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Jump, Twirl, Paint, Act!

By [SARAH LYALL](#)



Tanztheater Wuppertal

London 2012 Festival and Cultural Olympiad events will include dances by Pina Bausch. [More Photos »](#)

LONDON — Seventy Shakespeare productions from companies around the world, performed in 30 theaters all over [Britain](#). A 33-foot-high puppet of Lady Godiva (wearing undergarments by the fashion designer Zandra Rhodes) moving through the streets of Coventry and into London, powered by 50 people on bicycles. Music from everywhere performed free in choice spots up and down the Thames.

The organizers are calling it “the biggest festival the U.K. has ever seen.” For eight weeks from June 21 to Sept. 9 — before, during and after the 2012 Olympic Games — Britain is hosting the [London 2012 Festival](#), an outpouring of events across the country including theater, music, visual arts, dance, sculpture, performance art, film and other genres. The plan is to put on a show that rivals the sports spectacle in breadth and excitement, not to mention Olympian flights of excess. London 2012 is part of a broader, multiyear effort called the [Cultural Olympiad](#), showcasing events like the World Shakespeare Festival, running April 23 until November, and a major exhibition of Lucian Freud portraits (through May 27) at the National Portrait Gallery. “Even before we won the

bid, we said we wanted culture to be part of it, in the run-up to the games and through the games themselves,” said Moira Sinclair, the executive director of Arts Council England, the London 2012 Festival’s lead organization.

Deborah Shaw, the associate director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, said the effort brought the modern Olympics back to the ancient idea that the arts were as important as sports.

“It was about celebrating the whole human — both physical prowess and the spiritual, artistic side,” Ms. Shaw said. “If this culture program works, it could mean a whole recalibration for the Olympics.”

This program does not come cheap, which is something of a disconnect at a time of severe government cutbacks in arts financing here. Organizers say they do not yet know the final cost of the Cultural Olympiad, but [The Guardian](#) recently estimated the total at more than \$154 million: \$83 million for commissions for the London 2012 Festival and \$71 million for the Cultural Olympiad.

Artists were chosen in a variety of ways: through commissions, applications and organizations taking part in the festival. In one initiative, called Artists Taking the Lead, potential participants were invited to submit projects that would celebrate Britain’s different regions. The winning ideas — a 30-foot seafaring yacht constructed from donated wooden objects, a floating building that generates its own power on the River Tyne — were then selected by a regional panel of artists.

The final lineup of events will be completed this month, when the full catalog is published. But dozens of projects — deadly serious and seriously offbeat, traditional and conceptual, from Britain and abroad — have been confirmed.

One piece, “Work No. 1197: All the Bells in a Country Rung as Loudly as Possible for Three Minutes,” by the Turner Prize-winning artist Martin Creed, is scheduled to take place from 8 to 8:03 a.m. on July 27, the first day of the Olympics. The idea, according to the festival’s [Web site](#), is to encourage the nation “to ring thousands of bells at the same time, whether school bells, church bells, town hall bells, bicycle bells or doorbells.”

Other events will be less fleeting, like a retrospective of the German choreographer Pina Bausch, who died in 2009, at the Barbican and Sadler’s Wells, which will feature 10 of her works; a Damien Hirst exhibition at the Tate Modern; and “Back2Black” with the Brazilian musician Gilberto Gil, a [three-day exploration](#) of the links between Africa and Brazil.

The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis will have a two-week residency at the Barbican and other spots, culminating in the British premiere of Mr. Marsalis’s “[Swing Symphony](#) (Symphony No. 3)”, performed with the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Simon Rattle. There will be [screenings](#) of Alfred Hitchcock silent movies, restored by the British Film Institute and shown with live musical accompaniment. At the Barbican, Cate Blanchett will star in “Big and Small,” by Botho Strauss.

Offbeat fare is also on the agenda, like “[Bee Detective](#),” a murder mystery in which the audience travels through a beehive.

The verdict on whether the selections in the cultural festival are successful may have to wait until after the Olympiad has ended. But for now cultural critics and members of Britain’s arts world establishment seem open-minded and optimistic. There will probably be little argument over the prominent inclusion of Britain’s most enduring cultural export, Shakespeare. As part of a program

called the [World Shakespeare Festival](#), some 70 productions will take place across Britain in 30 locations starting on April 23, Shakespeare's birthday.

"The theme of the festival is to look at Shakespeare as a world playwright, so we're not getting just one perspective on his work," said Ms. Shaw, who is also serving as the director of the World Shakespeare Festival.

The festival, which is costing the Royal Shakespeare Company about \$9.5 million, she said, will feature a dozen new productions, some in collaboration with international companies and some performed outside theaters. There will be amateur performances, a chance for people around the world to discuss online what Shakespeare means to them, and an educational conference on how Shakespeare is taught in schools. The Globe Theater in London is hosting an ambitious undertaking called Globe to Globe, in which all of Shakespeare's plays, and one poem, are to be performed, each in a different language and each from a different international company.

"Four hundred years ago he was using the world to talk about Elizabethan Britain, and it's very interesting now to look at how the world sees their own societies through the prism of Shakespeare," said Ms. Shaw, of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

That has raised some controversy, with a number of [artists recently calling](#) for the Globe to cancel a planned performance of "The Merchant of Venice" by the Israeli theater company Habima, which has performed in the Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

"By inviting Habima the Globe is associating itself with policies of exclusion practiced by the Israeli state and endorsed by its national theater company," said a letter in The Guardian that was signed by the director Mike Leigh and the actress Emma Thompson, among others. In response the Globe has said the festival is a "celebration of language," not "nations and states." It is also featuring a performance of "Richard II" by the [Palestinian](#) company Ashtar Theater.

The festival arrives during a painful economic retrenchment across Europe that has drastically cut into government grants for the arts. In Britain the Arts Council's government funds have been cut by 20 percent; many smaller groups have lost all their financing. "When we won the Olympics, we weren't in the same position we're in now," Ms. Sinclair, of Arts Council England, said.

But, she added, the program should make it clear how important the arts are to the world's perception of Britain — and Britain's perception of itself.

"The range of activity that we've got to offer shows that we really are a contemporary-art nation, as well as having this extraordinary heritage we can hook into," she said.

After the last athlete has gone home, she added, "we want to convey the sense that the Olympics is over, but the arts aren't."