

Olympic Arts Festival

Performing Arts Network

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Le Theatre du Soleil

Television Center, Studio 9

Theatre: The Olympian Legacy

by Sylvie Drake

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Le Theatre du Soleil

It seems totally in keeping with the spirit of the Olympic Games that an arts festival of marathon proportions should accompany them—so much so that, in some circles at least, it is threatening to overshadow the games themselves.

In the province of theatre alone, 30 companies are participating. Ten are local, six come from other American cities and the balance hail from Australia,

Belgium, Brazil, China, England, France, Greece, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland and Canada.

In terms of international outreach the scope is Olympian. For theatre lovers, it is a dream come true. The world—very nearly—is coming to their back yard. Most of the companies have never been seen in Los Angeles and might never have come here were it not for this singularly special event. So

quite beyond its immediate function of heralding the games, the arts festival will achieve something entirely different and more permanent: It will forever change the Los Angeles audience by enlarging its horizons.

Exposure to new and foreign sensibilities will serve as a cultural catalyst. Seattle may have its Space Needle and Montreal its Habitat as the result of hosting their major international

events. For us, an energized and broadened sensitivity to the arts promises to be the Olympic legacy.

The range of theatrical participation encompasses known companies with imposing reputations (England's Royal Shakespeare Company, France's Theatre du Soleil, Italy's Piccolo Teatro di Milano) and lesser known ones, chosen by Olympic Arts Festival director Robert J. Fitzpatrick for a variety of subtler reasons he calls "complementary factors."

"I wanted to give a sense of the range of theatre," Fitzpatrick said. "Members of the public who may not have seen a lot tend to think of theatre as black and white—comedy and tragedy. I wanted to show that there are different kinds of theatre and that, when you put them together, you make certain leaps and connections.

"I wanted people to be able to juxtapose and compare," he elaborated. "There's a tremendous charge in seeing Derek Jacobi as a very fey Benedick one day (in *Much Ado About Nothing*), and see him the next day as Cyrano de Bergerac. For instance, I find great pleasure looking at five gymnasts and comparing one to the other. And if you watch the work of Piccolo Teatro and Le Theatre du Soleil, you have the same sort of reaction. There are great subtleties of difference in acting styles and approach."

Just as the selection of American companies (which we will get to in a moment) was designed to represent the best and most wide-ranging in the country, so did Fitzpatrick choose the international companies. But in this case it wasn't simply a matter of bringing representative top work. It also was a question of discovering the special, the esoteric, in some cases the unique in each country.

Another consideration: The work would have to overcome language barriers. How to accomplish this? By concentrating on highly visual events and/or familiar texts.

Thus, in terms of the familiar, we have Le Theatre du Soleil presenting three Shakespeare plays in French—*Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part I* and *Twelfth Night*—in an unfamiliar, very personal, very different style.

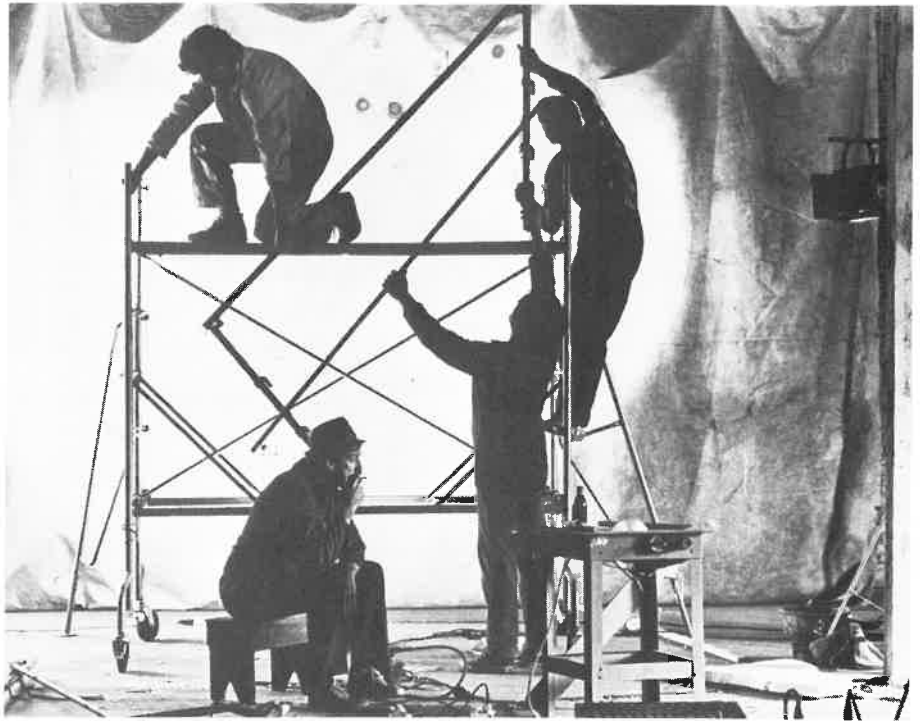
This 20-year-old artists' collective, under the unwavering artistic guidance of Ariane Mnouchkine, draws on a system of theatrical conventions and stylizations heavily influenced by Oriental and other traditions (Japan's Kabuki, India's Kathakali, Italy's Commedia

dell'arte). Mnouchkine views these as having a distilling effect on a piece of work, stripping it down to its essential elements while at the same time making it more accessible.

The 37-year-old Piccolo Teatro di Milano is also doing Shakespeare—in Italian. It will bring us a less philosophically complex *La Tempesta* (*The Tempest*) as well as the Goldoni classic, *Harlequin, the Servant of Two Masters* (which also happens to be a perennial hit at the Piccolo Teatro).

La Tempesta has received almost as much global attention as Peter Brook's *La Tragédie de Carmen* and has been perceived by some—probably incorrectly—as a swansong for the Piccolo's towering and enduring artistic director, Giorgio Strehler. We will be content to receive it on its own preternatural, impressionistic terms: the magical symbiosis of Strehler's celebrated inventiveness matched by the use of the latest in technical effects.

And while the British have often ac-



Radeis International

The Negro Ensemble Company



cused us of speaking a foreign tongue, we foresee no problems understanding the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Much Ado About Nothing* (directed by Terry Hands) or its *Cyrano de Bergerac* (in a new Anthony Burgess translation of Edmond Rostand's dashing rhymed couplets). Somehow, the idea of the English doing Rostand while the French have another go at Shakespeare only adds spice to already tantalizing festival prospects.

Nor does the cross-fertilization stop there. Consider the following proposition: The Epidaurus Festival company from Greece will treat us to a meticulously traditional *Oedipus Rex*, spoken in the modern Greek and starkly directed by Mikos Volanakis, but what are we to make of a Japanese *The Trojan Women*?

That is what Japan's Waseda Sho-Gekijo, a modern company dedicated to new uses of old ritualistic forms, proposes to deliver. The plot will be familiar, but count on the production to be as radical as its anti-elitist director, Tadashi Suzuki. Suzuki created the Waseda Sho-Gekijo company in the late '60s to protest a then-prevalent Japanese habit of imitating Western conventions.

His concept for the Euripides anti-war classic is to mount it as a nightmare vision seen through the eyes of an old Japanese beggar woman sifting through the rubble of post-war Tokyo.

"Suzuki has taken all the elements of Noh, Kyogen and Kabuki," Fitzpatrick said, "and deconstructed them so you can totally understand them, yet what he gives you is an absolutely contemporary vision." The old woman will be played by Waseda Sho-Gekijo's leading

Grupo de Teatro Macunaima



The Royal Shakespeare Company

performer, Kayoko Shiraishi, described by *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow as "an actress of blazing intensity . . . a fierce mystical presence." Japan has certainly earned the quintessential right to comment on the ravages of war. It seems safest, somehow, remanded to the uncompromising hands of its theatrical iconoclasts.

So much for familiar texts.

The balance of the international companies roughly can be divided into two groups: The purely visual entertainment pieces that make little demand on the psyche—and the politically/philosophically intriguing ones, where effect is not an end in itself but a means to a statement. And since in art as in life nothing is absolute, another collection of events straddles both sides of this artistic fence.

In the first group we can place such

stunt-oriented companies as Italy's clown-mimes, I Colombaioni, with their celebrated send-up of *Hamlet*, and the China Performing Arts Company. This company includes Mainland China's Central Ensemble of National Music and its exquisitely precise Chengdu Acrobatic Troupe. Together, they combine music with gravity-defying acts and the fastest footwork west of the international date line.

In the middle, or overlapping category we have Belgium's Radeis International with *Scaffoldings*, a comical pile-up involving elements of mime, circus and cabaret, but already suggesting more subtle concerns. Quebec's Theatre Sans Fil, a company using giant rod puppets, will present its visually haunting version of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, with 48 puppets ranging in height from four to 12 feet (shades of Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre).

And last, but hardly least, is Australia's satirist Circus Oz, where lunatic clowns juggle politics like bowling pins, a plate-spinning act turns into a commentary on nuclear power and an upside-down human fly reflects on Einstein's theory of relativity.

Stepping into the arena of pure impressionism and intellectual abstraction, we find featured two companies from Europe (Poland's Cricot 2 and the Netherlands' De Mexicaanse Hond) and two from Latin America (Mexico's Teatro Taller Epico de la UNAM and Brazil's Grupo de Teatro Macunaima).

Grupo de Teatro Macunaima receives its inspiration and its name from an Amazon Indian folk-hero, Macunaima, and its presentation, titled *Macunaima* and based on a 1928 novel by Mario de Andrade, tracks this hero's exploits from one jungle to the next—out of the Amazon and into the streets of Sao Paulo—and ultimately to the heavens where he becomes a star.

The journey is made in a series of scenes in which color, texture, sound and surrealism flow together, as critic Ned Chaillet of the *London Times* describes it, "from image to image like the floats and dancers of a carnival parade, never being much harder to understand . . . a fall from savagery to civilization . . . encompassing the magical, the innocent and the corrupt."

Novedad de la Patria ("News of the Homeland"), presented by Teatro Taller Epico de la UNAM, has a similar flavor but is based on *La Suave Patria*, an epic poem by Mexican poet Lopez Velarde,

adapted and directed as a series of sketches for the stage by Luis de Tavira. In De Tavira's words, it speaks fondly "about the most simple, everyday things in Mexico, transformed into intimate expressions that speak to us of the Fatherland as if we were talking of the loved yet inaccessible woman."

It is not entirely a coincidence that De Tavira claims to having been most heavily influenced in his own theatre by the writings of Polish theatre artists Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor. During World War II, Kantor and a group of artists took the name Cricot (an anagram of the Polish word for circus) and formed the Underground Experimental Theatre in Cracow. The company was dissolved at war's end and it wasn't until 1956 that Cricot 2 was born.

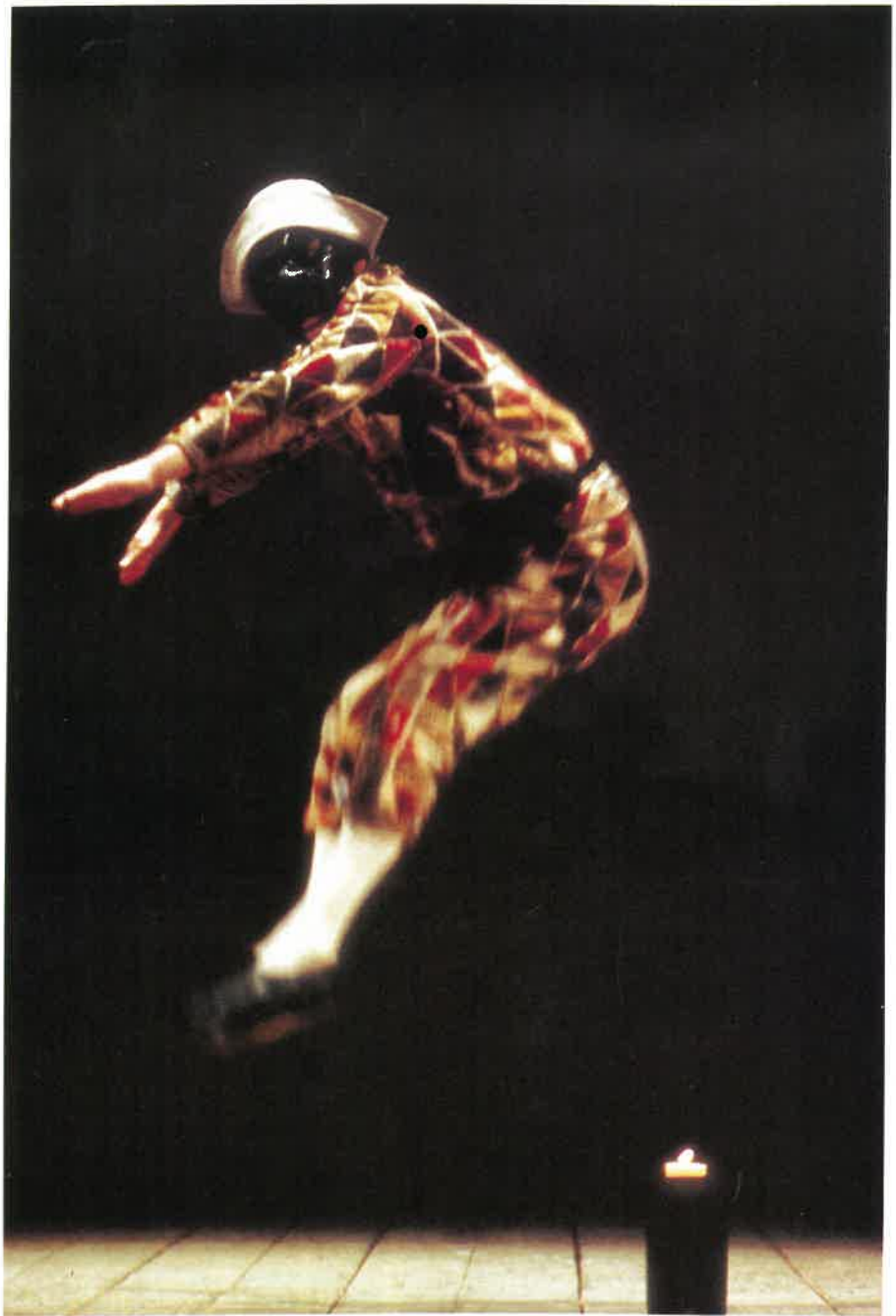
The ideas at the heart of this highly fragmented, nonlinear theatre are not simple. A central preoccupation of Kantor's is the correspondence of opposites: Life and death, reality and fiction. This is picked up in *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, one of two intense and intensely visual Kantor works coming to Los Angeles.

The other is *The Dead Class*, a grim farce based on the notes of Polish playwright S. I. Witkiewicz, in which aging characters, equipped with mannequins, confront their childhood selves, raking through forsaken passions and dead dreams.

Wielopole, *Wielopole* (named after the village where Kantor was born 69 years ago) is both more personal and more political. It is an autobiographical piece, presented in disjointed scenes, which writer Margaret Croyden has described as "both an homage and a dirge to Kantor's past, a recollection of his family and childhood experiences which . . . evoke the essential Polish experience, a world of suffering and sacrifice, of mass murder and wars, a provincial Poland dominated by Church and Army, whose presence lead inexorably to destruction and death."

Finally, we will see The Netherlands' De Mexicaanse Hond (The Mexican Hound), which has nothing to do with Mexico or with dogs. It is a name traced to a slang phrase meaning static (as in electrical interference) and adopted by a seven-artist collective in Amsterdam with its rebellious roots in Dadaism and Surrealism.

The group rejects conventional narrative in favor of thematically suggestive imagery and a sound surprisingly like that of American animated car-



Piccolo Teatro di Milano

toons. It is preparing a brand new work for the festival which only heightens the suspense.

To select representative American theatre for the Festival, the committee followed the same rules of quality, diversity, originality. The six national companies finally chosen to participate are distinguished regional theatres that should combine and/or contrast well with the ten Los Angeles theatres taking part in the summer event.

Of the six national theatres, four are known for their longevity and/or record of excellence. They encompass critic/director Robert Brustein's American Repertory Theatre out of Cambridge,

Massachusetts (doing *The School for Scandal* under the direction of Jonathan Miller and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* to be staged by Andrei Serban); Chicago's 59-year-old Goodman Theatre doing—here we go again—vaudevillian Shakespeare (*The Comedy of Errors*, directed by Robert Woodruff, with San Francisco's juggling Flying Karamazov Brothers playing the two sets of twins); Connecticut's myth-oriented National Theatre of the Deaf (with its mixture of deaf and hearing actors) presenting a dramatization of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*; and New York's Negro Ensemble Company re-



The Goodman Theatre

prising its 1982 production of Charles Fuller's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Soldier's Play*.

The remaining two companies, Nightfire and Antenna, will each be doing performance pieces and both come from San Francisco, the home of some of the best performance art in the nation. Nightfire is contributing *Liquid Distance/Timed Approach*, an abstract

piece created by artistic director Laura Farabough, concerning itself with Olympic achievement and performed in a swimming pool. Antenna is doing *Amnesia*, the latest in a particular form of audio play invented by artistic director Chris Hardman and dubbed "Walkmanology" (after the Sony Walkman) in which the spectator, armed with a tape recorder, simultane-

ously becomes the actor.

Farabough dove into swimming-pool theatre with *Surface Tension*, a feminist piece she created in 1981 — the same year that Hardman turned the spectator into an interloper with ear-phones when he presented *High School*, wherein the viewer/actor relived a youngster's high school experience by following a path through a high school building guided by a voice on tape.

It's worth noting that, despite the fact that Hardman and Farabough now have distinct theatrical orientations, they acquired their taste for so-called "location" theatre when both of them were pivotal members of yet another performance art company, San Francisco's now-defunct Snake Theatre.

On home turf, the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum will present a repertory of two plays: James McLure's Wild West adaptation of John O'Keefe's 18th century farce *Wild Oats* (Tom Moore directs) and Arthur Miller's *The American Clock*, to be staged by the Taper's artistic director, Gordon Davidson.

The other nine theatres range widely in their choices, but are united in a common goal: a desire to remain true to their individual styles in theatre while offering either quintessentially American plays or imaginative new ones that relate to the world of sports. In the latter group we have The Ensemble Studio Theatre's *Sporting Goods*, an event of short plays using sports themes; the Groundlings' *Olympic Trials*, a *Chick Hazard Mystery*, an improvisational spoof in the Raymond Chandler genre



Circus Oz



*The China Performing Arts Company/
Chengdu Acrobatic Troupe*



Waseda Sho-Gekijo

that will vary from night to night at the whim of audience suggestions; and the L.A. Theatre Works' presentation of Steven Berkoff's *Agamemnon*, a retelling of the Greek legend with an emphasis, to quote Berkoff, on "heat and battle, fatigue, the marathon and the obscenity of modern and future wars... Naturally, it is also about the body and its pleasures/pain."

In the realm of purely American themes we will have the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble's Los Angeles premiere of David Mamet's *Edmond*, a spare philosophical dialectic about the dehumanizing effects of urban life, and, in a more literal war zone, Al Brown's pungently humorous *Back to Back*, presented by Burbank's Victory Theatre and dealing with the cabin fever of two GIs cooped up in a fox hole in Vietnam.

Actors for Themselves is planning a world premiere (unspecified at press time); Room for Theatre, a group that specializes in meticulous revivals of plays out of the first half of the century, will revive Samson Raphaelson's 1939 *Skylark*.



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BRAIN HOTEL



The CAST Theatre

The Los Angeles Actors' Theatre insists on remaining silent about *Sherlock's Last Case*, the new murder mystery by Charles Marowitz that it will be contributing—and the Cast Theatre in Hollywood is reviving the 1981 *Brain Hotel*, a pastiche of musical styles to be sung a capella by four actors and described by director Tony Abatemarco as "a jam session of psychological confrontation—an imagined accommodation conjured up by four distinct personality types in search of change." Clearly, it is also difficult to explain. And there you have it—an embarrassment of choices with something for every taste. □



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