



How It Began

It began with a phone call from a friend. We were in the middle of a Saturday lunch amongst the sardines, baked beans and tinned tomatoes that lined the shelves of the back room of the corner shop that served as student lodgings. It was March 1978 and our friend Adrian Odell, who had gone to Portugal to teach after graduating, was ringing to say that the University of Coimbra was organising a student festival in May dedicated to ‘international solidarity and friendship’; would we come? There were to be companies from Germany, Poland and what was then Czechoslovakia, and Adrian had already convinced the festival’s organisers that he knew a university troupe (meaning us) from Warwick in the UK who put on the kind of radical, politicised work they were now looking for. The festival budget would cover our living expenses in Portugal, so ‘all we had to do’ was create a production and raise some airfares. Before the phone call ended we agreed we would do it. We had ten weeks.

Portugal had had a revolution four years earlier and a programme of collectivisation had swept the country. By 1978, the movement was faltering and the landlords who had fled the Communists were beginning to return, demanding their land back. Although at Warwick University we were very fortunate to see a wide variety of theatre presented at its Arts Centre, from Britain and overseas (performers included Mike Leigh’s Hull Truck, Pip Simmons, Berliner Eckerhart Schall, and Czech mime artist Bolek Polívka, to name a few), our own experiences as theatre-makers revolved around student productions of Jacobean drama, Christmas pantomimes and occasional forays into Boris Vian, Bertolt Brecht and Luigi Pirandello. In an attempt to do justice to the revolutionary cause, we hit on what we imagined to be the perfect play – David Hare’s *Fanshen*. We had just seen Joint Stock’s production, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, at the Arts Centre. Describing the process of land reform in China during the Cultural Revolution, it was, we thought, appropriate and topical. A pile of vivid blue posters from the production, showing workers’ arms upraised in revolutionary gestures, was still stacked in the Arts Centre’s marketing office. We cut Joint Stock’s name off the bottom of the poster and replaced it with our own: The 11th Hour Theatre Company. Equipped with armfuls of these, a scantily rehearsed play directed by Ben Gibson, plane tickets bought with funds raised from the University and the British Council, and a great deal of confidence and purpose, we flew to Portugal.

Despite our best efforts, which included on-the-spot improvisations and

Lucy Neal (left) and Rose Fenton outside the LIFT office, on the terrace of the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, LIFT’83. Photo: Honey Salvadori.

singing the *Internationale* in Portuguese as our grand finale, the play was an unmitigated failure. In contrast to the visual, robustly physical and musical shows of the other companies in the festival, our three hours of dense dialogue without translation bored the audience and got us into political trouble. Cafés buzzed with debate about whether our play was in fact a counter-revolutionary piece calculated to overthrow the revolution rather than support it. Renditions of *Scarborough Fair* and *Bandiera Rossa* on an outing to a collective farm saved us from being chased out of town. We left under a cloud.

The experience was transformative. Seeing theatre drawn from different traditions traversing music, dance and the visual arts in one confident arc was a revelation to us, and in total contrast to the text-based British theatre we knew. The vigour of the political debate and the festival's engagement with social issues inspired us. On our last night in Coimbra, we resolved to create a similar festival back in Britain. Looking down on the town from the crumbling balcony of our grand hotel we threw coins over our shoulders to bring luck to the new venture.

'You'll be shifting dead wood all the way'

The summer we graduated from the University of Warwick, Britain was entering a new political era. It was 1979, and Margaret Thatcher had won the election and begun her eighteen-year hold on British politics and the public realm. Declaring that 'There is no such thing as society' whilst putting the 'Great' back into Britain, her leadership heralded a culture of free-market private enterprise and union-bashing, with a war in the South Atlantic and Poll Tax riots at home. Britain was in a recession and the arts had to justify their existence in the market place, competing with hospitals and schools. International arts were off the agenda altogether and it is hard to conceive of the insularity of British theatre at that time – Peter Brook had abandoned the country in despair at its narrow-mindedness and cultural myopia to work in the more cosmopolitan Paris. On the face of it, this wasn't a great time to be launching an international festival full of 'foreign' work that hoped to challenge British theatre and open a window on the world.

Under the surface changes in the arts landscape were underway, albeit away from the establishment. Joseph Seelig founded the London International Mime Festival in 1978, Penny Francis the Puppet Festival in 1979, Val Bourne started Dance Umbrella in 1980 and Judith Knight and Seonaid Stewart began

Artsadmin in the same year. Pioneering individuals such as David Gothard at Riverside Studios, Thelma Holt at the Roundhouse and John Ashford at the ICA were opening their doors to artists such as the Rustaveli from Georgia, Tadeusz Kantor from Poland and Radeis from the Netherlands. The indefatigable Alfred Emmet at The Questors amateur theatre in Ealing was inviting companies from Eastern Europe and India. All gave encouragement and advice when we spoke of our plans for LIFT, ranging from Seelig's stoic warning, 'You'll be shifting dead wood all the way', to Emmet's invaluable knowledge of negotiating with official agencies in the Communist bloc. *British Alternative Theatre Directory*, edited by Catherine Itzin, became a point of reference. John Ashford offered us the use of the ICA. We worked as waitresses by night and researched the Festival by day.

We learnt about the late Sir Peter Daubeny and his World Theatre Seasons, which took place at the Aldwych Theatre in the 60s and 70s, from people asking us if we intended to follow in his footsteps. Until his death in 1975 he had presented, against the odds, some of Europe's established international theatre companies, such as the Berliner Ensemble and the Comédie Française, along with more unexpected productions such as *Umbatha* – a Zulu version of *Macbeth* by the Natal Theatre Workshop Zulu Company – from South Africa. The fact that he too had come up against the assumed superiority of the British theatre world was strangely reassuring to us. We contacted his widow, Lady Molly Daubeny, to ask if she would become our first patron. Inviting us to a grand champagne soirée at her town house in Wilton Square, she agreed.

We drew up lists of embassies and their cultural attachés to approach once we had worked out an itinerary of festivals to visit. The Polish Embassy produced an invitation to the Lublin Konfrontacje Teatralne festival of experimental and student theatre, and the German Embassy gave an invitation to the Erlangen International Festival. In both cases onshore costs were paid. The British Council, *Time Out* and an array of individuals were asked to assist us in buying the airfares. In *Who's Who* we found that Lord St Oswald was President of both the Anglo-Polish Society and Friends of Yorkshiremen in London Society. Given the explanation that Rose was a Yorkshirewoman trying to get to Poland, he agreed to see us, sending us away again almost immediately as we were wearing trousers and he didn't approve. We returned the next day resolutely in culottes to find him deliberating between buying a new lampshade for his home in Yorkshire, Nostell Priory, or giving us the cost of one airfare on condition that we find the other. In fact he wrote us a cheque there and then, and agreed to become our second patron. At *Time Out* proprietor Tony Elliott and Steve Grant, theatre editor, grilled us on our LIFT

plans before giving a donation of £500 *and* the offer of editorial support. After six months of research we were making headway.

Wislewe Moslive

The trip to Poland in April 1980 was a watershed and as rich a lesson in international theatre as we could have wished for. Powerful expressionistic shows, heavy with symbolism to avoid the censor, caught the assertive mood of the Polish public in the months leading up to the birth of Solidarity in the Gdansk shipyards. Lublin itself was renowned for its defiant spirit, home not only to the Catholic University, an institution barely tolerated by the Communist authorities, but also birthplace of Karol Wojtyla, who became Pope only two years earlier in 1978.

At the Lublin festival, new theatre forms were clearly being forged in response to the political climate and audiences were passionate to engage with the young independent companies that were raging against the system's destructive lies and propaganda in shows such as *More Than Just One Life* and *It is Not for Us to Fly to the Islands of Happiness*. As a public space for dissent and experimentation, theatre mattered. But despite the seriousness there were also jokes – our phrase book being one of them. Such gems as 'I didn't order steak, I ordered beef' provided an entire evening of bitter-sweet hilarity, as Theatre of the 8th Day improvised a script from it on food shortages and bread queues. (Their name exemplified a belief in man's right to aspire to the impossible: if God had had eight days to create the universe, he would have created the theatre in order that man could imagine all kinds of futures.)

Leaving the apartment of theatre director Leszek Madzik, we read a notice in Polish, *Wislewe Moslive*. We asked what it meant. 'Everything is possible,' he said. Our challenge to create LIFT assumed a new dimension and we returned with a sense of responsibility and urgency to communicate what was happening.

We travelled for three months around a burgeoning European festival circuit, visiting the big post-war players such as Avignon and Edinburgh (committed to building peace between nations through culture), along with the 'alternative' festivals that had sprung up in the years after the student movements of the late 60s. At Erlangen in Germany we saw the Brazilian company Grupo de Teatro Macunaíma's show two evenings running, and realised its South American sweep of sexy carnivalesque majesty could be a huge hit in London. Telling the story of Brazil's legendary folk hero Macunaíma, twenty-two performers playing

sixty parts conjured the Amazon jungle, rivers, whole cities and the clamour of street life in dizzying tableaux and rich action. Sitting in sunshine the next day by a magnolia tree, and knowing that festivals everywhere were vying for the show, we asked the show's director, Antunes Filho, if he would accept our invitation to come and play in London. Despite our lack of track record as theatre presenters, he gladly accepted our offer.

At the Festival of Fools in Amsterdam, derelict docksides, old liners, tugs and cargo boats became the setting for fifteen days of round-the-clock performance, including Hungary's Studio K, Poland's Theatre STU (Theatre of the 8th Day had been denied passports by the Polish government) and, from the UK's People Show, a peripatetic experience through interlinking warehouses, ending with a midnight feast around a campfire. We learnt that theatre could burst out of confined spaces across a whole landscape at any time and in any form. We had travelled to the Festival with a cohort from London's ICA, including John Ashford, Tim Albery and Sandy Nairne, and Jo Seelig. Whilst they stayed in a hotel on Herengracht, we were in a youth hostel around the corner – much to everyone's amusement. And we had bought our boat-train tickets with coupons from a Persil soap packet.

Returning to London we attempted to find sympathetic venues for the shows we had seen. David Gothard at Riverside Studios was already programming Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class* and was not impressed by our attempts to persuade him to programme lesser-known, younger theatre companies. A bid to house *Macunaíma* took us to see Thelma Holt at the Roundhouse and John Drummond at the Edinburgh Festival. Neither wanted to collaborate, although Drummond offered to take the Brazilians off our hands 'if they got too big for us to handle'.

Fundraising

We had selected ten visiting companies but with a budget of £120,000 to present them we needed to address fundraising very seriously. Our four Trustees (Gaie Houston, Tony Johnson, Joseph Benjamin and Denis Poll), recommended by a growing network of champions, had formally registered LIFT as a charity. They were magnanimous in their support. Houston gave hours of her time to help us plan the Festival's organisation, while Poll, an investor in communications technology, gave finance, as did Johnson from his yacht on the high seas. Benjamin, a property developer, provided us with

office space in a block of service flats undergoing refurbishments at the grand address of Buckingham Gate. On an old typewriter we wrote hundreds of letters explaining our plans and seeking funding, at one point even expanding rhetorically on the power of theatre to avoid world wars. We saw Peter Ustinov on the *Michael Parkinson Show* pitching for international co-operation and immediately asked him to be a patron. He agreed: 'I'll do it. But you'll have to push me.'

We ourselves were completely broke – and exhausted. For a year we had been on a treadmill of waitressing, cycling, travelling, more waitressing, fundraising and meetings – the Chinese Cultural Attaché one minute, the Director of the Old Vic the next. We enjoyed unstinting moral support from our parents, friends and families but we were burning out. 'I don't think Rose and I can keep it up much longer,' Lucy wrote in a letter one day. 'It makes a good story but a tiring life.' Walking down Petty France on 11 September 1980, after a particularly gruelling round of rebuttals, Rose declared it to be 'the worst day of the Festival'. We thought about packing it in.

We were clear, however, about the artists we wanted to invite from Poland, Peru, Brazil, the Netherlands, Japan, Malaysia, France, Germany and the UK. The Tricycle Theatre, the Half Moon, the ICA and Max Stafford-Clark ('But how can I trust your taste?') at the Royal Court had all agreed to present shows. Our excitement about the first LIFT programme kept us at it.

Money

'Badges will be sold at 30p each. We need to sell 1,243 to break even.'

Fi Godfrey Faussett, LIFT Volunteer

Despite the support we had received so far, raising money was not simple. Our plans were practical but we were seen as amateur. The budget didn't begin to break even and it was obvious we needed to move up a gear to gain credibility. Building public profile through the press seemed a possible route and a telephone call to Sue Arnold, who wrote the Upfront page in *The Observer* colour supplement, provided the breakthrough we needed. She was intrigued enough to invite us to lunch. The effect of the resulting article, published in September 1980, was astonishing. Buoyed up by Arnold's assertion that 'If the Festival is not a phenomenal success I shall eat an entire millinery collection

without demur', we wrote hundreds more letters and knocked on more doors, some of which finally began to open.

In December, as swathes of cuts to the arts were announced in the press, the Visiting Arts Unit, which had just been set up by the Foreign Office to serve the principle of 'reciprocity', awarded us their largest single grant of £5,000. Both the British Tourist Authority and the London Tourist Board made grants to us. Ken Livingstone's internationalist Greater London Council welcomed LIFT as an artistic addition to the city's vibrant and culturally diverse life, and its Arts and Entertainment Unit, under the leadership of Lord Birkett and the maverick Tony Banks, gave LIFT £10,000.

A letter from the Drama Director at the Arts Council, on the other hand, dated 31 March 1981, explained why that body would not fund LIFT. 'We cannot allocate subsidy for a festival whose programme is composed predominantly of appearances by foreign theatre companies,' it said. 'Of course such a festival can have a benefit to theatre in a broad sense: the Council, however, believes that the available subsidy produces a greater continuing benefit when given to companies resident in this country.'

While other funding bodies were beginning to participate, private sponsorship was thin on the ground. As late as March 1981 minutes of a LIFT meeting record 'The situation on sponsorship is depressing and frustrating – the more the artistic side of the Festival comes together . . . the less sponsorship we seem to find.' A newsletter to volunteers reported the challenges: 'Emelia Thorold is trying to get sponsorship in kind from various large food chains – bread, milk, cereal etc. – in order to provide the groups with food to make their own breakfast with. So far she has raised £25 from Sainsbury's.'

However, with a box office budgeted at a bold 40 per cent, we were able to tell our Trustees by April 1981 that 'the financial picture looks better'. In the event the budget of £120,000 balanced, with one third of the expenditure being covered by box office, one third by public grants and one third coming through private donations.

The Company

'A demonstration that unemployment can be put to good use.'

The Times, August 1981

An army of volunteers – forty in all, dedicated friends, family and fellow students

– took over different aspects of delivering the Festival (and are now running their own festivals, television companies, theatres, law firms, literary agencies, and advisory teams to the UN). A structure was emerging, based on our Coimbra festival experience, with people delegated to find and organise student accommodation, appoint group hosts and oversee the many after-show discussions and debates, to say nothing of the Festival Bulletin and the Festival Club. Simon Evans, a Durham graduate who had spent the summer seeing international work, joined us after spotting the Sue Arnold article. ‘Apart from the fact that Lucy, Simon and Rose are recognised as LIFT’s organisers,’ we reported to our stalwart Trustees, ‘LIFT evolves daily on a sound co-operative basis. Everybody working on the Festival recognises that they are solely responsible for their own area of activity and expected to work with the level of commitment that such a responsibility demands. This proves not only to be the most satisfactory way of working together, but also the easiest way of getting as many people as possible involved in running the Festival.’

The only professionals hired and paid to work on the 1981 Festival were the press agents, Cromwell Associates (Jacquie Richardson and Helen Anderson), and Jonathan Bartlett, a production manager who impressed us on our first meeting by carrying a briefcase. Indefatigable in his professionalism and flair for making the impossible possible, Jonathan remains LIFT Production Manager twenty-five years later.

The sense of being ‘professional’ was indeed strange. At times it was almost as if we were playing at offices, with an endless supply of clipboards in place of desks in an increasingly packed one-room office. A press photo of LIFT’s three organisers showed us gathered around an IBM golfball typewriter, of which we were obviously inordinately proud. We had one telephone – inconceivable in an age of email, mobiles and faxes. Getting 150 artists into London from South America, Malaysia, Eastern and Western Europe with one phone was a feat in itself, not to mention calls to London theatres to arrange production schedules and publicity. ‘We are terrified’, we wrote in our monthly update to the Trustees, ‘that there are people becoming infuriated at not being able to get through to us, or simply losing initial interest in the Festival because the phone is constantly engaged . . . Important journalists have given up trying to contact us to write about the Festival because they have failed to get through all day.’

Cromwell Associates hired a photographer, Chris Pearce of Panic Pictures, to take press shots of all the companies, and set up rounds of radio, press and television interviews to promote LIFT to the media. The Lyric Hammersmith

wrote to say they had received no advance bookings for *Macunaíma*: 'We're sure you have a trick up your sleeves, and if you haven't, you should have.'

On the day of Charles and Diana's wedding the streets were thronged with people making their way to Buckingham Palace – a stone's throw from our office. The LIFT team barely raised their heads from putting the finishing touches to box-office systems, brochures, contracts, carnets and freight arrangements. *LIFT OFF*, a daily bulletin which was to be commissioned, edited and printed every day of the two-week Festival, absorbed a team of editors, writers and cartoonists round the clock.

August 1981: LIFT-Off

A Festival Centre was given to us by Grand Metropolitan Hotels in a brilliant but unlikely location – the basement of the Piccadilly Hotel, at Piccadilly Circus. In July we held a press conference there, with Molly Daubeny heading the bill. As press and guests made for the drinks, we knew we had LIFT-off.

The Festival opened with three shows simultaneously on Monday 3 August 1981. The programme was eclectic: traditional dance dramas with a contemporary edge from Malaysia and Japan, impassioned political theatre from Poland, spectacular Brazilian music theatre, a one-man show from Peru enacting the devastation of an earthquake on a village, and a tender piece about gay relationships from Holland's Het Werkteater. Warwick colleague Ben Gibson and International Theatre Institute volunteer Debra Hauer's programme of talks at the ICA debated the role of the state and the aesthetics of theatre-making, whilst badges for Solidarity were sold in the foyer. When the elderly Count Raczynski, President of the Polish government in exile, arrived with his entourage and made his way to the front row of the ICA to watch Teatr Provisorium's actors perform on a stark set of military beds beneath a crowned eagle, a contentious symbol of Communist oppression, we realised our London audiences had a host of international connections of their own. Out on the streets, students Gub Neal and Jonathan Young's theatre programme took to the open spaces with the Natural Theatre of Bath, the Beach Buoys (including Neil Bartlett and Simon McBurney) and others in Covent Garden, Trafalgar Square and along the South Bank.

London audiences came out in force, curious to engage with new experiences and debates. A proportionally large number of UK artists attended, along with individuals from the Polish, Brazilian and French communities. On the

whole shows sold well. When *Macunaíma* opened at the Lyric on Wednesday 5 August there was a standing ovation, and as a rapturous audience moved out into the foyers they were assailed by flashing lights and TV crews clamouring for interviews. Critics' reviews, unanimous in their praise, were splashed across the papers, along with a cartoon in *The Listener* of the company drawn by the great cartoonist Feliks Topolski. LIFT had made the grade on the London scene. Though eating up a third of the Festival expenditure, this show was the box-office hit we had hoped for, contributing substantially to the balanced budget.

On a hot August afternoon you could fall into the Piccadilly Hotel's lush cool basement ballroom, eat sandwiches served by Grand Met waiters in black bow-ties, book tickets at the LIFT box office, buy a drink and listen to Lol Coxhill or Mike Westbrook playing, or watch Forkbeard Fantasy, at the LIFT Festival Club. As the Festival got under way, LIFT's artistic and social life took off. Partying late into the night, the Malaysian dancers Travolta-ed their way across the dance floor, accompanied by maverick theatre-maker Ken Campbell, who was trying to persuade them to stay to make a show with him in an abandoned quarry somewhere in the city.

A black cab lent by a friend, painted with the LIFT livery, delivered posters and bulletins around town until it was abandoned after overheating in traffic one day. And the Poles managed to bring the whole of Piccadilly Circus to a halt as they took to the wrong side of the road in their theatre truck. There was a spirit of disruption and trespass in the best sense of the words, and we caught a glimpse of a London ready to be reinvented.

Heartened by the impact of international theatre on London, we were to be surprised in some instances by the impact of London and its theatre community on our visitors. Teresa Whitfield, Group Host for Poland's Teatr Provisorium, wrote in the daily bulletin, *LIFT OFF*: 'It has been difficult for the Poles to view London with anything except blank amazement. For us, they say, it is like a Promised Land, a Welfare State. Recession? What is recession? Look at those people in the audience – I never saw such a well-fed recession.' To hear ardent supporters of Solidarity praising *The Daily Telegraph*, Ronald Reagan and Mrs Thatcher highlighted the gulf between East and West and challenged our political complacency. 'The Iron Curtain cuts across Europe as a distorting mirror,' Whitfield continued; 'the Poles may see a shining image of a Promised Land in England, but we, in the blackness that is ignorance of life in the Eastern Block, can only make romantic assumptions, seeing nothing.' Like all of us, she was grasping the opportunity LIFT afforded to engage with the

world through theatre – a blueprint for a vision of LIFT that would develop in subsequent Festivals.

Outside in the wider world the press were taking note, ranging from the *Evening Standard's* Charles Spencer with his cautious, almost fearful 'LIFT-off for the foreign invaders' to *The Times's* celebratory 'End of foreign theatre famine'. *The Times Educational Supplement* was stern: 'For all its grand promises, the Festival must set [its] sights higher for next year if LIFT is to be worthy of its name – let alone survive.' Fortunately, Sheridan Morley caught the overall mood, writing on LIFT in the *International Herald Tribune*: 'Miracles do still happen. London has at last again been given a window on the dramatic world that lies beyond these shores.'

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