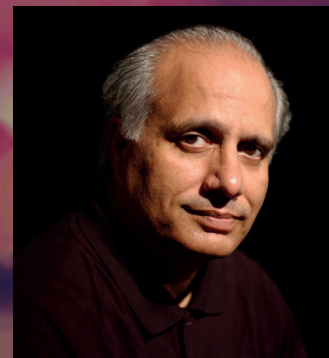


World Theatre Day 2020

2020

Message Author
Shahid NADEEM

Playwright
Pakistan



Under the patronage of
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United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Online Celebration
www.world-theatre-day.org

Editorial – Let’s Celebrate World Theatre Day 2020

Since its beginnings on 27 March 1962, World Theatre Day wants to inspire you to go to see a play. Since the first celebration World Theatre Day wants to encourage professional to do their job with passion. Since the first message of World Theatre Day written by the French playwright, author, poet, film and theatre director, and painter Jean Cocteau the authors of World Theatre Day want to share their love for theatre with each and every one.

Since its beginning the International Theatre Institute (ITI) is selecting authors year by year, extraordinary, outstanding and noble personalities who care for theatre, mutual understanding and peace. This has not changed for 2020 when the Executive Council of ITI selected Shahid Nadeem, eminent playwright from Pakistan, to share his voice for theatre.

The goals that the International Theatre Institute haven’t changed. World Theatre Day needs to be celebrated. Theatre needs to continue, even if we are restricted to not travel, not embrace each other, even if we need to be isolated at home due to the pandemic that we are going through at the moment.

Let’s celebrate theatre on 27 March. Let’s be thankful to those who take care of individuals who are ill. Let’s be thankful to those who help to soothe the pains of those who are old and need special care. And let’s be grateful of those who are guiding us with spiritual encouragement and makes us aware what is important for now and for the future of mankind. One person who does this very well is Shahid Nadeem, the World Theatre Day message author whose message you find in this brochure.

Please read it, distribute it to your friends and colleagues. Please stay safe and healthy.

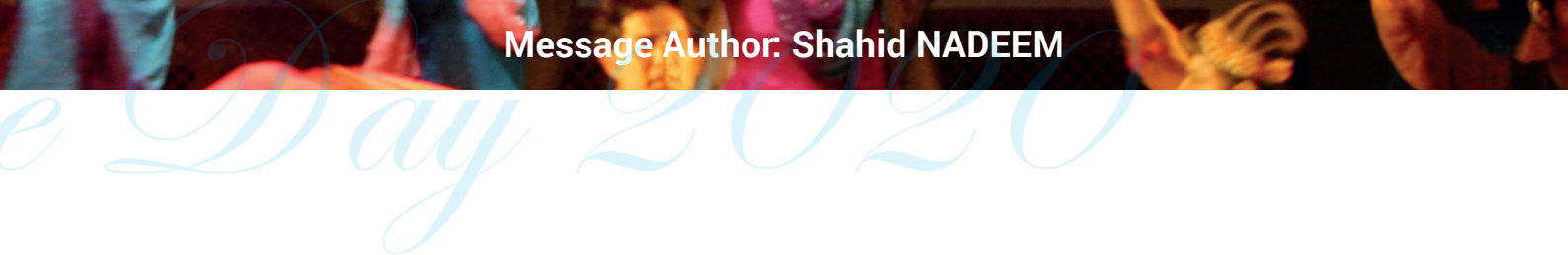
Happy World Theatre Day to you!

Tobias Biancone
Director General ITI

Mohamed Saif Al-Afkham
President ITI

Chen Zhongwen
Deputy Director General ITI





World Theatre Day – 27 March Celebrating the diversity of theatre all over the world

World Theatre Day was initiated in 1961 by the International Theatre Institute ITI. It is celebrated annually on the 27th March by ITI Centres and the international theatre community.

Various national and international theatre events are organized to mark this occasion. One of the most important of these is the circulation of the World Theatre Day Message through which at the invitation of ITI, a figure of world stature shares his or her reflections on the theme of Theatre and a Culture of Peace. The first World Theatre Day Message was written by Jean Cocteau in 1962.

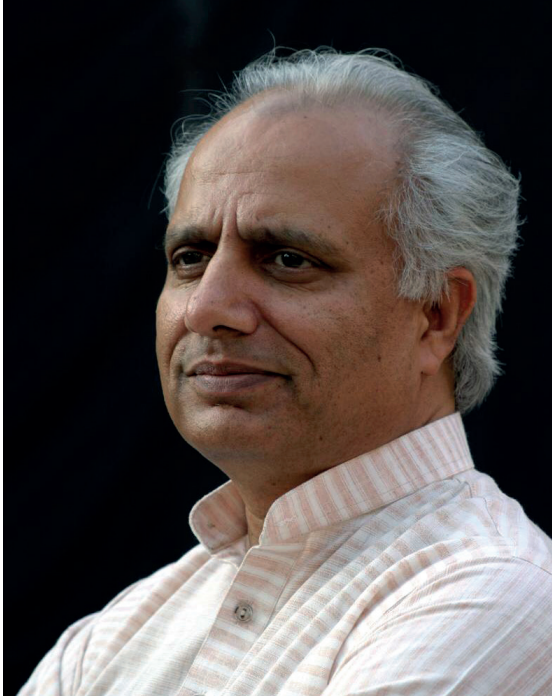
Ever since, each year on the 27th March (date of the opening of the 1962 „Theatre of Nations“ season in Paris), World Theatre Day has been celebrated in many and varied ways by ITI Centres - of which there are now more than 90 throughout the world. Moreover theatres, theatre professionals, theatre lovers, theatre

universities, academies and schools celebrate it as well.

Each year an outstanding figure in theatre or a person outstanding in heart and spirit from another field is invited to share his or her reflections on theatre and international harmony. What is known as the International Message is translated into more than 50 languages, read for tens of thousands of spectators before performances in theatres throughout the world, and printed in hundreds of daily newspapers. Colleagues in the audio-visual field lend a fraternal hand, with more than a hundred radio and television stations transmitting the Message to listeners in all corners of the five continents.



Message for World Theatre Day 2020 by Shahid NADEEM



Theatre as a Shrine

It is a great honour for me to write the World Theatre Day 2020 Message. It is a most humbling feeling but it is also an exciting thought that Pakistani theatre and Pakistan itself, has been recognized by the ITI, the most influential and representative world theatre body of our times. This honour is also a tribute to Madeeha Gauhar¹, theatre icon and Ajoka Theatre² founder, also my life partner, who passed away two years ago. The Ajoka team has come a long, hard way, literally from Street to Theatre. But that is the story of many a theatre group, I am sure. It is never easy or smooth sailing. It is always a struggle.

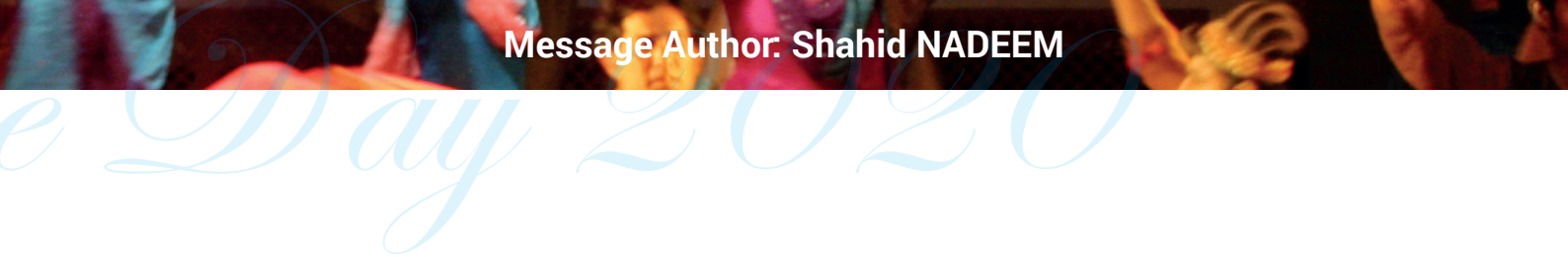
I come from a predominantly Muslim country, which has seen several military dictatorships, the horrible onslaught of religious extremists and three wars with neighbouring India, with whom we share thousands of years of history

and heritage. Today we still live in fear of a full-blown war with our twin-brother neighbour, even a nuclear war, as both countries now have nuclear weapons.

We sometimes say in jest; “bad times are a good time for theatre”. There is no dearth of challenges to be faced, contradictions to be exposed and status quo to be subverted. My theatre group, Ajoka and I have been walking this tightrope for over 36 years now. It has indeed been a tight rope: to maintain the balance between entertainment and education, between searching and learning from the past and preparing for the future, between creative free expression and adventurous showdowns with authority, between socially critical and financially viable theatre, between reaching out to the masses and being avant-garde. One may say that a theatre-maker has to be a conjurer, a magician.

In Pakistan, a clear division has existed between the Sacred and the Profane. For the Profane, there is no room for religious questioning, while for the Sacred, there is no possibility of open debate or new ideas. In fact, the conservative establishment consider art and culture out of bounds for its “sacred games”. So, the playing field for the performing artists has been like a hurdles race. They have to first prove their credentials as good Muslims and compliant citizens and also try to establish that dance, music and theatre are “allowed” in Islam. A large number of observant Muslims have hence been reluctant to embrace the performing arts even though the elements of dance, music and theatre are embedded in their daily lives. And then we stumbled on a sub-culture which had the potential to bring the Sacred and Profane on the same stage.

During the military rule in Pakistan in the 1980s,



Ajoka was launched by a group of young artists who challenged the dictatorship through a socially and politically bold theatre of dissent. They found that their feelings, their anger, their anguish, were so amazingly expressed by a Sufi bard³, who lived some 300 years ago. This was the great Sufi poet Bulleh Shah⁴. Ajoka found it could make politically explosive statements through his poetry, challenging corrupt political authority and bigoted religious establishment. The authorities could ban or banish us but not a revered and popular Sufi poet like Bulleh Shah. We discovered that his life was as dramatic and radical as his poetry, which had earned him fatwas and banishment in his lifetime. I then wrote, "Bulha", a play about Bulleh Shah's life and struggle. Bulha, as he is lovingly referred to by the masses across South Asia, was from a tradition of Punjabi Sufi poets who fearlessly challenged the authority of the emperors and the clerical demagogues, through their poetry and practice. They wrote in the language of the people and about the aspirations of the masses.

In music and dance, they found the vehicles to achieve a direct association between Man and God, by-passing with disdain, the exploitative religious middlemen. They defied gender and class divides and looked at the planet with wonder, as a manifestation of the Almighty. The Arts Council of Lahore rejected the script on the grounds that it was not a play but merely a biography. However, when the play was performed at an alternative venue, the Goethe Institute, the audience saw, understood and appreciated the symbolism in the life and poetry of the people's poet. They could fully identify with his life and times and see the parallels with their own lives and times.

A new kind of theatre was born that day in 2001. Devotional Qawwali music⁵, Sufi Dhamal dancing⁶ and inspirational poetry recitation, even the meditative Zikir chanting⁷, became parts of the play. A group of Sikhs⁸, who were in town to attend a Punjabi conference and had popped in to see the play, invaded the stage



at the end, hugging and kissing the actors and crying. They were sharing the stage for the first time with Muslim Punjabis after the Partition of India in 1947⁹, which resulted in the division of Punjab on communal lines. Bulleh Shah had been as dear to them as he was to Muslim Punjabis; for Sufis transcend religious or communal divides.

This memorable premiere was followed by Bulleh Shah's Indian odyssey. Starting with a trail-blazing tour of the Indian part of the Punjab, "Bulha" was performed in the length and breadth of India, even in times of gravest tensions between the two countries and in places where the audience did not know a single word of Punjabi but loved every moment of the play. While the doors for political dialogue and diplomacy were being closed one by one, the doors of theatre halls and the hearts of the Indian public remained wide open. During the Ajoka tour of Indian Punjab in 2004, after a very warmly received performance before a

rural audience of thousands, an old man came to the actor playing the role of the great Sufi. The old man was accompanied by a young boy. "My grandson is very unwell; would you please blow a blessing upon him." The actor was taken aback and said, "Babaji¹⁰, I am not Bulleh Shah, I am just an actor playing this role." The old man started crying and said, "Please bless my grandson, I know he will recover, if you do." We suggested to the actor to grant the old man his wish. The actor blew a blessing upon the young boy. The old man was satisfied. Before leaving, he said these words: "Son, you are not an actor, you are a reincarnation of Bulleh Shah, his Avatar¹¹." Suddenly a whole new concept of acting, of theatre, dawned upon us, where the actor becomes the reincarnation of the character he or she is portraying.

In the 18 years of touring with "Bulha", we have noticed a similar response from an apparently uninitiated audience, for whom the performance is not just an entertaining or an

e Day 2020

intellectually stimulating experience but a soul-stirring spiritual encounter. In fact the actor playing the role of Bulleh Shah's Sufi Master, was so profoundly influenced by the experience that he himself became a Sufi poet and has since published two collections of poems. The performers involved in the production have shared that when the performance starts, they feel that the spirit of Bulleh Shah is among them and the stage seems to have been elevated to a higher plane. An Indian scholar, when writing about the play, gave it the title: "When Theatre Becomes a Shrine".

I am a secular person and my interest in Sufism is mainly cultural. I am more interested in the performative and artistic aspects of Punjabi Sufi poets but my audience, who may not be extremists or bigoted but may hold sincere religious beliefs. Exploring stories such as that of Bulleh Shah, and there are so many in all cultures, can become a bridge between us, the theatre-makers and an unacquainted but enthusiastic audience. Together we can discover the spiritual dimensions of theatre and build bridges between the past and present, leading to a future which is the destiny of all communities; believers and non-believers, actors and old men, and their grandsons.

The reason why I am sharing the story of Bulleh Shah and our exploration of a kind of Sufi Theatre is that while performing on stage, we sometimes get carried away by our philosophy of theatre, our role as harbingers of social change and in doing so, leave a large section of the masses behind. In our engagement with the challenges of the present, we deprive ourselves of the possibilities of a deeply moving spiritual experience which theatre can provide. In today's world where bigotry, hate and violence is on the rise once again, nations seem to be pitted against nations, believers are fighting

other believers and communities are spewing hatred against other communities... and in the meanwhile children die of malnutrition, mothers during childbirth due to the lack of timely medical care and ideologies of hate flourish. Our planet is plunging deeper and deeper into a climatic and climactic catastrophe and one can hear the hoof-beats of the horses of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse¹². We need to replenish our spiritual strength; we need to fight apathy, lethargy, pessimism, greed and disregard for the world we live in, the Planet we live on. Theatre has a role, a noble role, in energizing and mobilizing humanity to lift itself from its descent into the abyss. It can uplift the stage, the performance space, into something sacred.

In South Asia, the artists touch with reverence the floor of the stage before stepping onto it, an ancient tradition when the spiritual and the cultural were intertwined. It is time to regain that symbiotic relationship between the artist and the audience, the past and the future. Theatre-making can be a sacred act and the actors indeed can become the avatars of the roles they play. Theatre elevates the art of acting to a higher spiritual plane. Theatre has the potential of becoming a shrine and the shrine a performance space.

¹ *Madeeha Gauhar* (1956-2018): Theatre director, actress, feminist and founder of Ajoka Theatre, holder of Masters in Theatre from Royal Holloway College, London and recipient of Medal of Distinction from the Government of Pakistan and Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands.

² *Ajoka Theatre*: Established in 1984. The word Ajoka means "Contemporary" in Punjabi. Its repertoire includes plays on themes such as religious tolerance, peace, gender violence, human rights.

³ *Sufism*: The Islamic mystical tradition, which seeks to find the truth of divine love through direct personal experience of God, became popular due to its preaching of universal brotherhood and opposition to rigid doctrinaire enforcement of religious teachings. Sufi poetry, mostly



rendered in music, expresses mystical union through the metaphors of profane love.

⁴ *Bulleh Shah* (1680-1757): An influential Punjabi Sufi poet, who wrote about complex philosophical topics in simple language, was a strong critic of religious orthodoxy and ruling elite, was exiled from the city of Kasur, accused of heresy and denied burial in the city graveyard. Popular among the devotional and folk singers. Admired across religious divide.

⁵ *Qawwali*: Devotional Sufi poetry, presented by groups of singers (Qawwals), originally performed at Sufi shrines, leading the listeners, to a state of ecstasy.

⁶ *Dhammal*: Ecstatic dancing at Sufi shrines, usually on drumbeat.

⁷ *Zikir*: Devotional rhythmic chanting, reciting prayers, achieving spiritual enlightenment.

⁸ *Sikhs*: Followers of Sikh faith, founded in Punjab in 15th Century by Guru Nanak.

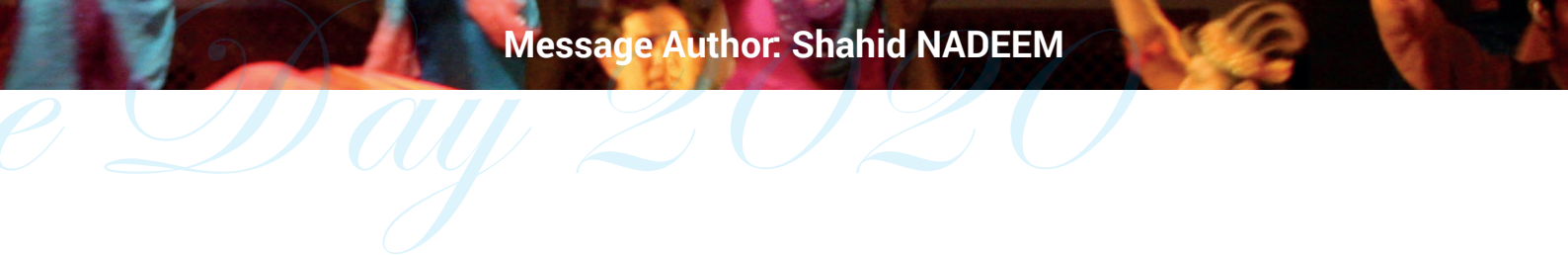
⁹ The Muslim state of Pakistan was carved out of India in 1947 amid unprecedented communal carnage and massive migration of population.

¹⁰ *Babaji*: An expression of respect for an elderly man.

¹¹ *Avatar*: Reincarnation or manifestation on Earth of a divine teacher, according to Hindu culture.

¹² *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* are described by John of Patmos in his Book of Revelation, the last book of the

New Testament. In most accounts, the four riders are seen as symbolizing Conquest, War, Famine, and Death, respectively.



Message for World Theatre Day 2020 by Shahid NADEEM

Short Version

Theatre as a Shrine

At the end of a performance of Ajoka Theatre's¹ play on Sufi Poet Bulleh Shah², an old man, accompanied by a young boy, came to the actor playing the role of the great Sufi³, "My grandson is unwell, would you please blow a blessing upon him." The actor was taken aback and said, "I am not Bulleh Shah, I am just an actor playing this role." The old man said, "Son, you are not an actor, you are a reincarnation of Bulleh Shah, his Avatar⁴". Suddenly a whole new concept of theatre dawned upon us, where the actor becomes the reincarnation of the character, he/she is portraying.

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⁴ *Avatar*: Reincarnation or manifestation on Earth of a divine teacher according to Hindu culture.



Shahid Nadeem, Playwright Biography

Shahid Nadeem is Pakistan's leading playwright and head of the renowned Ajoka Theatre.

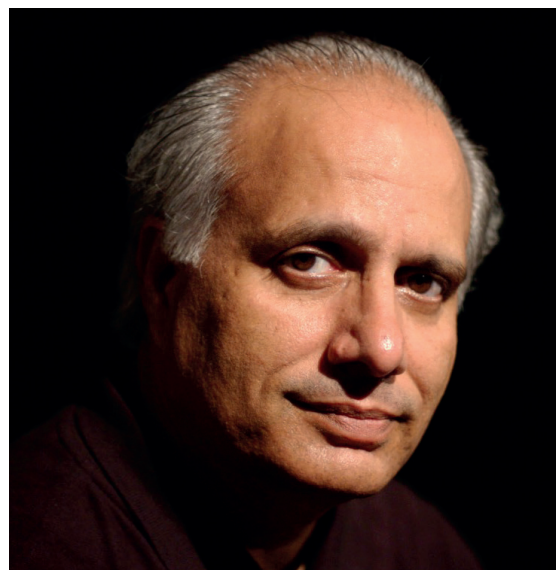
Shahid Nadeem was born in 1947 in Sopore, Kashmir. He became a refugee at the tender age of 1, when his family had to migrate to the newly-created Pakistan after the 1948 war between India and Pakistan over the disputed state of Kashmir. He has lived in Lahore, Pakistan where he did his Masters in Psychology from the Punjab University. He wrote his first play as a university student but became a dedicated playwright when he started contributing from his political exile in London, plays for Pakistan's dissident theatre group, Ajoka, set up by Madeeha Gauhar, a pioneer theatre activist, whom he later married. Shahid Nadeem has written more than 50 original plays in Punjabi and Urdu and several adaptations of Brecht's plays.

He has been associated with Pakistan Television as a producer and member of senior management. He was imprisoned three times under various military-led governments for his opposition to military rule and adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. In the notorious Mianwali Jail, he started writing weekend plays produced by and for the prisoners. Later he worked as International Campaigns Coordinator and Asia-Pacific Communications Officer for Amnesty International. He has been a fellow at the Getty Research Institute, International Pen, USA and National Endowment for Democracy. He is also a member of Theatre Without Borders network. Shahid Nadeem's plays have been widely performed and published in Pakistan and India. His plays have also been performed around the world.

His plays have been translated into English and published by Oxford University Press, Nick Hern Publishers and in several anthologies. He

was awarded the President of Pakistan's Medal for the Pride of Performance in 2009. He has also directed plays for stage and television and organized Theatre for Peace festivals in India and Pakistan. He has contributed for leading Pakistani and Indian papers and BBC's Urdu Service. He has produced documentaries on cultural subjects including Lahore Museum, Punjabi customs, poet Iqbal and painter Sadeqain.

Shahid Nadeem's plays are well-regarded for their bold socially relevant, sometimes tabooed subjects such as religious extremism, violence against women, discrimination against minorities, freedom of expression, climate, peace and Sufism. Several of his plays address the issues of Partition of South Asia and shared cultural heritage of the region. He skillfully combines contemporary social and political themes with traditional forms and folk heritage to present an entertaining and intellectually stimulating theatre. Music is an inherent part of his theatre productions. He teaches art of writing at Ajoka Institute for Performing Arts and the Institute for Art and Culture, Lahore.



Words of Previous World Theatre Day Message Authors

« Theatre is the father of all arts. This is a truth none can contend, and for this reason it is my one and only passion. (...) I believe that theatre is the light that illuminates the path of mankind. A light that ensures an organic link with the spectator by creating warmth between us – be that communication through the written text or through the performance on stage. »

Fathia El Assial, playwright from Egypt, World Theatre Day Message Author 2004

« Theatre can generate love, and love is the energy of survival. In the middle of my fears for all our lives and for our future, I rejoice, for I know that theatre artists have already begun to join hands around this world. And one day, the circle will be completed in one enormous embrace. »

Ellen Stewart, theatre director and producer from the USA, World Theatre Day Message Author 1975

« We gather to weep and to remember; to laugh and to contemplate; to learn and to affirm and to imagine. »

Brett Bailey, stage director from South Africa, World Theatre Day Message Author 2014

« We have to create another world because we know it is possible. But it is up to us to build this other world with our hands and by acting on the stage and in our own life. Participate in the "spectacle" which is about to begin and once you are back home, with your friends act your own plays and look at what you were never able to see: that which is obvious. Theatre is not just an event; it is a way of life! We are all actors: being a citizen is not living in society, it is changing it. »

Augusto Boal, stage director, theatre educator and humanitarian from Brazil, World Theatre Day Message Author 2009

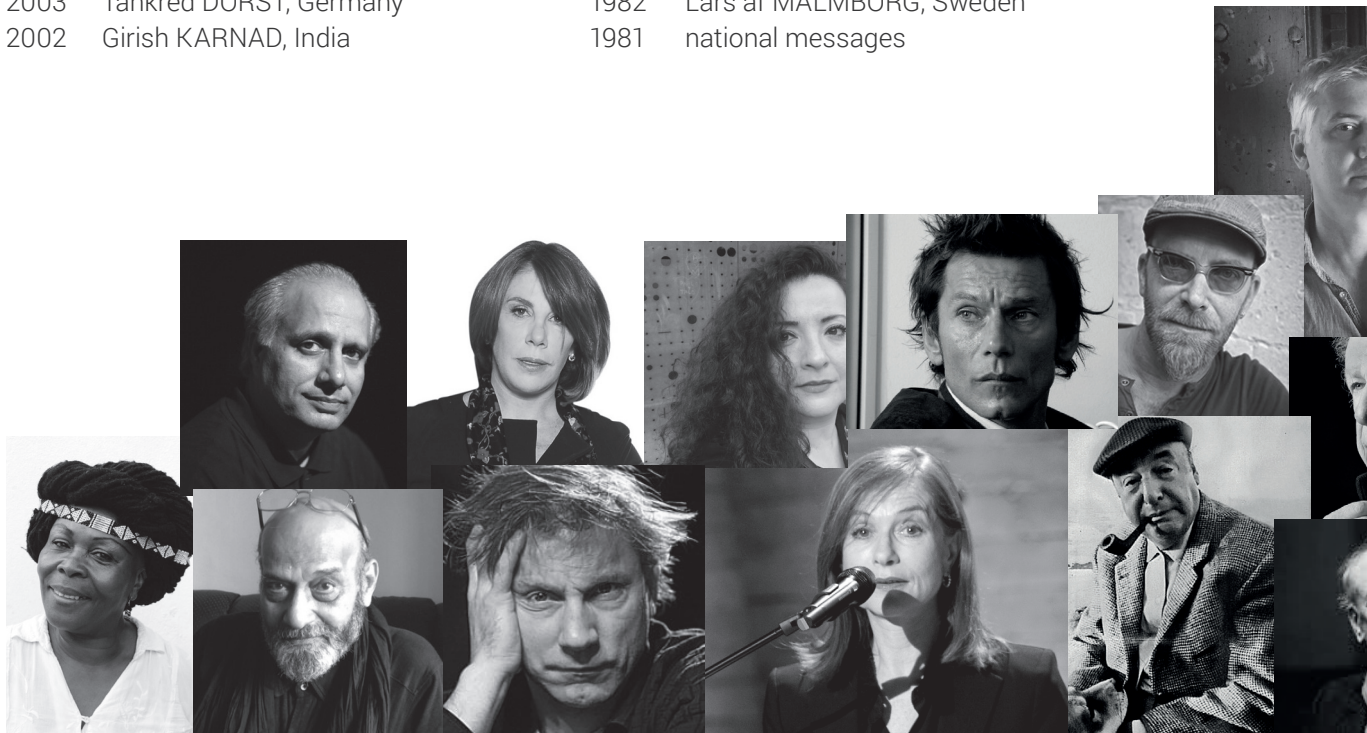
« To hell with gadgets and computers - just go to the theatre, occupy whole rows in the stalls and in the galleries, listen to the word and look at living images! - it is theatre in front of you, do not neglect it and do not miss a chance to participate in it - perhaps the most precious chance we share in our vain and hurried lives. We need every kind of theatre. »

Anatoli Vassiliev, stage director and theatre educator from Russia, World Theatre Day Message Author 2015

Strong voices for theatre from all continents for 58 years

Message authors from 2020 to 1962

2020	Shahid NADEEM, Pakistan	2001	Iakovos KAMPANELLIS, Greece
2019	Carlos CELDRÁN, Cuba	2000	Michel TREMBLAY, Canada
2018	Simon MCBURNEY, United Kingdom	1999	Vigdís FINNBOGADÓTTIR, Iceland
	Werewere-Liking GNEPO, Ivory Coast	1998	50th Anniversary of ITI - Special Message
	Sabina BERMAN, Mexico	1997	Jeong Ok KIM, South Korea
	Ram Gopal BAJAJ, India	1996	Saadalla WANNOUS, Syria
	Maya ZBIB, Lebanon	1995	Humberto ORSINI, Venezuela
2017	Isabelle HUPPERT, France	1994	Vaclav HAVEL, Czech Republic
2016	Anatoly VASILIEV, Russia	1993	Edward ALBEE, USA
2015	Krzysztof WARLIKOWSKI, Poland	1992	Jorge LAVELLI, Argentina/France
2014	Brett BAILEY, South Africa		Arturo USLAR PIETRI, Venezuela
2013	Dario FO, Italy	1991	Federico MAYOR, Director General of UNESCO, France
2012	John MALKOVICH, USA	1990	Kirill LAVROV, Russia
2011	Jessica A. KAAHWA, Uganda	1989	Martin ESSLIN, United Kingdom
2010	Judi DENCH, United Kingdom	1988	Peter BROOK, United Kingdom
2009	Augusto BOAL, Brazil	1987	Antonio GALA, Spain
2008	Robert LEPAGE, Canada	1986	Wole SOYINKA, Nigeria
2007	Sultan bin Mohammed AL QASIMI, Sharjah, UAE	1985	André-Louis PERINETTI, France
2006	Victor Hugo RASCON BANDA, Mexico	1984	Mikhail TSAREV, Russia
2005	Ariane MNOUCHKINE, France	1983	Amadou Mahtar M'BOW, Director General of UNESCO, Senegal
2004	Fathia EL ASSAL, Egypt	1982	Lars af MALMBORG, Sweden
2003	Tankred DORST, Germany	1981	national messages
2002	Grish KARNAD, India		



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|------|---------------------------------------------------|------|----------------------------------|
| 1980 | Janusz WARMINSKI, Poland | 1964 | Laurence OLIVIER, United Kingdom |
| 1979 | national messages | | Jean-Louis BARRAULT, France |
| 1978 | national messages | 1963 | Arthur MILLER, USA |
| 1977 | Radu BELIGAN, Romania | 1962 | Jean COCTEAU, France |
| 1976 | Eugène IONESCO, Romania | | |
| 1975 | Ellen STEWART, USA | | |
| 1974 | Richard BURTON, USA | | |
| 1973 | Luchino VISCONTI, Italy | | |
| 1972 | Maurice BEJART, France | | |
| 1971 | Pablo NERUDA, Chile | | |
| 1970 | Dimitri CHOSTAKOVITCH, Russia | | |
| 1969 | Peter BROOK, United Kingdom | | |
| 1968 | Miguel Angel ASTURIAS,
Guatemala | | |
| 1967 | Hélène WEIGEL, Germany | | |
| 1966 | René MAHEU, Director General of
UNESCO, France | | |
| 1965 | Anonymous | | |



International Theatre Institute ITI World Organization for the Performing Arts

The International Theatre Institute (ITI) was created on the initiative of the first UNESCO Director General, Sir Julian Huxley, and the playwright and novelist J.B. Priestly, in 1948, just after the Second World War, and at the beginning of the Cold War, when the Iron Curtain divided the East and the West.

The aim of the founders of ITI was to build an organization that was aligned with UNESCO's goals on culture, education and the arts, and which would focus its endeavours on improving the status of all members of the performing arts professions.

They envisaged an organization that created platforms for international exchange and for engagement in the education of the performing arts, for beginners and professionals alike, as well as using the performing arts for mutual understanding and peace.

ITI has now developed into the world's largest organization for the performing arts, with more than 90 Centres spread across every continent.





Happy World Theatre Day - Online



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HOME	WORLD THEATRE DAY	EVENT	MESSAGE	ITI	PRESS / MEDIA	GALLERY	CONTACT
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World Theatre Day

Since 1962 World Theatre Day has been celebrated by ITI Centres, ITI Cooperating Members, theatre professionals, theatre organizations, theatre universities and theatre lovers all over the world on the 27th of March. This day is a celebration for those who can see the value and importance of the art form "theatre", and acts as a wake-up-call for governments, politicians and institutions which have not yet recognised its value to the people and to the individual and have not yet realised its potential for economic growth.

“We gather to weep and to remember; to laugh and to contemplate; to learn and to affirm and to imagine”

Brett Bailey, Stage Director from South Africa, World Theatre Day Message Author 2014

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus almost all over the world, practically all World Theatre Day events were cancelled to stop the spreading of the virus - for the safety and health of each and everyone on a global scale.

We strongly recommend to you to celebrate World Theatre Day, the message author and his message in a strong way as usual - but in a different way - safe.

The International Theatre Institute, all the members and friends of ITI, all the members of the Centres, the Executive Council, the General Secretariat and Partner Organizations of ITI are called to share their love and support for theatre, for the artists, and their performances and actions online.

www.world-theatre-day.org
www.iti-worldwide.org
www.iti-worldwide.org/encouragementpage.html

Happy World Theatre Day to you!

“ We need to fight apathy, lethargy, pessimism, greed, and disregard for the world we live in, the planet we live on. Theatre has a role, a noble role, in energizing and mobilizing humanity to lift itself from its descent into the abyss. It can uplift the stage, the performance space, into something sacred.

”
Shahid NADEEM, World Theatre Day Message Author 2020



International Theatre Institute ITI, UNESCO, 1 Rue Miollis, 75015 Paris, France. Headquarters: 1332 Xinzha Road, Jing'an, Shanghai, China 200040. Copyright: ITI, Photo Credits ITI and Ajoka Theatre

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