

# Towards a New Enlightenment - A Vision for British Theatre

written by Mick Gordon



In the eighteenth century Denis Diderot said, if you forbid me to speak on religion and government, I have nothing to say. It is time to say this again and to say it loudly. Look at our country. Look at what happened to Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti because she wrote a play, look at what our government are trying to do to Hizb ut Tahrir, look at what four lads from Leeds and Aylesbury thought it acceptable to do to London. Our society needs alternative thinking and it needs it now. We need to ask ourselves frightening questions about our own beliefs and behaviour, we need to listen to international perspectives on our not-so-little England and we need to be inspired by shared human values. It is time for the British Theatre to once again champion free speech, to become a Voltaire's kitchen where the true states of our nation can be debated and where difficult personal questions can be interrogated. It is time for the British Theatre to lead a New Enlightenment.

Having spent seven extraordinary years at the heart of British Theatre, I wanted to question the relevance of theatre to contemporary societies. I searched for different points of view. I left the National Theatre and travelled to South-East Asia, to Uzbekistan. For five months I directed at the only independent theatre company in a country bled dry by an avaricious oligarchy. The Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent knows exactly why their theatre matters. Only through imaginative complicity with their oppressed audiences can they share ideas freely.

In Kampala I saw the stagnating attempt of the Ugandan National Theatre to emulate its ex-colonial counterpart. Then I was introduced to the Endere Troupe, a travelling company attempting to educate a sick population in the possibilities of safe sex and the unsettling notion of equal rights for women. The Endere Troupe makes theatre to save lives and they make theatre for young people. For they know that if they do not connect with the young then hope of change is gone.

I went to Vilnius to direct the Oskaris Kurshonovas Company. He and his group inspire the new Lithuania with a repertoire of re-written classics. The group believe that in times of change profound insights must be shared. And I witnessed the profundity of stories, images and predicaments from Aeschylus to Ibsen wonderfully and unapologetically re-written and rejuvenated by this respectfully iconoclastic company.

Inspired by these experiences I returned to the UK to create a body of work reflecting and challenging the fundamental preoccupations of my own sophisticated society. My company, On Theatre, works with leading experts like neurologist Dr. Paul Broks and philosopher A.C. Grayling to explore ideas through theatre. *On Ego*, playing at Soho Theatre, asks how the brain creates a sense of self. Later this year, *On Religion* will examine how religious belief comes into conflict with the secular project.

In a small way, On Theatre represents my vision and hope for British Theatre. For the British Theatre, with its powerful institutions, its dynamic, independent companies, its challenging, inquiring minds is in a unique position to lead a New Enlightenment. Theatre has a social duty to create work which reflects and challenges the fundamental preoccupations of our society. And if we ask ourselves honest questions, debate our ideas freely, believe in the possibility of change and share profound insights then we will indeed inspire the new kinds of enlightened thinking that our country so desperately needs. Alternative thinking will not begin with the establishment, it will begin with artists and intellectuals. And the British Theatre is the environment where alternative thinking can and must start.