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In my travels as a playwright recently, I have seen local art and culture wane throughout the world. In 2005 France sponsored a UNESCO convention with Canada to protect vulnerable cultures, by allowing government subsidies and quotas to advance culture and, 'implicitly, limit the access of Hollywood movies to their markets'. France's culture minister, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, said the convention supports 'cultural diversity for artists and national pride as well as peace... Hollywood movies account for 85 per cent of movie tickets sold around the world. In the United States, only 1 per cent of shown movies come from outside the United States'.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s in my early teens I grew up on movies in an art house in San Diego called The Unicorn. The movie theater had annual 24-hour movie marathons for which my strict French parents let me stay up all night. Truffaut's *Day For Night*, Claude Lelouche's *And Now My Love*, *The Grand Illusion* by Jean Renoir, Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, *Citizen Kane*, *Woman in the Dunes*, and when I was fourteen, unexpectedly, an X-rated film called *Turkish Delight* by Verhoeven.

Also during the 1970s when I was visiting my paternal grandparents in rural France I eagerly scanned the French *Télérama* guide, thrilled when I saw Hitchcock's *The Birds* listed. I was ecstatic when my grandparents and I gathered after dinner to watch the scary film on TV. My grandparents had a television when my parents in America refused to have one. French TV was better than American, they always said. *No commercials*.

In the 1980s I remember on a collective TV in Oran, Algeria, my mother's home-city, men watching the American TV show *Dynasty*, dubbed in Arabic in a café. I had never personally seen the show but the glitzy intrigues of wealthy Texans seemed an odd subject matter for the men in the cafés. However, the men seemed riveted.

In the 1990s my elderly maternal grandparents in Toulon, France, regularly watched the soap opera, *Santa Barbara*, while my cousins mocked the translated dialogue: '*Bob, je suis désolée*' ('Bob, I am SO sorry'). My grandparents' eyes did not leave the screen as they listened. Why the French, who prided themselves on their films, their art, their culture, allowed soap stars in *Santa Barbara* to speak in poorly dubbed French seemed bizarre. The American actors' lips often moved while no sound came out of their mouths.

In Cambodia in 2001 I was shocked to recognize my actress friend Lori Tan Chinn on TV one night in the Bill Murray comedy *What About Bob?*, which I'd never seen. She was playing a bus driver, grinning her big grin at me. I'd come an awfully long way to see that film. However, my students in Cambodia, in 2003 at the Royal University of Fine Arts, wrote filmic stories when taught them playwriting. A pretty girl comes to the city from the village to become a movie star. The scenes would shift cinematically, with no sense of theatrical language. Many of the theatrical forms of the country (*bassac*, *yike*, shadow puppetry) had been nearly wiped out by the communist Khmer Rouge, a regime targeting artists, and TV quickly asserted its power in the rebuilding of the country. Angelina Jolie became a UN Goodwill Ambassador to Cambodia after making *Tomb Raider* at the

ruins of Angkor Wat, and she adopted a Khmer boy she called Maddox, whom I often see in tabloids.

'The United States stood almost alone in opposing [the] new convention on cultural diversity designed to combat the homogenizing effect of cultural globalization,' reported the *New York Times*. President Bush felt it 'could be interpreted as authorizing governments to undermine the rights of minorities and to control both culture and the free trade in ideas and information'. Our economy thrives on people absolutely everywhere watching Hollywood bad guys in car chases, however America prefers to turn its back on real slaughter and bad air. Bush also opposes the Kyoto Protocol because he believes it also undermines free trade – though the treaty hopes to stabilize greenhouse gas emissions – a threat to the climate system. Bush also boycotts the International Criminal Court (ICC), because he assumes the tribunal will be used for politically-motivated prosecutions of Americans. It took the USA forty-two years to ratify the Genocide Convention designed by Raphael Lemkin, one of my personal heroes and the subject of my new play *Lemkin's House*. Lemkin said, 'Genocide can destroy a culture instantly, like fire can destroy a building in an hour.' Theoretically, his treaty tries to stop genocides before the ICC has to bring the war criminals to justice. And cultures might be saved in the long run.

After all the art films at The Unicorn, theater eventually became my way to tell stories in a voice that represents my multi-cultural roots. 'A theater is a house into which the spirit of its time, place and people is invited to dwell. In this way all theater is local,' writes Todd London. As a playwright I am deeply drawn to the communal spirit of theater, but it is sometimes confusing to see what actually qualifies as *local* in the world today. Recently when I was in New Orleans and Biloxi with playwrights Lynn Nottage and Joe Sutton to do research for a play about events surrounding Hurricane Katrina, I met a vibrant black community leader, Jearlean Osborne. She hosted us at her house for a copious local dinner, so we could listen to people speak about their experiences. After an intense evening of listening to stories of people surviving against major odds, and in many cases holding the Lord completely responsible for their fate, a woman who was particularly dynamic in recounting her story asked us what we were doing. We repeated that we were playwrights and she swiftly imagined a movie where her story would appear on screen. Other people at the dinner imagined we were really there to make money. We tried to convey the idea of a stage, live performance and of non-profit theater, but this was not at all easy to visualize. Hollywood has become more 'local' than theater to many people in America. Art in theater is delegated to a strange 'niche' group. Could the story of Oedipus killing his father and sleeping with his mother actually be a 'niche' story? Of course not.

Imagine a group of people in Cambodia sitting in a starry field at night watching a shadow puppet theater troupe perform, and imagine these same people turning on their TV to watch an American drama set in an upper middle-class suburb dubbed in Khmer. Will one eventually take precedence over the other?

I look forward to coming back and having our play performed in the communities of New Orleans and Biloxi and to seeing Jearlean Osborne and her friends in the audience. With theater, I have fallen in love with that communal, local spirit.

10. Alan Riding, 'UNESCO Adopts New Plan Against Cultural Invasion', *New York Times* (21 October 2005).