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London Stage and the Nineteenth-Century World IV
New College, Oxford, 2022
Barbara Bessac

**Tales of Two Cities.
Staging the International Exhibitions in the Theatres
of London and Paris
1851-1867**

*Each industry, exhibiting its trophies
In this bazaar of the general progress
Seems to have taken a fairy wand
To enrich the Crystal Palace
Glory, glory to the old England
Who, abandoning all rivalry,
Offers hospitality
To all the inventors it used to fear.
To the whole world, if its protective hand
Opens a shelter under its vast portal,
It is the sign that the war struggles
Are now replaced by industrial contests.*

These lines could have been pronounced during the opening of the Great Exhibition of 1851, in London, under the glass roof of the Crystal Palace. But they are actually part of a musical number performed in a theatre in Paris, three weeks after the Exhibition opened on the other side of the Channel. The performance, entitled *Le Palais de Cristal*, quite successful at the time in the French capital, invites us to dive into this *mise en abîme*: exhibitions, performances themselves, were transposed in other performances, on the stages of theatres. My paper will focus on the first four International Exhibitions, bouncing back and forth across the Channel: London in 1851, Paris in 1855, London in 1862 and finally Paris in 1867. My analysis focuses the entanglement of those events with the performing arts, and especially how playwrighting seized them and reconstituted them on stage.

Reading international Exhibitions through the lens of theatre seems to be an easy parallel: sharing the same lexical field – audiences, staging, or nowadays, scenography – they go hand in hand by essence. An exhibition is a performance, as it is a process consisting of dramatising artefacts in order to convey systems of signs and representations built around

them. But the presence of the arts of the theatre in the exhibitions goes further than this simple analogy.

First aspect of the presence of theatre in Exhibitions: those events borrowed their architecture from theatre: their sets were prefabricated, adaptable and could be dismantled and built again. They were similar to theatrical sets in their method, their use and even their aspect – they were conceived to enable the audience to see more and to see in the best way possible. They materialised abstract concepts: pacific competition, human progress and harmony between nations. Some of them, like the Palace of 1867, were directly inspired from theatrical architecture, offering a panoptic vision of as many exhibitors as possible to visitors walking around the circular galleries.

Second aspect of the relationship between theatre and exhibitions: performing acts were omnipresent during the exhibitions. From the opening ceremonies to the closing ceremonies, staged as dazzling spectacles, music was constantly played in the galleries and the spectacular aspect of exhibitions was also visible in the way artefacts are displayed, and particularly how they are put into motion. Automated animal figures were performing in front of the visitors. A ‘Process’s Court’, at the 1862 Exhibition in London, invited visitors to watch how artefacts were made or how machines were used: printers, lithography, looming, presses, or even sculpting machines were activated in front of audiences.

Third aspect: the world of theatre was also present in the exhibitions through the theatrical material remains of performances put on display: costumes, accessories, scenery innovations, and model theatres.

We can complete this overview with the fourth and most obvious example of the presence of theatre in Exhibition. Built inside the Paris Exhibition of 1867, the Théâtre-International could have been the best example of the entanglement of performing arts and international exhibitions. It could also have been the realisation of the “universal exhibition of Shakespeare” as Théophile Gautier dreamt it in 1851¹. Its architecture was meant to synthesise the main decorative trends of European theatre buildings. Nevertheless, the completed project was a disappointment: the performances programmed were not as international as it could have been expected – it served more the celebration of French drama and colonialism. It also had the drawback of making spectators pay twice to see a play: once

¹ « À Shakspeare, on entremèlerait Marlowe, Otway, Goethe, Schiller, Calderon, Zacharias Werner, Carl Immermann, et l'on pourrait attendre sans trop d'ennui qu'une bonne pièce moderne se présentât. Puisque nous sommes en train de rêver, ajoutons que Delacroix et les premiers artistes de l'époque dessineraient les costumes et feraient les maquettes des décorations ; car de semblables drames veulent être dignement encadrés. »
Théophile GAUTIER, « Revue dramatique », *Le Moniteur universel*, 21/05/1851, p.1.

to enter the exhibition park, and a second time to enter the theatre itself. It thus excluded local and modest audiences.

In fact, the main beneficiaries of the massive crowds drawn by the Exhibitions were the commercial theatres already implanted in the capitals. Such events were the opportunity to enjoy sold-out seasons. The luckiest companies even performed for the highest levels of power. In 1855, in Paris, Napoleon III and the empress Eugénie welcome Victoria and Albert – after visiting the Exhibition, a performance was organised in the imperial palace by the company of the Théâtre du Gymnase. But instead of having the theatres travelling to them, the more common visitors usually travelled to the theatres in town. The effects of the exhibition on the attendance of the theatres are remarkable. For Paris, precious documents enable us to have precise statistics to shed light on this trend. The Exhibition report, written under the direction of Prince Napoléon, cousin of the Emperor, gives exact numbers from which I was able to determine the following percentages: the exhibition of 1855 led to an increase of 48% of attendance in the duration of the Exhibition². Nevertheless, in the year 1856, the attendance goes back to a similar rhythm as before the exhibition: the effects were only short term. For 1867, I obtained numbers in a study published by Georges Gérault in 1901 on the economic results of the Exhibitions³. The incomes of Parisian theatres increased of 23% between 1866 and 1867 – but similarly, the increase did not last and after the Exhibition, the income went back to its state before the exhibition, if not lower⁴.

Such precise numbers are much harder to find for London's Exhibitions. But some other sources indicate a massive influx of new audiences in the theatres of the city during the Exhibitions of 1851 and 1862: Her Majesty's theatre had to add extra nights three times a week to welcome the new spectators⁵. The guides published for the visitors also always suggested visiting the theatres of the host city as much as its Exhibition park.

² En 1855, en comparant les mois d'ouverture avec ceux de l'année précédente, on note une nette augmentation de la fréquentation : 28,80% en juin, 53,95% en juillet, 63,47% en août, 53,85% en septembre et 41,8% en octobre.

³ L'ouvrage publié en 1901 par le docteur en droit et avocat Georges Gérault, intitulé *Les Expositions universelles envisagées au point de vue de leurs résultats économiques*,

⁴ Les recettes des principaux théâtres pour l'année 1867 : 21983867 francs contre 16962502 en 1866 et 13361020 en 1868, Georges GÉRAULT, *Les Expositions universelles envisagées au point de vue de leurs résultats économiques*, 1901, p.114.

⁵ « to accommodate the great influx of visitors at this great epoch, a series of grand extra nights in addition to the usual subscription nights will be given for a short period, on Mondays Wednesdays and Fridays. *Globe*, 24/05/1851, p.2

Between 1851 and 1867, the number of theatres in Paris and London also grew tremendously: almost doubling in Paris and more than doubling in London⁶ – hence the competition between theatres escalated. As a consequence, even if the theatres benefited from the influx of new audiences from outside the city and abroad, they also had to share those benefits with new institutions and redouble their efforts to get a full house.

We could have expected the exhibitions to be an opportunity for theatres to try new plays, more diverse and adapted to a cosmopolitan audience, but it shows that the same successful plays were played repeatedly to guarantee a regular income.

Nevertheless, we can nuance this lack of inventiveness caused by the Exhibitions. Those events did stimulate drama production by providing new subjects: the Exhibitions themselves, represented on stage. Some playwrights, like Clairville, as shown in this picture, adopted the theme of the exhibition in numerous of their plays – such as *Le Palais de Cristal*, that I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation.

I compiled numerous performances in which the plots are built around the topic of international Exhibitions. They are mostly mixing musical acts and comedies, and rather short, but accompanied with numerous set designs. Interestingly, some playwrights appear on several performances, Clairville in Paris, but also William Brough in London – writers showing a recurring interest in the topic. Those performances also share a lot of common themes and storylines. They often tell the story of craftspeople and inventors hoping for success, travelling to showcase their creations, like in *Le Palais de Cristal*. They have to face the ups and downs of such a thrilling experience: the struggles of customs in Dover, the difficult logistics of transporting their artefacts, the language barrier but also the bedazzlement of discovering the inside of exhibition palaces, filled with the cacophony of machines and cosmopolitan visitors. Another recurrent plot: the accommodation, and how expensive the capitals become during Exhibitions. *Apartments, Visitors of the Exhibition May be Accomodated*, performed at the Princess's Theatre during the 1851 Exhibition, tells the story of Londoners making profits by renting their house to foreign visitors of the Exhibition – but who end up having their privacy invaded and struggle to get rid of the lodgers. The same plot is seen four years later in *Paris trop petit* (“Paris too small”) and *Furnished apartments*, a French play plagiarising *Apartments*. The same storyline is again seen in *A Shilling Day at the Great Exhibition* in 1862, and *The French Exhibition or the Noodles in Paris* in 1867. The theme of

⁶ une augmentation d'un coefficient de 1,7 pour Paris et 2,2 pour Londres. Chiffres obtenus à partir du tableau de données de Christophe Charle dans *Théâtres en capitales*, op.cit., p.35.

the invaded house is actually quite interesting: if international Exhibitions recreate the world inside a city, those plays transfer the world-city between the walls of the domestic space, creating a world-house, where every character represents a country getting comfortable in the house of the local host, who's feeling seriously intruded on.

This quote from *Apartments* gives a clear example of the tone of those plays. A Londoner, Mr Tippity, hosts intrusive foreign visitors. As he is trying to sleep, the American visitor keeps talking to him:

AME. What's your candid opinion of the Exhibition ?

TIP. Don't like it, good night.

AME. You'll excuse me, but I should like to discuss that topic with you, don't you think it calculated to improve the good feeling between different nations.

TIP. Certainly not, if one nation won't let another nation go to sleep, how can it? good night.

Most of those performances are relatively successful, but the formula ends up losing steam: in 1867, two performances by Clairville reveal themselves to be bitter failures, *Paris Tohu Bohu* or *L'Exposition en 1967*, a science-fictional play projecting what the exhibition could be one hundred years later, in the 20th century.

Some other performances are also conceived to show the host city in its best light, like the Exhibitions themselves were trying to. *Paris*, a performance by Paul Meurice in 1855, transports the audience from the French Exhibition (first set) to the old Paris, through different key periods of the city's history - with very ambitious stagecraft, about 1600 costumes were made for the play.

The cities, constantly evolving, are therefore pictured on stage as everchanging. Those performances also give new ways of perceiving the cities, notably through their architectural transformations. The Exhibitions parks are represented, sometimes in detail. In *Les Voyageurs pour l'Exposition*, one of the final sets is the Théâtre-international built for the Exhibition – interesting *mise en abime* of a theatre inside the theatrical display of an exhibition, both represented on the stage of an actual theatre.

Some performances, such as *Paris trop petit* in 1855, or *A Shilling Day at the Great Exhibition* in 1862, were performed in the city where the Exhibition was taking place. But some others were performed on the other side of the Channel, like *Le Palais de Cristal* in 1851, performed in Paris whilst the Exhibition was open in London. It gave an opportunity for

audiences who could not travel to the actual Exhibitions to experience them anyway – those performances therefore created imaginary travelling.

The image shown behind me, showing the Crystal Palace as a backcloth, is actually part of a much bigger set design that we are now going to observe, - what's taking me to the last aspect of my presentation of those performances: motion.

This set design, painted with watercolour, and drawn with pen and ink, is a draft for a panorama supporting a play by Clairville entitled *Une Semaine à Londres* (“A week in London”), performed at the Théâtre du Vaudeville in 1853. It was miraculously saved by the first archivist of the Bibliothèque-musée de l’Opéra in the 1870s, who collected documents from commercial theatres in Paris when their directors changed. The actual panorama was probably very large, considering that the width of the paper here was the width of the stage of the Théâtre du Vaudeville. It was unrolled from bottom to top, revealing landscapes from Paris to London.

Interestingly, this performance was created by Clairville before the Great Exhibition, in 1849, and it was remade three times after that, in 1850, 1853 and 1862. Each time, the scenery was updated to show actual depictions of London and Paris, especially the ephemeral architecture of the Exhibitions. Therefore, as the first two versions of *Une semaine à Londres* depicted a train journey between the two capitals, the London docks and a dinner in Greenwich, in the 1853 version, the Crystal Palace was added, and in the 1862 version, the automatons of South Kensington and the US military ship, the Merrimac. Those performances are thus evolving through times, but they are also in movement during the time of the performance.

Looking closely at the detail of the panorama design, we can see that the different tableaux of the scenery are not isolated from each other, the landscapes are actually progressively changing, through countryside villages, clouds and fogs, giving to the spectators the impression of being themselves inside a train going from London to Paris. The 1853 version was for that matter subtitled “*le train des plaisirs*” (“train of pleasures”), and the 1862 version “*Voyage d’agrément et de luxe*” (“leisure and luxury trip”) or “*Trajet en trois heures et onze stations*” (“a three-hour trip with eleven stops”). We can speculate that instead of moving from one tableau to another, the panorama was unrolled progressively, at the same speed, throughout the whole performance. However, I could not verify this assumption in contemporary sources.

The 1853 version of *La Semaine à Londres* is also important as it brought more of London theatres in Paris theatres - in a very concrete way. Unlike the first version, it included British

pantomime, performed by artists from London – M. Flexmore and Mlle Auriol, a dancer originally French but based in London. The Parisian spectators attended several dancing acts like *Dancing Scotchman* or *Pop goes the weasel*, teleporting them in the world of London performances. A journalist remarks after the premiere that *La semaine à Londres* is an excellent way for the Parisian audience to discover that “there is more to England than Covent Garden and Drury Lane”.

Such performances somehow linked Paris and London through their theatres and created an international stage, both educational and entertaining. This ideal was precisely what motivated the creation of an international theatre at the Exhibition of 1867. The project was tried again in 1878, with a theatre welcoming foreign companies, as well as in 1889 and 1900. But every time, either the project was abandoned, or it failed. The already established theatres of the city, showcasing faraway landscapes, and gathering audiences from all over the world, might be, after all, the best examples of what the Exhibitions organisers were intending to create. For the few months of the exhibitions, but also in between them, the theatres of London and Paris spontaneously materialised the ideal of a universal theatre, for the span of an evening. Thank you.