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The Muse of Urban Delirium: The Arts and Social Change in Transformational Cities

Abstract

It is argued that cities are shaped by the confrontation of reality and values as mitigated by the arts. More specifically, residents at the height of deep, profound, and rapid social, political, and economic change struggle to define and redefine their own identities. They often do so by creating new artistic forms which, over time, become respectable as they themselves move into the mainstream. The article explores moments when the performing arts helped new social movers define who they are in six different cities on five continents inventing new forms of opera, theater, music, and dance. These cities shared a protean drive unleashed by their rising social classes which were struggling to define their own distinct identities within the very turmoil their own emergence had created.

Keywords: *urban sociology, city, arts, social changes, identities*

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Муза урбаністичних марень: мистецтво і соціальні зміни у місті, що трансформується

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Анотація

Стверджують, що міста формують своє обличчя у результаті пом'якшуваної мистецтвом конфронтації реальності із цінностями. Зокрема, мешканці, що перебувають на підйомі глибоких і стрімких соціальних, політичних та економічних змін, борються за визначення та перевизначення своїх ідентичностей. Часто це відбувається через створення нових художніх форм, що з плином часу стають цілком респектабельними, й собі потрапляючи до культурного мейнстріму. На прикладі шести різних міст на п'яти континентах у статті досліджуються певні моменти, коли виконавське мистецтво у нових формах опери, театру, музики й танцю допомагало новим соціальним дійовим особам визначитися, хто вони є. Спільним для цих міст був деякий мінливий імпульс, що його вивільняли присутні там соціальні класи, набуваючи ваги у суспільстві. Ці класи боролися за визначення власних відмітних ідентичностей у тій самій метушні міста, що й утворювалася з їхнім виникненням.

Ключові слова: соціологія міста, місто, мистецтво, соціальні зміни, ідентичності

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Муза урбанистических грез: искусство и социальные изменения в трансформирующемся городе

Аннотація

Утверждают, что города формируют свой облик в результате смягчаемой искусством конфронтации реальности и ценностей. В частности, жители, пребывающие на подъеме глубоких и стремительных социальных, политических и экономических перемен, борются за определение и переопределение своих идентичностей. Часто это происходит через создание новых художественных форм, которые со временем становятся вполне респектабельными, попадая в культурный мейнстрим. На примерах шести разных городов на пяти континентах в статье исследуются определенные моменты, когда исполнительское искусство в новых формах оперы, театра, музыки и танца помогало новым социальным действующим лицам определиться, кто они есть. Общим для этих городов был некий изменчивый импульс, который высвобождался присутствующими там социальными классами, приобретающими вес в обществе. Эти классы боролись за определение собственных отличительных идентичностей в той самой суматохе города, которая создавала их возникновением.

Ключевые слова: социология города, город, искусство, социальные перемены, идентичности

Brooklyn, New York, was hardly the hipster heaven during the late 1980s that it has become today. Brooklyn — like all of New York City — was at the height of a terrible crack cocaine epidemic when chaos and crime seemed to reign. Importantly, as fearful as New York at that time could feel, the city simultaneously was an enormously creative place. This seeming contradiction of urban destruction and creation stands at the center of the argument put forward in “The Muse of Urban Delirium” [Ruble, 2017].

The contradictory forces and trends reshaping Brooklyn at the time were starkly on display at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. BAM — as the Academy was and is known — had established itself as perhaps New York’s most cutting-edge large-scale arts institution. The Academy’s main auditorium was a carefully — and undoubtedly, expensively — renovated ruin, in which each crack in the plaster, peeling painted wall, and exposed pipe had been carefully planned. The venue had just the right touch of studied decay for any extravaganza.

More striking, however, was the real decay just outside, on the blocks along downtown Brooklyn’s Atlantic Avenue. The city’s horrifying crack cocaine epidemic had tossed a proverbial match into the borough’s noxious mix of violence, racial tensions, crime, and poverty. The domestic decrepitude inside the BAM auditorium was nothing compared with what was happening outside on the neighboring streets. By turning their stage over to the wild imaginations of frontier-breaking artists, BAM’s overseers hoped to produce a manufactured delirium. But there was nothing manufactured about the delirium outside.

One October evening in 1988 performance stands out even against these starkly conflicting tendencies, that of Lee Breuer and Bob Telson’s “The Warrior Ant”. Best summarized by a “New York Magazine” critic John Simon, “The Warrior Ant” was “the story of the birth of the warrior ant, his descent into hell to find his termite father, his dalliance with a death moth that proves his undoing, as told among a Trinidadian carnival with bands circling on gaudily painted trucks by narrators in 18th century costume, West African griots¹ and Brazilian singers to the accompaniment of Caribbean and Afro-Cuban music, Western chamber music, American rock, with eighteen-foot mechanical ants, Egyptian belly dancers, Chinese glove puppets², and a bunraku³ puppet show” [Simon, 1988].

One particular performer stood out for all the critics even in this pandemonium: Tamamatsu Yoshida, a *bunraku* puppet master brought in from Osaka. Among the many puppets appearing that evening was a four-foot tall samurai playing the *bongos*⁴. Where did he and his craft emerge? How did they travel so far to fit into the chaos of 1980s Brooklyn so effortlessly? It turns out that late 17th-century Osaka where *bunraku* emerged was not all that far from 20th-century Brooklyn.

¹ Musicians and storytellers whose performances include tribal histories and genealogies. The *griot* profession is hereditary.

² A type of opera using cloth puppets.

³ A Japanese traditional puppet theatre in which half-life-size dolls act out a chanted dramatic narrative.

⁴ A joined pair of small deep-bodied drums, typically held between the knees and played with the fingers.

Osaka — long Japan's leading commercial center — was at the dawn of the Tokugawa era¹: a raucous, greed-driven town vibrating with the energies of people who were looked down on by elites. Local merchants — who were especially frowned upon by their aristocratic social superiors — embraced an unruly new theatrical form that had emerged from sex-laced dances originally performed by female theatrical troops — *kabuki*. Given censorship laws, puppets could say things and do things that actors could not and, in Osaka in particular, the theatrical dyad of *kabuki* and puppetry was born.

In other words, the theatrical cousins of *kabuki* and *bunraku* are products of a distinctive urban culture at the height of a delirium created by social and economic transformations so rapid that they turned life on its head. They became more than forums for popular entertainment, though they certainly that; they became venues in which an emerging class of townspeople defined who they were. They lasted for centuries ever since because they gave meaning to a chaotic urban reality. Herein lies the deep connection between a Japanese art form centuries old and a down-at-the-heels decaying American urban landscape. Furthermore, here are some potentially powerful insights for understanding the creative force of cities.

Cities and Artistic Innovation

To understand how this is so, it is important to set down some basic principles about cities. First, cities are the largest and arguably most complex product of the human enterprise. Second, because cities are made by humans, they are necessarily imperfect. Third, that imperfection forces humans to become innovative and creative. Fourth, as a result, urban existence encourages humans to become self-starting achievers. Together, these four assumptions form the philosophical bedrock on which “The Muse of Urban Delirium” rests.

This perspective is hardly original; but it does need to be refreshed over time. Most well-read urban scholars probably recall perusing Lewis Mumford's “The City in History” [Mumford, 1961]. As seminal as his critical writing about cities has been, Mumford has been overtaken by the scholarship of the past half-century; and more. This is hardly surprising; it is the way of academic inquiry. Yet, if Mumford is not a good guide for reaching a contemporary audience, where to begin?

Among the numerous possible answers to that question lies Sir Peter Hall's astonishingly impressive volume “Cities in Civilization” [Hall, 1998]. Hall's book, which appeared a generation ago, explored what he identified as the uneasy and unstable tension between a set of conservative forces and values — aristocratic, hierarchical, religious, conformist — and a set of radical values which were the exact opposite: bourgeois, open, rational, skeptical. For Hall, this tension produced societies that were troubled about themselves.

In defining what animates his work, Hall argued that creative cities are complex, even disorderly, cosmopolitan communities. They are certainly not the easiest and safest places in which to live, but they are always forcing their residents to

¹ The final period of traditional Japan under the *shogunate* (military dictatorship), which lasted from 1603 to 1867 before the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

invent. Hall demonstrates this by a magisterial tour of history's most inventive cities at moments when they were at their apogees. True, he has surprises — in addition to Periclean Athens he writes about [Elvis] Preslian Memphis [Tennessee]. But fundamentally, Hall is looking at places long acknowledged to be places at the top of their game.

“The Muse of Urban Delirium” tells the story of a different kind of city — one that is far closer to the norm of urban life. This volume examines the sorts of places that perhaps never are thought of as even having a game to be at the top of. They are the rough and tumble places that often get overlooked in history. Even when examining such an obvious candidate for urban glory as New York, that city is approached through the prism of immigrants, African American creativity, and Yiddish theatre¹.

Accepting the wisdom of Spanish novelist and journalist Manuel Vázquez Montalbán — who once wrote, “I like cities that destroy themselves. Triumphant cities smell of disinfectant” [Vázquez, 2003: p. 3], “The Muse of Urban Delirium” explores six different moments when the performing arts help new social movers define who they are. These are stories which played out in six different cities on five continents inventing new forms of opera, theater, music, and dance. Despite all their obvious differences, these cities shared a protean drive unleashed by their rising social classes which were struggling to define their own distinct identities within the very turmoil their own emergence had created. These are the stories of the emergence of *kabuki* and *bunraku* puppetry in Osaka and of Baroque comic opera in Naples during the 17th and 18th centuries; early 20th-century *tango* in Buenos Aires and musical theatre in New York; and late 20th- and 21st-century music in Cape Town and theater in Yekaterinburg.

The Creative Power of Urban Delirium

This exploration is animated further by another powerful insight drawn from the urban literature; namely Rem Koolhaas' notion of urban delirium. In his path-breaking exhortation of New York during the 1970s “Delirious New York”, Koolhaas argued that the metropolis strives to reach a mythical point where the world is completely fabricated by man so that it absolutely coincides with his desires [Koolhaas, 1978: p. 293]. But how are those desires shaped?

That prior question is the focus of “The Muse of Urban Delirium” which argues that cities are shaped by the confrontation of reality and values as mitigated by the arts. More specifically, residents at the height of deep, profound, and rapid social, political, and economic change struggle to define and redefine their own identities. They often do so by creating new artistic forms which, over time, become respectable as they themselves move into the mainstream. For example, in the course of four decades *hip-hop* moved from its invention at a 1973 back-to-school party in a housing project on Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx to the heart of Manhattan on Broadway in Manhattan with the 2015 arrival of the transformational musical “Hamilton”.

For New York theater, the 1920s were a glorious Golden Age — with new theaters, new plays, celebrated productions, and an ever-expanding audience. Al-

¹ Also known as the Yiddish Rialto. The theatre had gained popularity by the mid-1920s.

though the movies began to cut into theater audiences elsewhere, the frisson of live performances and sound kept the stage on top in New York, and would do so throughout the decade. Eventually, however, the “talkies”¹ and the Great Depression would bring the curtain down on this unique era of the Broadway theater’s cultural preeminence.

This Golden Age emerged through the integration of outsiders — immigrants and African Americans — into a previously native predominately European theater culture. Significantly, many of the New Yorkers recreating this culture were born abroad, or were the children of immigrant parents. For example, some 1,500 musicians emigrated from war-and-revolution-torn Europe between 1933 and 1944, and many settled in New York. Broadway was full of ambitious immigrants.

Why? Perhaps these immigrants were more observant of the American reality that they sought to enter, and perhaps they drew on their previous connections and traditions in their homelands to provide the cultural and social capital they needed to make their way in the New World. Perhaps, as in Argentina, these outsiders were less shaped by the myths of local elites. Or perhaps an entertainment business dominated by immigrants was more open to outsiders than other realms of American life, such as finance, business, and the law. Most critically, perhaps these immigrants’ new hometown — arguably, the most successful immigrant city the world has ever known — created plentiful opportunities for them to shine.

The 1920s witnessed the arrival of new talents in the world of New York theater. These men and women would define American popular stage culture for much of the remainder of the 20th century. Yet, Broadway theater — and the larger city which produced it — would undergo considerable change following the Second World War.

In many ways, postwar New York was the same city it had been for much of the 20th century. Several trends, however, were beginning to make themselves felt, which, within a decade or two, would define rapid urban decline. Automobiles and suburban dreams carried more and more residents to homes outside the city; immigrants, restricted by law in the mid-1920s, began to disappear; and manufacturing fled first out of town, then to the rising American Sun Belt, and eventually abroad.

A sharp decline in the percentage of New Yorkers who were foreign born represents an enormously important change. By 1970, less than 20 percent of the city’s population had been born abroad, an all-time low. This trend reversed itself in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of an opening of the US federal immigration policy. By the first decade of the 2000s, more than a third of all New Yorkers had been born abroad.

These tumultuous changes — first, the end of decades of near-continuous growth; then, calamitous decline; and finally, a remarkable revival — shaped what would appear on New York stages as well as who would be in the audience. New Yorkers who were recent immigrants brought fresh energy, music, and tastes to Broadway, as they had always done before. The search for new identities transformed what people wanted to hear and see, as did new technologies — ranging

¹ Another name for early sound movies.

from long-playing recordings to television, to computer screens, the Internet, and the Cloud.

A younger generation of composers, lyricists, choreographers, directors, producers, and performers bridled at what they saw to be limitations of their mentors and their seniors. Their impatience with existing forms grew out of different realities they experienced coming of age. They appreciated different kinds of music — including the sounds expressed by African Americans — and they were drawn to modern dance — as opposed to classical ballet and traditional musical dance forms such as *tap*¹. They had been well educated, having benefited from the new theater and music programs that were being offered at the nation's top universities and conservatories — and thus they had completed courses in now-well-established drama programs and had received more inclusive music educations that moved beyond European classical training.

Enduring art forms continually prompt cries of despair over their impending death. Many times, critics have declared the imminent death of opera, ballet, jazz, *bluegrass*², *kabuki*, theater, and Broadway. Yet new generations come along and discover what came before them in new ways. Just as some began to write of Broadway as nothing more than light diversion for tourists, Lin-Manuel Miranda came along.

Miranda was born in Manhattan of Puerto Rican heritage, and he grew up in Inwood, a blue-collar neighborhood near the island's northern tip cut off by subway switching yards from downtown. The area evolved from being the home of Jewish and Irish immigrants to the home of Hispanic — often Dominican — newcomers. This end of Manhattan has long been reserved for the latest arrivals to find their way in a new homeland, often giving rise to new cultural permutations in the process.

Miranda's first show — “In the Heights” — set Broadway on fire by bringing new energy from the ever-evolving life of the city around them. But “In the Heights” was just the beginning. In 2015, Miranda's hip-hop interpretation of Ron Chernow's authoritative biography of Alexander Hamilton [Chernow, 2004] broke every mold on Broadway. Starting out with its two-month run at the Public Theater, “Hamilton” tells the story of one of the country's most overlooked founding parents through the lens of the hip-hop generations infused with the sounds of New York's street culture.

Music from the Streets onto the Stage

Beyond Osaka and New York, 17th- and 18th-century Naples, turn-of-the-20th-century Buenos Aires, and late 20th-century Yekaterinburg and Cape Town offer additional examples of how urban life transforms performance culture. For example, Naples under Spanish Hapsburgian viceregal administration between 1503 and 1700, and under Bourbon rule, which lasted with interruptions from 1734 until 1861, was a place where the future of European music be-

¹ A style of dancing in which the dancers tap the rhythm of the music with their feet, wearing special shoes with pieces of metal on the heels and toes.

² A type of folk music originating in Kentucky known as the “Bluegrass State”. Bluegrass is a plant that grows in many of the state's pastures.

came its present. The Neapolitans successfully interjected middle- and low-brow musical forms into high-brow ones. In doing so, they added the verve and energy of their own city to propel European classical music forward.

Naples was more than the capital of the world's music. It was a mixing bowl in which European music became supercharged with the vitality of the non-aristocratic. Neapolitan performers and composers reshaped opera by bringing the contradictions of everyday Neapolitan life to the stage. From there, they moved on to reshape European music as they spread out across the continent.

As Greek colonists quickly appreciated, the Bay of Naples promises humans one of the most salubrious habitats on the planet. The bay's environment, in fact, is so perfect that local residents have rarely been forced to be enterprising. They have merely needed to live off the land and sea as the mild Mediterranean climate, safe harbor, turquoise sky, and indigo sea have sustained lush vegetation boosted by a deep-layer rich volcanic soil and an easy growing season.

Yet all was not quite idyllic. The inhabitants of this earthly paradise constantly faced the possibility of near-instantaneous annihilation by Mount Vesuvius. Categorized as a "red" volcano for the lava that periodically spews from its crater, Vesuvius has erupted cataclysmically over the centuries, as when it eradicated the Roman port cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in AD 79.

The city's combination of natural appeal and peril has nourished a lively culture marked from the time of its original settlers, the Epicureans, by a distinctive blend of sensuous, joyful hedonism and rigorous, stern sanctity — of paganism and piety. Against this backdrop of anxieties over their unruliness and depravity — complicated by volcanic eruptions and other natural calamities — the Neapolitans turned across the centuries to music, frivolity, and prayer for solace and salvation.

Popular music merged with sacred music, as the vernacular and the formal flowed together with wild music — including the *villanella*, *frottola*, and the musical accompaniment to the *tarantella*¹ dance — wafting throughout the city's streets and alleyways. The merely domestic combined with the communal, audible sensations of life in Europe's most densely packed city, where people lived literally on top of one another. By the 17th and 18th centuries, Naples had become one of the indisputable music capitals of Europe.

Seen from this vantage point, the Neapolitans unsurprisingly embraced the emerging performing art of opera in the early 17th century. However, the serious classical allegory of *opera seria*² provided far too earnest a backdrop for Neapolitan life. Therefore, by the early 18th century, librettists, composers, producers, and performers had begun to look for ways to enliven the evening by interjecting comic interludes in between the acts of the main performance. These exuberant *entr'acte* creations drew on local characters from the streets of Naples, as opposed

¹ *Villanella* is a Neapolitan 16th-century part song, usually for three unaccompanied voices. *Frottola* is an Italian secular song popular in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. It could be performed by unaccompanied voices or by a solo voice with instrumental accompaniment. *Tarantella* is a couple folk dance characterised by a fast upbeat tempo. The musical accompaniment is provided by the accordion, castanets, and tambourines.

² *Opera seria* ("serious opera") is an Italian dramatic opera with a classical or mythological theme. It emerged in the late 17th and was dominant throughout the 18th century.

to Greek and Roman heroes. Their performers sang their roles in local dialect rather than more formal Italian, Latin, or Greek. Their stories — which were often incoherent and unstructured — were natural and spontaneous. Their music favored straightforward melody. Their comedy favored broad buffoonery and ridicule that often bordered on the crude. And their undeveloped characters came straight from the stock of traditional *commedia dell'arte*¹ story lines.

Over time, these short entr'acte performances, which were done in front of the closed curtain, were used to deflect attention from the stage, setting changes taking place behind. Performers developed standardized forms engaging the audiences, so these short interludes gained popularity on their own. Eventually, these small diversions evolved into their own art form, the Neapolitan *opera buffa*². Though *opera buffa* spread through Europe — reaching its pinnacle achievements with Mozart's three collaborations with his librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte ("Le Nozze di Figaro" [1786]; "Don Giovanni" [1787]; and "Così fan tutte" [1789–90]) and Gioachino Rossini's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia"³ [1816] — it nonetheless remained quintessentially Neapolitan.

Since its founding, Naples has been such a city of sudden and disconcerting juxtaposition of opposites — the sort of place that creates and recreates over and over again the kind of delirious urbanism that constantly bursts forth with invention and creativity. The Naples of paradise and devils — of delirium and creativity — is a place where the devils make the music.

Melding the Incompatible into Something New

Moving to turn-of-the-20th-century Buenos Aires, the Argentinian port was then the second largest city in the Americas; and the second largest immigrant city in the world. Argentina and Buenos Aires already had survived a particularly tumultuous history from the city's early times as the largest slave port in South America and a backdoor contraband trading post into the heartland of Spanish America to the north. As late as the middle of the 19th century, the city remained more or less a third Afro-Argentine, a legacy which later elites worked as hard as they could to erase in an effort to turn their country and city into the most "European" (read "white") on the continent.

By the century's end, tens of thousands of migrants from Southern Europe had steamed into the great port city's downscale neighborhoods bringing along with them their languages, religions, folk traditions, and music. Once there, they met with displaced rural farmhands and cowhands and the descendants of a once-vibrant Afro-Argentine community to create a new urban culture. The explosive fusion of these groups changed eating habits, courting patterns, religious practices, and the language of everyday life, while producing vibrant new dances including what became known as *tango*.

¹ An Italian popular comedy, developed chiefly during the 16th–18th centuries, in which masked entertainers improvised from a plot outline based on themes associated with stock characters and situations.

² A comic opera, especially one with characters and situations drawn from everyday life.

³ "The Marriage of Figaro", "Thus Do All Women", "The Barber of Seville".

Tango took shape at the end of the 19th century; drawing on elements brought by poor migrants from the interior, immigrants from Europe, and members of the Afro-Argentine Monserrat neighborhood in town. The story of how tango emerged from their *mélange* is a complex one open to great dispute. The larger point is that the development of the tango – which has no foundational moment but suddenly just was – is the story of exiles. More specifically, the history of tango is the history of those exiles becoming true *porteños*¹ – the history of outsiders becoming insiders.

Tango culture is inclusive, mutating to absorb new influences. Once submerged into tango culture, the outsider and the newcomer become one with the great city itself. The precise origins of the tango are long lost. Like American jazz and Brazilian *choro*² and *samba*, the tango is what happens when European, African, and American rhythms, music, instruments and bodies collide. How that collision started is hidden away from view as it transpired in the sorts of urban corners where outsiders rarely ventured and insiders didn't bother to record.

Tango, of course, went international and transformed itself all along the way. Tango today is no more Andalusian, African, Mediterranean, or even Argentine that it was when it emerged on the edge of a growing metropolis at the edge of the world. Complex and, at times, brutal, the tango is more than anything else beautiful. Its beauty is caused by the constant precariousness of life in a city where the kaleidoscope of cultural differences spins too quickly. It is what happens when an urban culture and a metropolitan place force people who can barely stand one another to embrace.

A similar pattern emerged within the music of Cape Town. The Second World War marked a turning point for Cape Town, as it did for so much of the world. The presence of soldiers and sailors from around the world – including African American warriors – only heightened the possibility for cross-cultural pollination. More forms of American popular culture arrived with the troops; more money flowed through town. The city developed a distinctive jazz scene which drew energies created by the mixing of multiple musical cultures.

Afrikaner nationalism was also on the rise, fueled in part by the growing presence of the English language, brought along by British war efforts and American popular culture. More perniciously, segregation – often practiced by custom – was becoming an ideological anchor for the South African regime. Racial separation, which had been omnipresent throughout South African history, became steadily more pronounced as the country entered the postwar era. Within a few years, every state institution had been Afrikanerized. The Nationalists' signature policy became quickly known as *apartheid*, a program of race-based social engineering that applied firm racial categories which claimed to provide a "scientific" basis for identifying racial groups.

The history of apartheid is also the history of resistance, primarily by Africans. The local Cape Town urban culture – with its long history of racial propinquity and decades of British colonial rule – stood as a slight to the new regime.

¹ People who live in a coastal (port) city of South America.

² An instrumental popular music genre whose origin dates back to 19th century Rio de Janeiro.

Simultaneously, however, many Capetonians supported – or at least acquiesced to – apartheid; and others benefited personally from the various dislocations that were being imposed from Pretoria. A long and complex relationship developed among the authorities, the opposition, and Cape Town’s various urban communities.

The racist world surrounding jazz was hardening fast. If the improvisational freedom of the music challenged the founding tenets of the authoritarian regime, this regime in turn challenged the improvisers. There were fewer and fewer venues where jazz players could perform (even within their own racial groups). Record companies and state-controlled media outlets stopped promoting the music and the musicians. Musicians could not get gigs; they were not being hired to teach; they were not being sought out by fans. Some of Cape Town’s best jazz players stayed in town, playing for families, friends, and other musicians, whenever and wherever they could. Others went abroad, enriching the jazz scenes of cities across Europe and North America.

Despite the boundaries imposed by apartheid, South African jazz thrived creatively in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. New sounds flooded into Cape Town. Cape Town’s economy created a demand for labor that could only be met by African migrants from the countryside. Unable by law to live just anywhere, these migrants piled into increasingly self-built townships on the Cape Flats on the other side of Table Mountain from downtown. They brought their musical lives with them.

Over time, the role of music in opposition to apartheid would grow and, with it, the transgression of musical boundaries would gain in significance. In Cape Town, a collective of local musicians of all genres – the “Musical Action for People’s Power” – organized in the 1980s to perform at rallies, protests, and other events that brought together music from jazz to Zulu dance. Such efforts created new forms of “Afro-pop fusion”, which blended music from many styles. “Musical Action” eventually became a combined township booking agency, ensemble stable, music school, and student big band, thereby creating new opportunities for the sort of syncretistic cross-fertilization that has marked Cape Town’s music from the very beginning.

The city’s history, from the moment a motley band of Dutch East India Company employees stumbled to the shore, has been marked by all the crimes, injustices, and indignities that the human mind can conjure to commit against those who are somehow different. The human mind seems capable of offering up endless criteria for asserting differences, so the city’s past and present have contained far more stories of villainy than decency.

Yet the incredibly rich history of Capetonian music reveals a different story, one of improbable beauty and inventiveness. From the moment when the Dutch arrived at Table Bay, the town has been home to an opulent multiplicity of humankind, each seeking solace and meaning in the creation and performance of song and dance. The intermingling of indigenous African and imported European and Asian instruments; the two-century long absorption, adaptation, and reinvention of American musical forms that continues until today; and the stunning integration of Islamic, Christian, and African vocal forms – all speak to an uncommon Capetonian capacity to create aural beauty. Music in Cape Town has become a most human response to how individuals can assert their humanity and claim the dignity that is their due in a world of constant brutish assault. Cape

Town's musical subconscious has always understood that we are all the bearers of the same mixed-up cultural *bredie*¹.

Confronting Authoritarianism

Another striking example of creative beauty emerging in an unexpected urban corner is Yekaterinburg. Located a handful of kilometers inside Asia's western border, the city is Russia's fourth largest city, a major industrial center, one of Russia's major criminal centers, and the focal point of the "New Russian Drama" movement that produced another startling "golden" age in Russian theater.

Founded in 1723 by Peter the Great, the city was every bit a product of empire as Buenos Aires, New York, and Cape Town — but as a landlocked frontier town rather than a randy port city. Unusual for imperial Russian cities, Yekaterinburg was an industrial headquarters rather than an administrative center and, as such, was always driven by the imperatives of business and engineering rather than by the exigencies of ideology and politics. Devouring talent, the city became the sort of melting pot of empire that promotes unrefined interethnic and interclass contact that nurtured a distinctive "soul", as a literary lion Valentin Luk'yanin² likes to put it. That soul outlived the city's Soviet experience.

What is important for the story being told here is that, by the late 1990s, this hard-edged rough and tumble town had no shortage of talented theater people and no dearth of people who had been slapped in the face by life, pushed into the gutter, and abandoned by those who ran the show. Theater requires more than setting down ideas from a single mind with a pen and paper or a keyboard and screen. Plays are social acts, requiring playwrights and actors and directors and sponsors, and stages, and audiences and money.

Early in the 1990s, many observers argued that theater was just one more victim of the post-Soviet transition. Because it seemed commercially unviable and bereft of fresh ideas, Russian theater entered a period that to many was marked by death throes of excruciating pain. But just as some were sounding the death knell for the Russian stage, the "New Russian Drama" movement was coalescing around the nexus of several momentous events including the arrival of the British Council, the Royal Court Theatre, and British "In-Yer-Face"³ theater motivated by the notion that writers and theater troupes should interact with everyday life and not just amuse comfortable patrons.

Newcomers from far-flung provincial cities such as Yekaterinburg, Togliatti, Kemerovo, Omsk, and Irkutsk found a coherent new voice to express the traumas and pathologies of their daily lives. While each of these regional centers has an important role in the story, Yekaterinburg became the focal point because, to some extent, of a dynamic personality. This important figure is Nikolai Koliada who runs a major theater, organizes significant theater festivals for new works, and teaches upcoming playwrights and directors and actors. Jointly these young

¹ A word that refers to a traditional South African dish. It literally means "stew".

² The editor-in-chief of "Ural" literary magazine during 1980–1999.

³ *In-yer-face* ("in your face") is a slang expression used to describe something (e. g., advertising, performance) done in such a way that it shocks people.

playwrights and directors produced a hard-edged new theater that put a spotlight on some of post-Soviet Russia's sharpest edges.

Unsurprisingly, the "New Russian Drama" movement has not been to everyone's taste. Russian nationalists complain about its association with Britain, and deplore its fascination with sex, violence, depravity, and general *chernukha*, or filth. Indeed, this genre of literature has faced increasing obstacles in recent years following the consolidation of Vladimir Putin's regime.

But such criticism misses a perhaps larger truth. Many of the authors and plays categorized as constituting the "New Russian Drama" movement seek to reveal more than the pathologies of their own society. Their characters retain a core human dignity in the face of the most degrading circumstances. Plays are infused by a larger spirituality, in mocking contrast to the events taking place on stage. This underlying attitude of profound humanity beneath the surface horror of post-Soviet life attracted audiences back to the theaters. *Chernukha* — filth — served a larger end than just to shock. It created moments for redemption.

The tensions around Putin's revived presidency exploded in Yekaterinburg when Koliada supported Putin's candidacy. As that episode revealed, the Russian theatrical community is part of larger Russian society and reflects some of the same divisions as society at large. More tellingly, a number of Russian cultural policies — including bans on obscenity in artistic works, limits on non-state funding for cultural institutions, and the growth of a xenophobic nationalism — marked the end of an era.

John Freedman, former theater critic for "The Moscow News" and a major chronicler of post-Soviet Russian theater, perhaps captured the moment best when he observed: "The community of theater writers is under attack; key values and aspirations no longer unite it... A break has occurred, and now we wait to see what comes next" [Freedman, 2014]. But whatever that next step will be it is certain to have been shaped by the exciting innovations of the "New Russian Drama" movement before; the originations of playwrights struggling to make sense of the changes in city life taking place all around them.

Making Urban Diversity Work

More than two decades ago, in 1993, the Harvard government professor Robert Putnam published his now-classic study "Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy" [Putnam et al., 1993]. Trying to answer the question of why Northern Italian cities had developed vibrant civic traditions, which came to support the growth of democratic institutions, but Southern Italian cities had not, Putnam was surprised to find a strong correlation between civic health and choral societies¹.

Putnam masterfully argued that choral societies emerged from the same broad reservoir of social capital that is required to support civic vitality. Appearing just as countries throughout the former communist world were struggling to create new democracies, Putnam's work became something of a Holy Grail for promoters of a new political order. The problem, however, was that Putnam's

¹ Organized bodies of amateur singers who meet regularly to perform choral music.

work failed to sufficiently explain how such civic virtue and social capital could be created in the first place.

Perhaps hard-nosed democracy advocates pursuing measurable advances toward institutionally bounded representative institutions considered music little more than white noise. If so, they may have missed part of a solution to Putnam's seemingly unanswered challenge. Song, after all, has bound humans together for millennia, and the social interaction required to create vocal beauty that can be transferred to other activities. Choral societies are not just a reflection of civic health, but may in reality be central to its origins.

The significance of social capital for civic well-being is more than theoretical conjecture. A growing body of evidence drawn from the responses to such recent disasters as Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy suggests that those communities which have the highest stores of social capital before suffering a communal trauma recover most quickly following both human-made and natural disasters. This capital does not require deep knowledge of one another — like a casual sociability that allows neighbors and colleagues to turn to one another in times of crisis.

The performing arts encourage just such a geniality by bringing together audiences and performers to share a moment of conviviality. They open pathways for outsiders to become insiders, adding new creative energy to cities. They convert urban delirium into an asset, as can be seen for each of the cities and performing arts explored here.

The dynamism of 17th-century Naples and Osaka reflected the energy of new political regimes and the broadening of commerce. Their wealth drew tens of thousands of migrants from the surrounding countryside into town and created new social classes. Opera and *kabuki* responded to the desires of the ambitious rising *nouveaux bourgeoisies* as they dreamed of ascending ever higher in the social hierarchy. The broad comedies of *opera buffa* were sung in the language of the street by characters lifted out of everyday life. *Kabuki* was still closer to the ground, having originated in the Tokugawa sex trade. Both opera and *kabuki* were intensely urban in their character from the very beginning. Opera, of course, initially began at court, often in small towns. It secured its place in European culture in the grand cities of the era — first in Venice and Naples; and later in London, Paris, and Vienna. *Kabuki*, from its earliest performances in Kyoto, always was about pleasing audiences of townspeople.

New York and Buenos Aires of a century ago were the very definitions of urban intensity, as tens of thousands of immigrants arrived from across Europe. These outsiders challenged assumptions about every aspect of daily life. In coming to the New World, they joined societies predicated on integration. Culture throughout the Americas for a couple of centuries before had formed around locally distinctive blends of native, African, and European elements — a process heightened in the urban pressure cookers of Buenos Aires and New York.

20th-century Cape Town and Yekaterinburg were products of colonial projects united by some of the harshest social and political experimentation of the 20th century. Because these cities' performing arts were set in regimes in which insiders sought to keep outsiders permanently under heel, performances gave voice to those who otherwise could not speak. In both cities, jazz and rock performers, and theater directors and playwrights, uttered the unutterable. They created public spaces where those who were to be kept apart nonetheless came to-

gether. As collective expressions, the performing arts enabled community members to impose their own inner world on a cityscape of immense complexity.

The contradictions of urban life are a wellspring of invention, converting the sudden and disconcerting juxtaposition of opposites — of high and low culture, good and evil, foreign and domestic — into an asset that enriches the cityscape. “The Muse of Urban Delirium” draws on histories of the performing arts — opera, dance, theater, and music — to provide insight into the creativity of urban life. They tell the story of moments when the urban kaleidoscope has turned with such delirious speed that the city has become the muse for many among their most creative inhabitants.

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