

### Imagi-nation.

Much of the contemporary debate surrounding ideas of nationality and nationhood focuses on Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson's argument that nations do not actually exist but are, in fact, 'imagined communities' of perceived rather than real connections. Patrick Geary's impression that the modern historian has shrouded history in a mask of permanence by creating the illusion of a moment of national territorial acquisition supports Anderson and Gellner's views. However, I wish to argue that the phenomenon of national theatre can, in theory at least, provide an alternative both to Geary's mythical and Anderson's imagined national and international communities. It is possibly the only place available for rational public debate, national or otherwise, in a modern age, because it is at once real and fictitious, virtual and true. A national theatre is not an imagined community but a community of imagination and imagining therein is a creative cultural activity that maps out its territories by means of a process of interactivity and inter-relationality. Ideally, a national theatre would involve its audience in a perpetual re-consideration and re-creation of the national certainties that make up its understanding and perception of itself and others.

I propose to relate this particular concept of national theatre to Jurgen Habermas' argument in his influential book, *'The Cultural Transformation of the Public Sphere'* Habermas' defined the eighteenth century as the point of emergence of a new liberal public sphere that was to become the locus for a democratic and egalitarian debate that rearranged the balance of power between people and their state. In this new sphere, people functioned as 'mere humans', equal players in the public opinion polls so to speak. I wish to argue that a national theatre might ideally be able not only to participate in a burgeoning public debate but to represent the very essence of that debate in its own formal structure. National theatre is clearly an appropriate vehicle for the investigation and expression of national identity and feeling, but I will argue that the reason for its particular relevance in this field is the fact that its formal structure actually mirrors that of the modern liberal sphere defined by Habermas - the public that has, according to T.C.W. Blanning, dominated European culture ever since. As Lessing would argue, the creativity of the dramatic poet goes beyond the representation of a real or perceived past. He is not a, 'historian; he does not relate what was formerly

believed to have happened, but makes it happen before our eyes ... he wishes to cause illusion and by illusion to move us'. It is possible, I believe, for a national theatre to function not simply as one of the cultural conduits for the cultivation of modern European public discourse but as an alternative space for the continuation and elaboration of that discussion, truly, an 'area of no frontiers'.

Benedict Anderson's well-known maxim that nationhood can be thought of in an anthropological way as an imagined sense of community as opposed to a community in real contact is supported by Ernest Gellner's conviction that nations are in fact nothing more than a by-product of nationalism. Miroslav Hroch, however, presents an alternative vision of nations as fundamental historical realities. Hroch counteracts the vision of the subjectivist conception of nation as a product of national consciousness, national will and spiritual forces with the argument that it is in fact a constituent of social reality of historical origin. The nation exists, he says and nationalism develops from the existence of the nation. Hroch offers a definition of a nation as 'a large social group characterised by a combination of relations which arise on the one hand from the solution found to the fundamental antagonism between man and nature on a specific land-area and on the other from the reflection of these relationships in the consciousness of the people'.

Gertjan Djinski also sees nations in much more concrete terms and argues that it is almost impossible to separate a discussion of national identity from that of geopolitical visions. He goes on to identify these visions as any idea concerning the 'relation between one's own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage and/or invoking ideas about a collective vision or strategy'. A geopolitical vision, he says, requires a 'them and us distinction and an emotional attachment to place. Robert Kaiser defines this phenomenon as the territorialization of national identity and describes it as the promotion of an idea of the nation as an unchanging entity rooted to a particular place. Ironically, as actual places become more fluid and flexible, Kaiser feels that ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become more prominent. These places, he argues, are often depicted as neutral and eternal places but this is, in fact, never the case.

Kaiser's comments imply a fundamental mistrust of national ideas of and about place and this implication is supported by Patrick Geary's

accusation that contemporary nationalists think of history in a static and linear sense. As part of this reductive process, Geary claims that they define a moment of 'primary acquisition' at which their chosen nation, 'first arriving in the ruins of the Roman Empire, established their sacred territory and their national identity'. He argues that the recent study of philology facilitates the myth of an ancient past called to the service of a current nation and its nationalists and claims that this fabrication is aided and abetted by modern historians who conjure up the illusion of a moment of territorial acquisition at which distinct nations emerged.

Geary is not the only one to recognise an element of fabrication or at the very least imaginativeness in the history of nations. Ernest Rénan identifies the same link between the accumulation of a historical national heritage and the strength of national identity when he suggests that forgetfulness and even historical error are an inherent part of the process of nation formation and that advances in historical studies are, in fact, a threat to that process. It is to this historical error that Geary refers when he claims that early medieval historians are drawn into a nationalist debate and become agents in the creation of a pseudo-history that assumes the genesis of stable, objectively identifiable social and cultural units in denial of the realities of mass migration and the ambiguities of national character.

What Geary argues is that the mapping of national territory facilitated by historians who talk and write of the links between nations and particular land parcels as if these links were forged in permanence at a particular fateful moment are deceitful, or at the very least wrongheaded, attempts to stabilise the constant movement of peoples and boundaries that constitutes the very life and soul of modern Europe. He sees this Western tendency towards historical fabrication as a pernicious weapon in a battle against national identity formation and suggests that it enables military and political leaders to claim that they represent ancient traditions of peoples in a manner that excuses them from justifying their relations with the people whom they are moulding at any given moment of present history.

Geary's concerns might well be justified by the harrowing geopolitical vision that achieved a particularly disturbing and spectacular embodiment in the highlight of Hitler's cultural programme; the Nuremberg rallies. There is an incisive discussion of this terrifyingly effective process of transforming place into politics in George Mosse's article on the *Nationalisation of the*

*Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass movement in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich.* The Nuremberg rallies were orchestrated with great care in order to articulate the support of the masses for Hitler's political programme. They occupied a specific place in terms of the calendar year and Nuremberg itself surrendered its former character in favour of its new identity as the stronghold and showpiece for the German Nazi party. In this case, it was not a question of a basic and instinctive response to personal or communal history manifest as affection for one's birthplace but rather the artificial birth of a place that was to become a national symbol. According to Mosse, the rally was carefully stage-managed so that it became the stage for the production of a 'Führer-cult'. Hitler, himself was, 'the leading actor and point of reference for both the architecture and the processions ... symbolically bringing the people together in an emotionally elating, communal experience'. In a sense Nuremberg became a national historical site that glorified a contemporary political force rather than commemorating some aspect or other of the country's past.

If we look again at the terms used by Mosse in his discussion of the nationalisation of the masses, it is fascinating to note the similarity between his descriptions of the rituals and ceremonies of the Nuremberg rallies and the workings of theatre itself. The theatrical terminology employed by Mosse highlights the performative aspects of the political, social and quasi-artistic activities at the core of German mass representation and domination during Hitler's regime. Mosse also notes that the staging of these spectacles was designed to utilise the fact that the highpoint of bourgeois nineteenth century festival culture was national celebrations. The rallies staged a political statement and in so doing created both a company of political actors and a national and political public. It did so by the use of spectacle, performance both exhibitionary and participatory, ultimately by enabling the, 'leading actor' and his supporting troupe to bring 'the people together in an emotionally elating, communal experience'. The rallies were subject not only to scrupulous planning but to revision and the programme for such debriefing might well have been a format for the study of national theatre, firstly, 'to analyse their rituals as an expression of political aims and as a means of influencing the masses', secondly, to 'enquire as to what effect they had on their audiences'.

This alarming misuse of a theatrical formula may well alert us to the potential of national theatre both as constructor of space and as a constructive space. In her introduction to *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, Ellen Gainor comments on the capacity of works of art to create spaces, cites and places in their audience's minds and this view is shared by many critics. Eric Hobsbawm lists film, radio and the press amongst the new technological tools that modern society has made available to nationalism and Kaiser's comment on the increase in the number of visitors to the Wallace monument subsequent to release of the film, *Braveheart*, highlights its function as an aesthetic icon that conjures up an ideological place in the minds of its viewers, representing the nature of Scottish nationality. I would like to propose that national theatre is by far the most powerful of the artistic media capable of conjuring up illusions of space and/or place. The affinity between its methodology and that employed by the Nazi regime at Nuremberg clearly indicates the strength of its potential as a national force but also the danger that it, too could become 'a false place, staging a fictitious version of national realities and creating an imaginary audience, akin to that defined by Joseph Roach, as 'an organic cultural whole and a 'mass-cultural simulacrum of the body politic'. However, I think that the opposite is true. Because theatre it is an art form that draws its very life breath from an acceptance and assertion of the inter-relativity of illusion and reality, it can provide a place where ideas of nations and nationhood can be played out constructively and possibly in the only way has any valid meaning.

I wish to relate this vision of national theatre to Jurgen Habermas' analysis of modern society in his study, *The Cultural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In his fascinating analysis of modern society, Habermas describes how in the eighteenth century, the separation of the Privy Purse from the state budget, government institutions from the court and the development of a professional bureaucracy signalled the end of an era in which authority and power was signified directly by a designated individual, such as a monarch. This distinction between private and public status and authority was set in motion by the nationalisation of town-based economy that created a modern state based on taxation. As a result, space was cleared for the formation of a new sphere occupied by a body of private people – these people were the product of the 'specific historical

circumstances of a developing market economy', characterised by the exchange of both goods and information. The new public sphere occupied by private citizens defined itself in contrast to the state—related public authority and became the locus for a rational debate conducted via the cultural media. Amidst the media that facilitated this debate were music halls, theatres, museums and concerts. What they all had in common were the persistence of rational argument therein and the irrelevance of wealth and rank in the articulation of that argument. In this new liberal public sphere, people functioned as 'mere humans', equal players in the public opinion polls so to speak.

The emergence of a public sphere characterised by its facilitation and promotion of critical discourse might, at first glance, seem to render the idea of nation and nation-ness redundant. If membership of a public body was now open to all private individuals simply on the basis of the 'effort of communication', would people still need other modes of belonging? The answer proved to be in the affirmative. One of the major concerns that came to the fore in the rational and egalitarian discourse that characterised this new sphere was nationalism. Whilst Habermas' discusses the role of the emerging press and of literary forms such as letter writing and the Romantic novel in the perpetuation and publicising of this discussion, he does not deal with national theatre in any detail. Nonetheless, Blanning flags it up as one of the cultural media that might play a fundamental role in stimulating and sustaining the kind of public debate prevalent in this new sphere.

According to Habermas, it was only in the eighteenth century that a fully-fledged theatre-going public was formed and, more specifically, it was eighteenth century national theatre that activated theatre as a cultural force within the newly formed liberal public sphere. Habermas cites Gottsched and Lessing's establishment of a permanent national theatre in 1766 as the declaration of the emergence of this public in Germany. The terminology he uses in this context is interesting because it indicates his perception of a link between the fact that this was a national theatre and the fact that it was both permanent and 'public'. Although he does not pursue this line of enquiry further, might it be that Habermas sensed that national theatre could provide people with a new sense of belonging in a world where modern egalitarian tendencies were slowly but surely rendering old meanings and modes of being redundant? I think it is possible to claim that a national

theatre could provide the kind of public identified by Habermas as the new liberal public sphere, not only with a means of playing out a rational debate central to its interests, but with a sense of participation and community – an awareness of belonging.

I would also like to suggest that it was not only able to participate in a burgeoning public debate but to represent the very essence of that debate in its own formal structure. In any theatre, cultural activity is the province of the players and their public and the relationship between the two is equal. It is one's own active investment in the debate presented via the theatrical spectacle that dictates the nature and value of the artistic experience discovered therein. However, in the case of national theatre, that debate necessarily has a common relevance to all by virtue of its designation as a national discourse. It is, I believe, the ability of national theatre to play out 'an identity that is publicly performed, constituted by certain practices of social interaction within a regular territory that strengthens collective identity' that makes it a particularly appropriate representative medium for the experience of national identity within the context of a modern Europe.

In his assessment of the condition and kind of modern society, Habermas concludes that the new public sphere that emerged in the closing centuries of the second millennium has by now been infiltrated by the laws of the market governing commodity exchange and social labour. As a result, what he refers to as 'the web of public communication' has fallen apart at the seams and disintegrated into a series of individuated acts of reception. There is no longer a genuinely public sphere, simply an apparently public sphere in which the individual achieves satisfaction of his own needs in the presence of others, but not in conjunction and debate with others. Habermas' view is supported by Geary who defines the rise of capitalism and individualism in the wake of communism and socialism as a dangerous trend despite the fact that he does not elaborate on his rationale for this. If we remain true to our perception of the link between the new liberal public sphere and the artistic medium of theatre, and for our purposes, national theatre, we might well deduce that it too will succumb to a similar fate. I think it is possible, however, to argue the opposite.

Both Gellner and Geary agree that nations do not exist. Anderson, the author of the famous phrase, 'imagined communities', objects to Gellner's reductive attitude towards nations and claims that he confuses invention

with fabrication and sees falsity where there is, in reality, imagination and creation. His view of nations seems closer to that of Miroslav Hroch who admits that the surface manifestation of their permanence is provided by human consciousness but claims that the essence of this permanence derives from a stable connection between the individual and a series of objective social relations. Whether we succumb to Hroch's view, on the one hand or Gellner's and Geary's, on the other, Hroch's definition of a nation is particularly interesting in terms of its adaptability to a definition of national theatre. Hroch says that a nation is a, 'social group characterised by a combination of social relations (economic, territorial, political, religious, cultural, linguistic etc) which arose from the antagonism between man and nature on a specific compact land-area and from the reflection of these relationships in the consciousness of the people'. This might serve equally well as a definition of a national theatre in that it too provides an occasion for the assimilation of a social group sharing a combination of varied social relations, formulated by their participation in a common economic, ceremonial, cultural and linguistic event which investigates the struggle between man and nature on a specific stage-area and from the reflection of these relationships in the consciousness of its audience.

I wish to use my adaptation of Hroch's definition to support my argument that the phenomenon of national theatre can, in theory at least, provide an alternative both to Geary's mythical and Anderson's imagined national and international communities. National theatre is possibly the only place available for rational public debate, national or otherwise, in a modern age because it is at once real and fictitious, virtual and true. A national theatre is not an imagined community but a community of imagination and imagining therein is a creative cultural activity that maps out its territories by means of a process of interactivity and inter-relationality. Ideally, a national theatre would involve its audience in a perpetual re-consideration and re-creation of the national certainties that make up its understanding and perception of itself and others.

