

The impacts of globalisation on theatre



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Globalisation refers to the increasing interaction and integration of people socially, economically, and culturally through increasing interconnectedness, in which, theatres are also affected by. Performances originally in English are now performed in multiple languages, allowing other cultures around the world to experience watching similar theatrical performances. Singapore, a globalised community, consists of much cultural variety. Due to the immersed cultural diversity, Singapore would like to expand their theatrical performances, appealing to a broader audience of different cultures and eventually become the 'Broadway of the East'. It is the contention of this essay to analyse the impacts of globalisation on theatres via the examination of McTheatres, modernism, interculturalism, and the impact of Western theatre culture on Singapore's theatre culture in accordance to theatre design.

In the McTheatre franchise, the workers have little or no control over their conditions of work; all the creative decisions were taken years ago and are locked down. The choreography is fixed, and the movements are largely determined by the automated sets and standardized lighting designs, which means that any deviation from the pattern risks injury or singing in darkness (Rebellato 2009: 44).

The concept of McTheatre productions are methods of global imperialism. The pro side to this can be explained when the concept was founded by Cameron Mackintosh during the 1970s when he began working in a British theatre. After experiencing a "shabby imitation" of a metropolitan original, Mackintosh wanted audiences anywhere in the world to have the same high-quality experience instead of a cheap reproduction. However, because of

standardization, the virtues of theatre are depreciated, such as the liveliness, immediacy, and the uniqueness of each performance. " In a show such as *The Lion King*, the costumes are the stars, and the actors merely their operators. When we think of the mega musicals, we often think of the brand images: the big eyes orphan, a cat's eye, a combined Japanese pictograph/helicopter. The star performers are never part of the brand image, because in McTheatre even the biggest star is replaceable" (Rebellato 2009: 45). Cities such as Toronto, Las Vegas, Basle, and Denver hold theatres that have been built specifically for these mega musicals. However, they are not built well acoustically, considering all mega musicals are miked performances. Thus once that particular mega musical performance has moved on, the theatre is limited to performances requiring well built acoustics.

Musical franchises are successful to a certain extent, but they are limited to an English speaking audience. Musicals such as *The Lion King* and *Tarzan* however, even though they are global musical theatre hits, are performed in multiple languages in order to appeal to a larger range of audience members. *Cats* have been translated into 10 different languages such as Japanese, German, and French and *The Lion King* will be making its first Spanish debut in Madrid on October 21st of 2011 (Cats the Musical 2011; Gans 2011). Aside from mega musicals, past theatrical performances such as Shakespearean plays are currently performed around the world. Variations of Shakespeare's plays are also created to appeal towards the audience of the 21st century, for example, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Abridged)* is an interactive and humorous parody of Shakespeare's plays where

improvisation plays a huge roll. Hence, every performance is never the same and is unique.

While older theatre acts are adapting to a more modern perspective, new performances are created to relate towards the 21st century audience. " The theatre might be thought to contribute to the globalization of politics through plays that critically represent the workings of globalization..." (Rebellato 2009: 9). The musical Avenue Q, is ranked 21st of longest running shows in Broadway history with 2, 534 performances (Avenue Q 2009). The musical, ironically portrayed as an adult version of Sesame Street, isn't a globalized musical because it has been performed around the world, but also because the musical itself is about globalization. Considering its relevance towards the 21st century audience, it is able to connect with the majority of the world population. The puppets in the musical goes through stereotypical problems and activities people go through every day, such as, the relation towards internet within their song " the internet is for porn", pokes fun at how the modern day population makes use of the internet, though not many may admit or embrace the new mentality.

Culture and globalisation goes hand in hand with each other, and theatres are no exception from the interculturalism. Defined by nationalists of the Canadian province of Quebec, " interculturalism is the philosophy of exchanges between cultural groups within a society." Theatres in particular have been able to share multiple cultures with the world for centuries. This alone is a huge part on globalisation because different parts of the world are able to experience different cultures through the form of theatrical performances, whether it would be through dance, acting, and music. " I

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consider 'theatre' to refer to all cultural forms in which performers and active or passive participant-audiences coexist in the same space for a set time" (Knowles 2010: 3). During the Nara period, the Japanese, Chinese and Koreans exchanged performance traditions with each other, hence the bukagu court dance and gagaku, the Buddhist processional dance play, was eventually integrated with the Japanese culture. Western cultures did not intermix with the Asian cultures until American and European invasions in the late 19th century. Ric Knowles makes this point in his book *Theatre & Interculturalism*:

Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century and lasting almost a hundred years, the shingeki (new drama) movement saw a turn in Japan to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, Stanislavski, and the performance styles of western naturalism and spoken drama. In the first decade of the twentieth century, in the wake of China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5, a similar movement developed in China, largely through the conscious efforts of Li Xishuang and Tokyo's Spring Willow society, and visits to the society by Chinese students who produced the first huaju (spoken drama) (Knowles 2010: 8-9).

Much like the plays from Shakespeare, as mentioned before, it has come to a point where we have the ability to share knowledge easily around the world, and theatrical performances are also able to be shared with equal amount of ease.

One of the most well known types of performances known to globalise are circuses. It is in their nature to be mobile and move from place to place

entertaining audiences. This leads to globalization through culture, "... the interconnection of world cultures, perhaps even the development of a 'world culture'" (Rebellato 2010: 5). The most world renowned circus to this day would be Cirque du Soleil. Originally named Les Échassiers, it was founded by two former street performers in 1984 in Baie-Saint-Paul. It is now a Canadian entertainment company based in Montréal, Quebec, self-described as a "dramatic mix of circus arts and street entertainment" (Cirque du Soleil 2010). Cirque du Soleil has a wide variety of performances, all of which are an integration of circus styles from around the world with its own theme and storyline. They attract audiences through continuous live music, which allows the performance to be cross cultural because one doesn't have to understand the language in order to enjoy the performance, hence it appeals to everyone and they are able to expand to different cultures around the world.

Cirque du Soleil does not only travel around the world, but they have also left permanent set ups in different parts of the world. Las Vegas, United States, has the most Cirque du Soleil performances in one area.

Performances such as KÀ, LOVE, Mystère, O, Viva ELVIS, and Zumanity are performed to many new audiences because it's in an area of visiting tourists from all around the world. ZED Cirque du Soleil is stationed in a theatre build specifically for this performance at Disney Resort in Tokyo, Japan, with seven million people watching this spectacular performance every year. Cirque du Soleil has been able to create and show many different performances, but it couldn't have been done without more than 600 of their performers. (Cirque

du Soleil Inc. 2009) Hence, the interconnectedness of culture is shared amongst performers and audience alike all around the world.

Though most of the casts of Cirque du Soleil are trained for this specialized art, there are also performers who were past Olympic participants from all around the world. Zoltan Supola, a gold medal gymnast who competed in the Olympic three times, retired in the year 2000 after the Sydney Games. He landed a job with Cirque du Soleil and became a part of the gravity-defying troupe of performers, which now incorporates a total of 17 former Olympians. Another example is gymnast, Paul Bowler, who performs in "Mystère" at the Treasure Island hotel in Las Vegas after failing to make it with the British Olympic team in 1996 (Martinez 2011). Performances themselves aren't the only ones affected by globalisation, but the people who work within those performances as well. It is without a doubt that Cirque du Soleil is one of the most globalised theatrical performances to have spread from North America all the way to Asia.

Singapore is known to be a global community with multiple cultures integrated in one city, and because of this, different kinds of theatrical acts dedicated to the different cultures and all cultures are continuously performed. Singapore is a perfect example of interculturalism in general and for theatres. With the amount of international theatrical performances arriving every few months and with the amount of audiences watching these performances, it is clear that Singapore has embraced the idea of interculturalism within their theatres. This is a country in which Western and Asian performances are accepted together and appeal to a large portion of

the public, hence Singapore's wish to be a global pin point, the 'Broadway of the East' so to speak. As Kenneth Lyen states:

Yes, Singapore can indeed be the Broadway of the East. We have several unique attributes. Firstly, there is a wealth of stories waiting to be told in the genre of musical theatre. We also have a fascinating variety of Asian music, with different rhythms and different instruments. Our talent pool is immense, and largely untapped. We have not reached the stage where musical theatre prohibitively expensive to stage (Lyen 2010).

Aside from Singapore bringing in theatrical performances from other parts of the world, Singapore themselves are trying to globalise their own local theatre productions. It is obvious how much Western performances have influenced the local productions. By trying to maintain a unique theme to Singapore, the structure is very much of the western style. A good example of this is the musical, Forbidden City. " It's Singapore's most successful musical - first commissioned for the opening of the Esplanade, now in its third run, greeted with interest by American investors who'd like to adapt it for Broadway" (Yi-Sheng 2010). By exploring the fusion of Western and Eastern styles, there is a possibility for Singaporean theatrical productions to become worldwide and achieve globalisation with their own culture and local acts.

Theatre of the 21st century is affected by social standing and social status of the community, hence the design of theatres affect the people's want and reason to attend a performance based on prestige. Theatre of Ancient Greece was an open air, semi-circular layout with only the use of a skene

and costumes for visual distinction between characters and scenery (The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition 2008). It was a place for the gathering of people to enjoy a performance by being taken to another dimension. The use of lighting was available only through natural lighting; hence performances were casually held during the daytime. The globalised theatre design of the 21st century however, is incorporated on the theatre experience influenced by the modern American stage design through the use of lighting, props, and moveable stage parts. With the discovery of lighting, theatres became enclosed and performances became a nightly event, which gives off a more formal experience. Now it is a place not only for people to gather and enjoy a performance, but also a place of prestige. Theatres in general have become a social marker.

The concept of an exposed theatre within the new proposed design of the Victoria Theatre situated in Singapore is aimed to attract audiences through the act of interaction or communication with the general public and raise awareness of theatrical performances to help Singapore reach its goal of being the 'Broadway of the East'. The use of an open-air theatre and an enclosed theatre together is to create two different experiences much like the casual experience of Ancient Greece and the more formal experience of the 21st century.

With today's technology and interconnectedness, theatres has become a huge part of globalisation through the sharing of performances and performers around the world not only through the use of " McTheatres", but also through the creation of fused cultural performances in order to reach out to a broader audience. Through Western influence, the design of theatres

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has created a social status through the theatre experience. Singapore, being a social marker and huge globalised community, has attracted theatrical performances from around the world in order to share the multiple cultures with its local audience, to become the next 'Broadway of the East', and to create their own theatrical performances as well, such as Forbidden City.