

International Theatre Institute ITI

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Saadalla Wannous 1996

Had it been customary to give World Theatre Day celebrations a 'function specific' title in terms of the needs the theatre responds to, I would have given this year's message the title "*The Thirst for Dialogue*". For there is indeed a great need for multi-lateral, multi-faceted and comprehensive dialogue among individuals as well as among societies. The prerequisites for such dialogue are of course democracy, respect for pluralism and control of the aggressive urge in individuals and nation alike. Every time I feel this thirst for dialogue, I imagine it starting in a theatre, then growing, expanding and spreading beyond and beyond to encompass all peoples and cultures.

I believe that the theatre, no matter what technological revolutions it undergoes, shall remain the ideal forum in which man can ponder his historical and existential condition. What makes the theatre so unique in this respect is that it is where the spectator breaks out of his shell to contemplate the human condition in a communal context that activates his sense of belonging to the community, and where the spectator is taught the infinite value of dialogue and the multiplicity of the levels of such dialogue. There is the dialogue within the action itself, a more implicit dialogue between the action on the stage and the spectator, dialogue among the audience themselves and, further beyond, dialogue between the performance and the public on the one hand and the city outside on the other. At every one of these levels we shed a measure of our lonely depression and acquire a new sense of societal affiliation so much so that the theatre becomes not just a mere manifestation of civic society but a prerequisite for the growth and development of such society.

But I must be dreaming or nostalgically hearkening to those eras when theatre did really cause explosions of dialogue and pleasure in cities galore. Yet, we must not fool ourselves; the theatre is on the retreat; and wherever one looks one finds that more and more cities are growing impatient with their theatres and pushing them back into ever diminishing marginal shells, for the space is now needed for yet more glittering lights, colour screens and conveyor-belt trivialities.

I know of no other period during which the theatre was so impoverished both financially and morally. Even the privileges it once enjoyed are now replaced by lip-service rhetoric that verges on outright contempt. Let us face it, the theatre today is no longer that civic celebration that allowed us room to contemplate, encouraged us to engage in dialogue and deepened our sense of humanity.

However, the problem of the theatre, specific as it is, remains part of the overall problem of culture which itself suffers from marginalization and siege.

The irony of it all is that despite the tremendous wealth of knowledge, information, and marketing and communication potentials that has become available and that has transformed the world, virtually globalized, into a single village, the utopia of theatres, all theatres, has remained as illusive as ever, as has the dream that men and women would soon live in a single united world whose people partake

equally of the wealth of the earth and enjoy their humanity free from injustice and aggression. But, unfortunately, the globalization that is taking shape at the end of this century is almost the very opposite of that dreamt-of utopia; for it seems to be creating yet more inequalities in the distribution of wealth and widening the gap between the obscenely rich and the destitute poor. Furthermore, it seems to be mercilessly destroying all forms of cohesion within societies breaking them up into individual, lonely and depressed souls. In the absence of a vision of the future and because people, perhaps for the first time in history, dare no longer dream, the human condition at the turn of this century seems to be very grim.

We can best understand the danger inherent in the marginalization of culture when we realize that with revolution becoming extremely difficult and complex, culture now stands in the forefront of the forces that seek to confront the egocentric inhuman process of globalization. For it is through culture and through the critical outlooks it promotes, that man usually discovers the mechanisms of events and regains the strength to recover his humanity. Culture, after all, provides the idea and the ideals, which enhance man's freedom, consciousness and beauty.

In such a context, the theatre, through example and participation, can teach us how to rebuild and recreate and how to engage in the dialogue for which we all thirst –the serious and comprehensive dialogue that should be the first step towards confronting the frustration that besets the world at the turn of this century.

Our lot is to hope, and what happens today cannot be the end of time.

For four years now I have been battling with cancer. My strongest weapon in this battle has been to write frenziedly for the theatre. I have been asked, somewhat cynically, why I so stubbornly persist to write plays at a time when the theatre is receding, even fast disappearing, from our life. The question, I remember, angered me. How could I explain to my censoring interlocutor the extent of my friendship with the theatre and how could I make him understand that for me to abandon writing for the theatre as I stand at the outer limits of my life would be tantamount to an act of betrayal that would only hasten my departure. I would further say, if I had to proffer a reply that I am determined to go on writing for the theatre to the very end and would add, at the risk of repeating myself, that the theatre must stay alive because without it the world would grow lonelier, uglier and poorer.

The siege may seem tight and conditions frustrating; yet I am sure that goodwill shall prevail in the world at large and that unison of goodwill shall safeguard culture and restore to the theatre both its brilliance and status.

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