

The 2012 Globe to Globe Festival

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Aim: The 2012 Globe to Globe festival aimed to celebrate the national and global legacy of one of its greatest cultural touchstones, William Shakespeare. In doing so, the festival, and the 2012 Cultural Olympiad as a whole, aimed to affirm Britain's place as a cultural powerhouse of both historical and contemporary relevance, and to effectively project an image of Britain as a forward-looking nation open to and actively encouraging of cultural diversity and international exchange.

Context: In 2012 the United Kingdom, and London above all, had one of the most coveted Public Diplomacy opportunities in its hands: the hosting of the Summer Olympic Games. With hundreds of thousands of foreign visitors flocking to London, and millions more tuning in to watch the celebrations and competitions on TV, for a few months London was in the global spotlight. Eager to make the most of the Olympic momentum, a number of complementary programs were designed to go beyond athletics and highlight Britain's role as a cultural powerhouse. To this end, the Olympic Charter required the Olympic Committee to "organize a programme of cultural events which must cover at least the entire period during which the Olympic Village is open." This became the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, billed as "largest cultural celebration in the history of the modern Olympic and Paralympic Movements." The Olympiad included hundreds of cultural programs and events in the months leading up to the Olympics, including exhibitions, literary readings, musical concerts, film screenings, and other festivities. One of the highlights was the eight-month World Shakespeare Festival, which itself included the Globe to Globe festival that brought together international theatre companies to produce culturally specific interpretations of Shakespeare's plays in their native languages. The goal, as described by festival directors, was to highlight both the diversity of world cultures and the universality of the British playwright's works: "Shakespeare is the language which brings us together better than any other, and which reminds of our almost infinite difference, and of our strange and humbling commonality."

Program Activity: The Globe to Globe festival ran for six weeks in the run-up to the Olympics, welcoming theatre companies and more than 600 artists from around the world to perform at Shakespeare's Globe theatre in London. A total of 37 plays were selected by the Globe's artistic leadership to be performed by a different international company in their native language and featuring their own cultural spin on Shakespeare's classics. The plays, each of which ran for two days before making way for the next production, reflected incredible diversity and included offerings such as "Troilus and Cressida" in Maori, "Twelfth Night" in Hindi, "Hamlet" in Lithuanian, "Taming of the Shrew" in Urdu, among many others.

The festival was not without its controversies, as may be expected with a multicultural undertaking of such ambition. In many cases the off-stage stories of companies and actors lent particular drama to the stories unfolding on stage. The Belarus Free Theatre, for instance, performed the political "King Lear," made all the more charged by the fact that the company is banned in Belarus and run by political refugees. The Afghani company's production of "A Comedy of Errors," set in modern day Kabul and performed in Dari Persian, was chosen to contrast the dark negativity of Afghanistan's current international image. Many of the actors, however, were plagued by harassment and persecution in their home country for their involvement. There was also controversy surrounding the inclusion

of the Israeli theatre company's production of "The Merchant of Venice," as anti-Israeli protestors demanded they be excluded for their past performances in the occupied territories. One protestor interviewed by the BBC declared that "culture may not be used to give a civilised gloss to a state that perpetrates human rights abuses." The festival continued undeterred, however, as organizers and artists insisted fervently that, in the words of Globe artistic director Dominic Dromgoole, "You're not watching politicians or policy-makers. You are watching artists who are here to tell a story."

The vision and goal was to highlight the universality of Shakespeare and of theatre as a unifying experience, both diverse in its interpretations and uniting in its ability to resonate across linguistic and cultural divides. This theme was highlighted in the presentation of the plays: scene descriptions were available, but the dialogue was delivered entirely in the company's native language, with no subtitles provided, so that non-speakers – the majority of the audience – had to rely entirely on the staging and actors' performances. Questions about whether London audiences would even be interested in such an experience were quickly put to rest: by the time Globe to Globe celebrated its final production more than 100,000 people had attended performances, an incredible 80% of whom had never before been to the Globe.

The festival was hailed as a great success, so much so that the Globe has continued the program beyond the context of the Olympics: in 2013, four of the most popular productions from the 2012 festival – including "Venus and Adonis" from South Africa, "As You Like It" from Georgia, "King Lear" from Belarus, and "The Tempest" from India – will be revived at the Globe. The legacy and reach of the 2012 festival has also been ensured online: every production available to watch online for free, creating an opportunity for millions around the world to experience the multicultural celebration of culture through the lens of a British national treasure.

Analysis: The Globe to Globe festival played out as a truly dialogic, mutually-beneficial example of effective cultural diplomacy: London buoyed its image as a diverse, international city, and the visiting theatre companies had a truly unique opportunity to demonstrate what their culture and perspective could bring to the world stage. In many cases, Globe to Globe offered companies the opportunity to present an alternate view of their culture; one commentator noted that the Afghani production was "enormously important for Afghanistan because it's often seen as a victim, simply a charity case...here is a way of turning the whole thing around and saying Afghanistan is one of the most important sources of our civilization."

While festival audiences overwhelmingly praised the productions, however, it is important to note that many of the featured productions have yet to play in their home countries, where they are often unwelcome. Such tension is perhaps unavoidable in cultural diplomacy efforts of this scope: however diverse the programming, it is the host country's values that define and frame them: in this case, Britain's Western values of freedom of expression, gender equality, and multiculturalism. While this speaks to inherent boundaries of public diplomacy, such limitations should not overshadow the fact that cultural diplomacy is an on-going process that very gradually over time, and propelled or slowed by the global political landscape, builds a foundation of awareness and dialogue that can lead to more positive exchange and understanding. The Globe to Globe festival was a significant addition to this cumulative effort, creating a space for diverse cultural expression while,

from a strategic PD perspective, reinforcing a positive image of London, - and the UK by extension- at prime moment when global attention was at its peak.

Learning Points: The Globe to Globe festival dramatically demonstrates the power of storytelling – the core of theatre and Shakespeare – in creating shared experiences and encouraging openness to diverse cultural perspectives. Stories, particularly familiar stories centered on universal themes, inspire a receptivity among audiences that can become a gateway to greater cultural awareness and appreciation.

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