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The Diary: Tony Hall

By Tony Hall

The outgoing chief of the Royal Opera House on what Britain is teaching Brazil about art and culture – and the role of dance in development



Luke Waller

While there are many reasons for flying down to Rio, I can suggest one of the more unlikely ones – if you can find your way to something that predates Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' first movie pairing by almost 25 years. It's the gents' urinal on the second floor of the beautiful Theatro Municipal in the centre of the city. The reason I recommend a look is to read what's written on the porcelain: "Made by Johnson Bros, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, England". In 1909 it was one of the many things we exported to Brazil. What we're more likely to export today, and the reason I've come to Rio, is a British approach to art and culture.

It is extraordinary how much coverage there's been in the Brazilian media about the Royal Opera House galas in Rio. Two of the Royal Ballet's principal dancers – Thiago Soares and Roberta Marquez – are big names in their native country, real superstars. The cheers, screams and applause when they appear on stage underscore the point. So does the warm reception for the other principals from the company and the singers from the Jette Parker Young Artists programme. The politicians are excited too. The governor of the state of Rio is coming to one of the performances, and he's invited his president.

With Carla Camurati, the inexhaustible and inspiring boss of the Theatro Municipal, the Royal Opera House has signed an agreement to work together for the next four years. This is not one-way traffic; we're learning too. They want to bring in new audiences – an idea I particularly like is where every seat in the house for a day a year is sold on the day for a *real* (about 33p). There are also things that could be useful to us in relation to our projects in Essex, north Kent and Bedfordshire, where the ROH is working with deprived communities. Things may seem starker in Brazil but we're dealing with similar issues, proving that the arts and culture have a vital role to play.

It's not just us. The Sage at Gateshead, the Southbank Centre, the Barbican and other organisations are also working with Brazilian counterparts. The creative Britain that the world saw last summer is what excites them. Cultural diplomacy, soft power, call it what you will. A few days in Rio make it clear that this is something we're good at – and need to take seriously.

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The worst behaviour by taxi drivers anywhere must be in Rio. On one trip, our driver has a satnav on one screen, a *telenovela* or Brazilian soap on another, and is talking on the phone, while we move between lanes at 50mph without so much as a blink of an indicator. We are going to two favelas. In the first, a British charity, Street Kids International, does an amazing job teaching young people how to be entrepreneurs – to think about what they'll sell, to whom, at what price and at what cost. On their first day, Monday, they're quiet, eyes down, stropic. On Friday, I can hear the shrieks and whoops as soon as I reach the building. One young woman is working out how to make a business giving ballet classes. So many people working in the arts are real entrepreneurs – she's definitely one of them, and later that night we make her dream come true: she meets Thiago Soares.

Our second favela visit is just as exciting. We are escorted into the notorious Vigário Geral, our arrival communicated by fireworks. We are then greeted by a sea of drummers ranging from three-year-olds to teenagers, who lead us into the Afro Reggae centre, set up 20 years ago to counter drugs and violence through the arts. Afro Reggae now works in six favelas, reaching 3,000 people a day. We watch a ballet piece by younger children and a Brazilian-style dance by the older ones who act as mentors and role models for the younger children. Everyone is keen to say hello, to have their photograph taken with Roberta Marquez and to practise English.

Afro Reggae director Roberto Pacheco was one of the delegates at our symposium last week, in which the ROH education team spent two days with dance teachers from Rio looking at the role ballet and dance can play in developing children, inspiring them and giving them skills for life.

On my final day we discuss training for young people, particularly the backstage skills and crafts required within the creative industries. The needs and challenges in Rio are similar to those we face in the UK. Back in London I'm delighted the Royal Opera House is ready to announce that the Derek Butler Trust will secure our apprenticeship programme for the next decade. This kind of support is invaluable not only for the ROH but in developing young people for the industry more widely.

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Before Rio I was in New York for a concert in the home of the chairman of the American Friends of Covent Garden, Mrs Mercedes Bass, where Tony Pappano, music director of the ROH, accompanied the German soprano Diana Damrau. Earlier in the day I'd escaped to see an exhibition of work by Matisse. I was particularly struck by how he'd taken photographs of each stage of the creation of some paintings; ideas came and went as the work progressed. It reminded me of how fascinated audiences can be to see behind the scenes: last year 1.2m people watched *A Day in the Life of The Royal Ballet*, nine hours of live streaming from Covent Garden of classes, rehearsals, and productions coming together.

This is the last piece I'll write as chief executive of the Royal Opera House. From now on I'll be back whence I came – a member of the audience. The commitment, creativity and passion of everyone working at Covent Garden will always be with me. When she was director of the Royal Ballet, Monica Mason had a cushion in her office embroidered with a quotation from *As You Like It*: "I like this place and could willingly waste my time in it."

Tony Hall rejoins the BBC, as director-general, on April 2

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