audience in this short period. Although it is understood that what is constructed in the theatre is only a fleeting fantasy, in immersive theatre the audience is

forced to identify what is happening in front of them, and the addition of touch and smell, in addition to the traditional senses of sight and sound, undoubtedly blurs the line between reality and fantasy [7]. (Hamana 2020, 24). Although more and more people are now getting into the immersive theatre industry, which is starting to saturate the whole market. But it certainly opens up new possibilities for theatre as an art form and allows for a closer connection with the youth market.

2. OPPORTUNITY: THE GOVERNMENT STEPS IN AND THE INDUSTRY RESCUES ITSELF

The UK government announced a £1.57 billion bailout package for the cultural and creative industries at the beginning of July. The UK Culture Secretary Gordon Dowden said the aid package was unprecedented and that arts and culture were the souls of the country; we would not let the arts off the hook and this huge amount of aid showed our commitment. In a statement, the UK government said the bailout was the country's largest investment to date in the cultural industries and that the funds would be disbursed in the form of grants and loans to museums, cultural heritage sites, galleries, theatres, independent cinemas, music performance venues and related businesses across the UK. Sir Serota, Chairman of Arts Council England expressed their welcome for this major investment by the government. They believed that outstanding artists and creative organizations will repay the faith shown by the government by showcasing their creativity, serving their communities and helping the country recover from the New Coronation pneumonia epidemic.

There are also dissenting voices in the industry about this government initiative. These argue that the UK is facing the greatest cultural threat in a generation and that the government has been slow to respond, jeopardizing the future of cultural institutions and the livelihoods of those working in them; that the policy was introduced only after pressure from many quarters and is far from adequate; and that there are no clear guidelines on how it should be spent, especially as it does not reach a large number of freelancers. While large cultural institutions such as the National Theatre receive more financial support from the government, the vast number of small and medium-sized theatres fear being neglected and need more substantial help, such as allowing tourists and audiences to visit the theatre. In the theatre's view, they are no match for museums, which reopened much earlier and can apply to the government for subsidies for loss of income from tickets and peripheral products due to the epidemic, which theatres dare not hope for.

On 11 August, 300 theatres, including the famous National Theatre and Shakespeare's Globe, took part in a 'Red Alert' campaign for the theatre industry. On the night, the facades of these theatres and museums were

illuminated with red lights, and a banner reading "Throw us a rope" was hung from a boat on the Thames in the hope that people would lend a helping hand, drawing large crowds. Some of the UK's leading dramatists appealed for private donations to help the theatres and their staff through the immediate crisis.

3. DAMAGE FROM THE EPIDEMIC

The UK theatre industry has a significant influence on the global theatre scene. Firstly, it is because of the long history of theatre and the number of celebrities in the industry. Secondly, the industry started early and became large-scale, with London's West End and New York's Broadway being known as the two major theatre centers in the world. Thirdly, the platform is significant, with many actors, directors and writers going global through the theatre stage and being active in the international theatre and film industry. Fourthly, the integration of culture and tourism has become a model area.

The Newcastle pneumonia outbreak earlier this year has had a serious impact on the UK theatre industry. According to research released in September by Purple Seven Theatre Marketing UK and another international art and entertainment management consultancy, through a study of 212 theatres in the UK, box office revenues from performances have continued to fall and could get worse, with box office sales down 92% and revenues down 91% from March to September. The number of comparable ticket sales rose between July and mid-August compared to the same period in 2019, but it didn't last. The supply of show memorabilia was down 46% and cumulative charity income was down 63%. In terms of box office pre-sales, 2020 pre-sales numbers and revenues only reached 75% and 85% of the same period in 2019.

Plays were halted and theatres closed. Since the outbreak of the Newcastle pneumonia outbreak, a large number of plays in London's West End have been closed, such as the musical *Les Misérables*, which ended its 35-year run in March this year. Many theatres in London's West End are feared to have closed their curtains for good, and neighboring industries have been affected as the area loses its vitality and vibrancy, with reports describing "the heart of the West End stopping beating and many casualties." According to a report by the UK Parliament's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 15,000 performances were canceled in the 12 weeks after March 23, costing box office around £303 million, and together with other reduced income, the total loss was around £630 million.

Theatres are facing a financial crisis. Many theatres have only enough reserve funds to last a few months, and the government's leave plan to pay staff part of their salaries through the epidemic until October, after which

survival remains problematic. Bird, head of the British Theatre and London Theatre Federation, believes that 70% of theatre companies face bankruptcy by the end of the year; Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London believes it could also close without emergency government funding and job security schemes.

In August, the industry was shocked by the sacking of 850 employees from the company of the famous music producer McIntosh. While the actors' union has called on theatres to retain theatre professionals, Mackintosh argues that the government has provided no substantial support other than to put theatre companies in debt, and that government bailout money is mainly spent on cultural buildings and organizations, not on employment issues, so employers have to choose between redundancy or bankruptcy. In addition, 1,200 temporary workers at the Ambassador Theatre Group, one of the largest employers in the UK theatre sector, lost their jobs in September, while 400 people each lost their jobs at the London Southbank Centre and the National Theatre. The loss of a large number of theatre professionals or the change of career is bound to change the ecology of the UK theatre industry in the future.

The survival of theatre freelancers is a matter of concern. According to the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Film and Theatre Alliance, a British trade union organization, 70% of the 300,000 people working in the theatre industry are freelancers, and more than 5,000 have lost their jobs (both freelancers and permanent staff) since the outbreak, many of whom had been working in the London theatre scene, mainly in the West End.

4. MULTIPLE CHALLENGES TO FACE IN REOPENING THE DOORS

How to address the growing artistic brain drain. A few days ago, an advert was broadcast in the UK, "Fatima's next job should be online", showing a ballerina putting down her dancing shoes and preparing to work online. The government authorities then rushed to say that they had nothing to do with it. The government authorities then rushed to say that they had nothing to do with it. The arts sector believes that the growth of artistic talents requires years of hard training and that the government should not do anything to allow people to give up their arts and change their careers at will. In fact, in the face of the dilemma brought about by the epidemic, many people have been forced to leave the theatre industry or consider changing their careers, and there is a serious problem of brain drain.

Secondly, how to solve the contradiction between the epidemic prevention and control and the aging theatre infrastructure and other historical problems. The theatres in the UK are generally old and small, making it difficult to meet the government's requirements for prevention and control, and making it impossible for audiences and

performers to maintain a social distance. As per UK regulations, indoor performances have been allowed to operate under strict precautionary conditions since August, yet only a few theatres have been willing to comply with government guidelines. McIntosh, Webb and others, as well as many theatres, have called for a precise timetable for full opening to be announced and, if not canceled, for the social distance rules to at least continue to be relaxed.

Musical theatre producer McIntosh says the eight theatres he owns won't be able to open until 2021, which is unthinkable as long as the distance rule remains in force. Webb, another musical theatre guru, believes that keeping the distance is unrealistic for theatre operations and that theatres can only be even when they have 65% or more attendance. Another theatre body's policy experts have received feedback from theatre operators that attendance of 25 percent is completely unfeasible and that many theatres cannot break even until they are at least 60 percent full.

Thirdly, it is important to provide a boost of confidence and a sense of security for audiences returning to the theatre. To achieve this, the London Theatre Association and the National Theatre Guild organize the 'See if it's safe' campaign, whereby member theatres complete an online application and are issued with a qualifying badge that can be used in digital and physical marketing materials, and a kit that includes resources such as an audience safety video. Under the guidance of the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the two organizations have accepted applications from over 140 theatres. This shows that the demand for theatre's backlogged productions is still high, especially as we head into the Christmas season and audiences want to see more productions. Of course, many in the theatre community are still on the fence, believing that the restricted audience numbers and lack of profitability make it viable to wait until the social distance restriction is lifted before restarting productions.

Fourthly, the recovery of tourism is also key to the recovery of the theatre industry. A report by the City of London Council states that the London theatre industry is a considerable attraction for tourists, with tourism-related to theatre, musicals, opera and ballet valued at £2.1 billion in 2015. In June this year, a London Theatre Association audience survey reported that tourism is important to the London theatre industry, with domestic and international tourists being a significant part of theatre audiences, with foreign tourists accounting for 27% of London theatre audiences and 36% of those from outside London. The World Tourism Organisation estimates that global tourism arrivals could fall by 20-30% in 2020, while London's tourism sector expects 59% fewer tourists to come to the UK this year, assuming there is no second wave of the epidemic. It is clear that the theatre industry and tourism are interdependent and that

the revitalization of the UK tourism industry will play a very important role in the survival and growth of the theatre industry.

5. CONCLUSION

Modern British theatre is attributed to experiences of immersive and new technologies on stage. Both give audiences a brand-new way to understand the story, for instance, the new lighting and sound effects can create a real atmosphere of the story like a dark rainy night or a warm sunny day. Moreover, the immersive experience can let audiences have a close look at actors on the stage, they can understand the emotion of characters in the story by observing actors. Modern people are more willing to watch theatre because of those new experiences in modern British drama, and this will let the public learn more about the traditional drama which benefits both traditional and modern drama. The responsibilities of the UK government are not only physically supporting theaters and the theatre industry, but also raising the interest of drama of the public. As mentioned above, the growing artistic brain drain is a considerable problem that the UK government needs to face. One of the reasons is drama actors don't get income. Another thing that causes brain drain is the public has insufficient information so that when decline comes, society will not spontaneously help them. Moreover, the UK government can instruct the information like situation and condition of drama actors to the public and teach knowledge and culture to the public to raise their interest in theatre, in this way, the drama industry is not so dependent on tourists.

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