



Mark Ball

LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre)
<http://www.liftfestival.com>

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Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

The LIFT festival that has brought innovations to London
What is its next challenge?

ロンドンを革新したLIFT
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Launched originally in 1980 as an international student theatre festival in London, the following year it was officially founded under the name LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) as the first international theatre festival in the United Kingdom. Held biennially since then, LIFT continued to bring innovation to the London performing arts scene with programs of cutting edge and experimental performing arts from around the world (sixty countries by 2001) and moves like using non-theatre venues for performances. After becoming a year-round festival for a while, but when Mark Ball became the festival's artistic director 2009 it returned to biennial holdings from the following year. In this interview we speak with Ball about the festival's objectives until now and the new directions it is pursuing, such as projects using digital platforms.

Interviewer: Kyoko Iwaki, journalist

The London International Festival of Theatre, commonly known by its acronym LIFT, was founded in 1981 by two women, Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal. What kind of vision did they have when they started this theatre festival?

When Rose and Lucy started LIFT in 1981 they had a very clear vision. While studying at University of Warwick, they had attended a student theatre festival in Portugal and been very much inspired by it. When they left the University and came to London, they started a student theatre festival in 1980. The following year, 1981, they started LIFT as the first theatre biennial festival in the UK.

When they came to London, they saw a tension between it being an incredibly international city with diversity as its engine and the fact that you have all sorts of communities, cheek by jowl. You have a city where 307 languages are spoken, And yet in 1981, when Rose and Lucy looked around the theatre scene they saw that it was rather inward looking with very little international influence. And when international works did come into London, it tended to be very classical work; Bolshoi, Mariinsky, Paris Opera Ballet, big classical companies. And so that is why Rose and Lucy smartly identified that there was an opportunity to bring work in which spoke to Londoners, that is the incredible diverse communities of London, and which somehow represented that diversity back to London. They said that the mission of LIFT should be to bring the world to London, and show London to the world. And that vision continues today.

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The artists invited to perform at LIFT in the 1980s was full of big names like The Wooster Group, Robert Lepage, Anatoli Vasilyev, Needcompany and more. Did these big international artists have an influence on the British theatre world?

Of course they had an influence, and that was also what Rose and Lucy wanted to see, there was a strong motivation to influence British theatre makers and say that there are other theatre practices; to open British theatre making to new influences. Rose and Lucy told me a story when they went to the Arts Council in 1981, introducing international festivals, there was a response from the Arts Council, not in these exact words, but they basically said “but we’ve got the best theatre in the world. What have we got to learn from anybody else?” So, they wouldn’t give money to a festival featuring mainly foreign theatre. Rose and Lucy were amazed. And I think that Rose and Lucy were determined to refute that argument and prove that there is incredible theatre culture all over the world. And you could see that theatre makers from the 80s and 90s were influenced by that theatre outlet. And particularly in the area of innovation, LIFT certainly from the 1980s and early 1990s influenced a new generation of theatre makers.

That would include artists like Tim Etchelles and his Forced Theatre (founded 1984) and Lloyd Newson’s DV8 (founded 1984), wouldn’t it? Are there any other aspects of the festival’s vision that lives on today?

LIFT was pretty much a pioneer of site-specific theatre. Theatre that took place not in traditional venues, but in bound spaces, in old railway stations, in derelict hotels, theatre that led you to discover the city. Now, you know, every warehouse in London, every old railway arch deserted seemed to have a site-specific theatre show in it. It’s become the zeitgeist. But LIFT was really the first people to introduce those kind of works. One that really cemented the trend was “The St Pancras Project” directed by Deborah Warner. There were two reasons why Rose and Lucy wanted gather audiences at venues outside of the theater. One was to expand the concept of theater, and the second was to attract audience from London’s diverse communities. In any event, they wanted to overturn the idea that theatre equals Shakespeare and sitting for three hours. And we continue with the innovation now, particularly with those theatre makers who try to integrate new technologies into their works. Using technology platforms, social media platform, as a new place for the distribution of their work.

Also, they were supportive of extraordinary artists who were working in a difficult situation in Palestine, in parts of Africa, in parts of India, in parts of South Asia. And I was very respectable of that humility and that curiosity. They had an intense curiosity about the world. The desire to always go to that one places that other promoters wouldn’t to find an extraordinary piece of work. And the persistence to do that, I think I really learnt from that. So there is an absolute commitment to internationalism, absolute commitment to London, an absolute commitment to innovation. Starting with Rose and Lucy, and I still wave that flag.

When we look at some of the artists that have been invited to perform in LIFT, like Elevator Repair Service of the U.S., Rimini Protokoll from Germany, Belarus Free Theatre, Romania’s Gianina Cărbunariu, Lebanon’s Lucien Bourjeily and others, unlike festivals of continental Europe that tend to program mainly artists from the own

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country and former colonies, LIFT truly seems to me to invite artists from all over the world. Would you tell us about your policies in programming?

I see a lot of works in different countries, but to invite something to LIFT, I think that the work has to somehow speak to the London audience's. Whenever I see any work, I see that work from that vantage point. I have huge respect for my European festival colleagues, but when you see the works that are produced there, it's almost like you don't know which city you are in. You could see the same work in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Brussels, Paris and there is very little sense of connection to the city. So what I really look forward to when I am talking to artists, is getting their curiosity and excitement for London as a place. We are the London International Festival of Theatre, and so the London element is quite important. That is one of the criteria. And, also there is the sense of innovation. There is something new and interesting; is this a new way of telling a story; and perhaps to trying to speak out those things that other people haven't. Letting the light shine into the darker political world. And I think that LIFT has the responsibility to do that.

You took over as artistic director of LIFT in 2009, and since then you've invited many artists from Middle Eastern Arabic countries. Why did you specifically focus on artists in these regions?

There are two clear reasons. One is that in the immediate aftermath of what is termed as the Arab Spring, what we saw was the collapse of the traditional cultural infrastructure in places like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, which all had established schools of dramatic arts and national theatre, but they were very conservative. And, in many ways very stifling of innovation. And when what happens when that infrastructure collapse, is that there was suddenly exposure of independent artists, who couldn't make work in these organizations because those organizations no longer existed. They had to make work out on the streets, as part of cooperatives. And I thought that there was suddenly an intense sense of excitement that was being generated by this new generation of theatre makers who did things differently; so that was the first reason I wanted to invite them to London.

The second reason was that I felt a very strong, very important sense of obligation to tackle Islamophobia. Especially in the aftermath of the 7.7 bombings in London, there was a growing sense of distrust, growing sense of disbelief between the Middle Eastern communities, the Muslim communities and everybody else in the capital. Theatre can become a fantastic bridge between communities. It develops many different ways to communicate how different we are and we could understand that there are commonalities of realities through theatre. So one of the things that we did was *Romeo and Juliet in Bagdad*. In 2012, I invited a new company within Bagdad, which has been totally crippled and obliterated, to look at new ways of looking at the *Romeo and Juliet* as a story between the Shia and the Sunni community in Iraq. But, it's the same story you know, between the Montagues and Capulets, over and over again. That story was able to tell you what was going on in Bagdad at that certain time. I felt that there was an opportunity to fill in the bridge between the Middle Eastern artists and artists in London. And challenge some of the phobia, around these cultural communities.

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I can see that you have a strong desire to break down the various political, social and ethnic phobias that haunt London.

I know that theatre wouldn't change the world instantly. Our task is to reflect, and reflect collectively on theatre, to show something in a different way, to show that there may be somebody that looks very different from you, that may come from a very different background, but there are commonalities of experiences, who loves, hates, hopes and dreams in the way that you do. That just plants a small seed of provocation in someone else's head, so that they could look at the world in a slightly different way; so that they could reflect on issues in a different way. Then, the theatre has done some job. It's just a tiny pebble, dropped into a lake. In and of itself, of course, it is not going to create world peace. But, it's an important tool to enable us to reflect and think about the people that we live and exist in society that we create.

Did you personally have that kind of experience, that a seed was planted inside you?

Absolutely, I had a profound experience. When I was fourteen. I have to confess that I didn't go to theatre at all until then. I didn't read much novels, plays, because I grew up in a family of scientists, actually. And then I was taken to Stratford, age 14, to see the Royal Shakespeare Company. I was really sceptical that it was going to be interesting. I knew that it was going to be extremely boring. People were talking in a language that I didn't understand, and I thought that it wasn't for me. But, I was fortunate enough to see what later became a landmark performance of RSC, which was Anthony Sher playing Richard III. Even now when I think about it, it makes me think the hair stand on the back of my neck. I suddenly became aware of, through really the singularity of his performance, I came aware of the power of theatre that is capable of reflecting the human complexity. It was the naiveté and the villainous nature that Richard III captured in a very political production. It was such a powerful and emotionally resonant piece of work, it completely blew my mind. I suddenly noticed, threw this medium, which was telling me about human behaviour that I didn't even know that it existed. Literally a light bulb moment. And from that point onwards, I became more aware of theatre and became more and more involved in it. In that one lazy afternoon in 1982, at the RSC was the moment for me. And what was lucky for me was that before coming to LIFT, I worked at the RSC and I was fortunate enough to work with Anthony Sher. I of course told him the story. He was very pleased.

Even though you had that life-changing experience from theatre, at University of Liverpool you majored in international politics. Why was that?

I went on to study drama but not theatre because that would have upset my parents completely. Actually, I went to study politics in Liverpool. I think that stayed with me, and I was always interested in assessing the world. I mean, yes, theatre entertains and tells stories and has the ability to take you out of the ordinary. But I think that theatre also has the ability to be political and say provocative things about the world. Also, because my degree was in international politics, I became interested in the world.

After graduating from university in 1989, instead of going to work in either theatre or politics, you became a salesman of double-pane windows in Liverpool.

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Yes, because when I graduated I couldn't get any job in the arts. Liverpool in 1989 was a city with massive unemployment. And I remember that I couldn't get any jobs, so the only job that I could get was selling double-glazing, selling windows, which I did for 8 months. It was not a nice job. But what it taught me and stayed with me ever since is that importance of connecting to people. Even though I was selling these unattractive products, I had to have the confidence to knock on their door and talk to them. And that is something that stayed with me.

Then I moved to Birmingham where my parents were living, so I was able to stay with them and live very cheaply, and then I got my first proper job as an administrator for a theatre company that is still on-going, called Geese. And it is a very specific theatre company that only works in prisons. That was quite fascinating for me because it kind of filled in my political interests, because the work was about engaging with people in prison. It was devised theatre, made with the inmates and totally devoted to having the inmates look at their own behaviour. Also, as well as being an administrator, I was then offered to do workshops in prisons. It gave me a chance to open my eyes towards those things you would never have noticed, such as the disproportionate number of people with mental problems in prisons, and disproportionate number of black and Asian people in prisons. Then when I finished working for them, I came here to the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) to work in 1992 (under the directors Lois Weaver and James Neale-Kennerley of the LGBT company Gay Sweatshop.

They are known as the curators of the 1993 "American Political Performance" season at ICA that is still talked about today for its very experimental performance art. And they introduced to the UK artists such as Tim Miller, Holly Hughes and Kate Bornstein who were leaders of the American performance art scene in the 1980s.

It was very avant-garde and it was very different from what I knew as theatre. I knew Shakespeare, Chekhov, I knew community theatre, but there was something different when I came here. Working with these very avant-garde theatre workers who weren't using narratives, who weren't using traditional forms, whose works often came from visual art; and I totally loved it. I loved its conceptual nature; I loved its ambiguity. And, that got me more interested in more experimental work.

After leaving ICA, you worked freelance, returned home and in 1996 you started Birmingham's first experimental performance art festival, "Fierce!" Now this festival is known as one of the UK's leading experimental arts festivals, but at the time it must have required a lot of courage and determination to start such a festival in Birmingham.

Birmingham was this very young community. It has more 16 to 24 year olds than any of other European cities. So, when I started working in ICA, I noticed that there is a lack of work for that group of people. Birmingham was full of artistic institutions but it tended to be very grassroots community organizations, or very huge organizations such as City of Birmingham Orchestra, Birmingham Royal Ballet. There was a gap of work to attract young people, and I thought that I should do that kind of work that I'd met in ICA here in Birmingham. And that was really the impetus to build and develop Fierce! It started very modestly. My very first festival was in 1998. It was around 12 to 14 shows which attracted 2,000 people, but 10 years later it was 40 shows and

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100,000 people.

Getting funding for the festival must have been very difficult.

Yes, it was! But, I am very stubborn and I am getting more stubborn recently (laughs). When I was meeting people from Arts Council and City Council, they were constantly saying “No” to me. And I just didn’t give in. I think I made 14 applications [for grants], and they were all turned down. I had an innate sense of belief that this was a good thing, and eventually, since I annoyed them enough, I got a small amount of money for the first festival. I got £5,800. But, I was able to use that money to build connections with other organizations to use some of their money, and to build a budget, which in total came up around £25,000. And I could show that there was a potential with that. It was a very successful first festival. People came. I could show them that there is a demand, then it became easier to ask for money.

Talking about money, when you were appointed as Artistic Director of LIFT, it was directly after the Lehman Shock, and all the arts organizations were reducing their budget. And also the annual budget of LIFT was decreased to half the amount.

Yes, just two months before my appointment it was announced that the budget was halved to £600,000. Now our budget has recovered to £1.4 million, so we still don’t have the same amount of money as LIFT used to have in 2007. When I was appointed as the artistic director, many of the traditional partnerships had drifted away. I spent a long time rebuilding those, and I also had to take very tough decisions in reducing the size of the organization. We went from an organization of 14 people, and within 9 months, we went down to 4 people. Now its10. So we made very hard decisions on the overheads so that we could spend every penny that we had on the arts, and so that we could show our work. Building those partnerships, investing on art and keeping the overhead low, I think that really helped to get the organization back on track to be more ambitious.

After you were hired by the LIFT, you teamed up with the world’s third largest advertising agency, Saatchi and Saatchi to pursue a branding campaign for the festival. What was the reason for that?

I was very alarmed to learn that LIFT didn’t know who the audience was. There was a long standing loyal audience connected to the LIFT but that was all that they knew. So, when I asked who the audience of the LIFT was, they would be quite vague about it. They are young 16 to 30 year olds in London, and they are from diverse London communities. But, then we had this full title of London International Festival of Theatre, sounded quite traditional and boring. And I felt that we needed to rebrand. And by sheer luck, we were introduced to Saatchi & Saatchi through one of our board members. And brilliantly, and I am hugely indebted to Saatchi & Saatchi for this, but they did a brilliant piece of work so that we could know who our audience was and really sharpen the brand. They did a lot of researching and they asked us “how big do you think our audience is in London?” and we said “50,000?” and they went away and did a lot of analysis about the kind of people who would be coming to our shows and they came back and said, we have good news and bad news for you. The good news is that your audience base in London is 700,000, and the bad news is that they don’t

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like theatre. And what they meant by this is that they had a certain perception when they heard the word “theatre.” That theatre is Shakespeare, dull and passive, and this was the audience who grew up in the Internet technology and wanted interaction that likes of art forms of next big things. So actually Saatchi and Saatchi is an incredibly creative organization.

In fact, LIFT is now using these digital media like websites in recent years not only to get the word out but you are using the technology to create a digital platform. Can you tell us a bit about these efforts?

Yes. In 2014, we created a performance titled “Longitude” that directly used a digital platform. It took place live simultaneously in Lagos (Nigeria), Barcelona (Spain) and in London, all of which are close to the Greenwich Dateline. It used Google Hangouts as the infrastructure. They ultimately watched plays that were episodic and were shown every week for three weeks. It went well I think. It was about selling the future, fresh-water smuggling, it was about precious water becoming suddenly a commodity. And it really showed the potential of the platform to make things work. Last week we just launched a project that will be down in 2018 and will be using Google Hangouts with artists in Palestine. Those artists can’t travel because they can’t leave their districts, so the Internet is their only means to communicate.

LIFT has also had a kind of guerrilla project where the venue was announced on an SNS just before the performance, hasn’t it?

It was a performance we showed in 2012, which was called *One Extraordinary Day*, by an American performance artist called Elizabeth Streb. There were two things that made this project difficult. First is that Elizabeth wanted to invite 30 dancers from New York and do quite demanding, skillful, acrobatic and challenging work. She wanted to put those performers in the spokes of the London Eye, City Hall, jumping off the London Bridge, plunging off the National Theatre, so that was a challenge. And the second thing that was challenging was that we were given strict instructions by the police that we couldn’t announce any of those performances in advance of half an hour before they started. In the context of 2012 in the Olympics, there were all concerns about terrorism. So gathering a large amount of people in public spaces would potentially be an obvious terrorist target and there was a public safety concern. We had to use social media to diffuse the media used. And, also we were invited to talk to BBC so we could use social media and television to get the word out. We still got thousands of people just by putting something on Twitter half an hour before. But, the first bit of the performance was 7 o’clock in the morning, with a number of dancers jumping of the London Bridge. The River Thames, which has massive tidal movement, so it was a huge challenge.

By the way, that festival (2012) drew an audience of 43,000, the largest in LIFT history.

The program for the 2016 LIFT festival was announced in February. Would you tell us about the theme for the programming this time?

From the end of 2014, Europe has clearly been exposed to the worst refugee crisis

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since World War II. This is something that can't be ignored in London either. So for our program there is quite a lot of artworks that deal with community and what is community that looks at the migration crisis, and we will be collaborating with the Royal Court, putting together a mini-program titled "On the Move" featuring installations, film works and performance works by artists from Germany, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Syria and the UK. At the Royal Court, we will be inviting a German choreographer called Constanza Macharas, called *Open for Editing*, inviting 35 kids to talk about various things like the Roma people known for their history of migration.

One large-scale work directed by the really iconic Polish director called Krystow Warlikowki, is a new interpretation of *Phaedra(s)* with Isabelle Huppert at the Barbican Theatre. And then in the Barbican studio theatre, almost the last two weeks of the festival, Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker will be coming in. I saw them in Yokohama two years ago and it was the most visceral experience. It is an intense onslaught of a particular slice of Japanese youth culture. Visually very exciting, you will never see those kind of work created in the UK. And it's just tremendously fun.

So we will have 21 different performances, including a lot of big talks; for instance, Peter Brook is going to come talk about *Midsummer Night's Dream*, The Wooster Group is going to come talk about their performance of the Camera.

For me, part of the job of being a Festival Director, is that you have to be a futurologist. I hope that the audience will appreciate my vision of the future.