

A BIG IDEA

Globe Council Chair Iraj Ispahani has supported the theatre since before it was built. He talks to Rachel Potts about being inspired by the late Sam Wanamaker and taking his vision into the future



Sam Wanamaker
celebrating the successful
settlement of the 1986
High Court case against
Southwark Council and
Derno Estates.
Photo: Alan Butland

Iraj Ispahani was not expecting to begin a 30-year journey in theatre when he met Sam Wanamaker in 1991, one evening after work. Ispahani is a scion and board member of the 200-year-old Ispahani Group, a conglomerate with roots in Iran and Bangladesh’s oldest tea business, and was then a banker at JP Morgan. The day after that first meeting, he was invited to Bankside, to the “leaky building in Bear Gardens” that was the Globe’s HQ, and was persuaded by Wanamaker – “who liked collecting people,” as Ispahani says – to support the as yet unrealised dream of reconstructing an Elizabethan playhouse next to the Thames. “I just jumped in with both feet,” says Ispahani.

Since then he has worked in a voluntary capacity for the Globe, including as a Trustee for 24 years and Deputy Chair of the Board, providing advice on governance strategy and organisational development. Over the years he has introduced his network to the Globe during all the major phases of development and outreach, from the first £8m capital project that began the building of Shakespeare’s Globe, to touring *Hamlet* to every country in the world bar two, and opening the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, finally creating a year-round working campus for theatre and education.

“I always had a view that Shakespeare was not the quintessential Englishman, that he was a global citizen,” says Ispahani, who grew up in the 1960s and early 1970s in Dhaka, in what is now Bangladesh, and is now CEO of Ispahani Advisory. “He resonated with me, in a very different part of the world.”

It helped minimise the divide between banker and actor, he thinks, on that evening 30 years ago, that Wanamaker was an American – “also, in a way, an outsider, who had a love for Shakespeare” – and that his vision for building the Globe struck Ispahani as “inspired and brilliant”.

He now chairs the Globe Council, as its first independent chair. In the past the Globe Board Chair was also the Chair of Council. The Council is an advisory body which complements the Globe’s governance structure. Globe Chair Margaret Casely-Hayford and CEO Neil Constable attend all Council meetings to make sure that there is a well-informed and regular dialogue. Ispahani admits many people

won’t have heard of the Council before but an important part of Council’s purpose is “to hold and provide institutional memory, past and present, to the Globe family and act as a sounding board and critical friend to the Globe”.

The Council also supports fundraising and development. The majority of its 50 members, who span fields including acting, teaching, business and law, have worked with the Globe as long-term volunteers or are former members of Globe staff, rather than simply being drawn from the organisation’s major donors, as may be the case elsewhere.

As an organisation through which more people in the world engage with Shakespeare than any other – pre-pandemic, more than 600,000 people were watching productions at the Globe or on tour and 1.25 million people were visiting annually, not to mention digital audiences – one might question why the Globe needs to look back. At 24, says Ispahani, “we’re still a restless, radical, young organisation, and we came from a place where no one thought we needed to exist. We don’t take things for granted.”


Young is relative: the first theatre opened in 1997 but as an idea the Globe goes back to at least 1970, when Sam Wanamaker founded the Shakespeare Globe Trust, and turning the idea into a reality was a struggle against legal and local government challenges, and “there were people in the UK who said, ‘We’ve got the RSC, why do we need this? This will be an imitation, this will be a replica. This will be Disney on the Thames.’”

When Ispahani came on board, although he didn’t know it at the time, Wanamaker was already suffering from cancer, and therefore, Ispahani thinks, becoming more amenable to approaching the campus build in stages, rather than attempting to raise the £24m needed for the full project up front. “Sam initially viewed that as a compromise, but then actually understood that that was the way to get it going during his lifetime.”

Members of the first Globe Council, established in 2005, had been there, they had done the “hard yards” and they were therefore vested in this venture. Moreover, they knew first hand that “behind this organisation was



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Isango Ensemble's *Venus and Adonis*, part of the Globe to Globe festival. Photo: Ellie Kurttz

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somebody who literally gave their life to create this, and we must hold good to his expectations”.

While its theatres are the face of the organisation, Ispahani says Wanamaker’s vision always included education. The Globe’s first season of plays delivered from a tent on Bankside in 1972 was accompanied by a summer school. “One year the tent blew down,” says Ispahani. Globe Education today works with more than 140,000 students a year, “and we’ve never forgotten that our work began and indeed continues with the schoolchildren of Southwark”, says Ispahani.

The Globe Council, which was reorganised in 2019, now includes an actor who performed on a temporary stage at the Globe as it opened, an eminent Shakespeare scholar, a lay member of the Met police specialising in safeguarding and community relations, an international digital expert and an expert in entrepreneurship programmes for schools. One of the exciting developments about the Council for Ispahani is that it is becoming a repository of skill sets which the Globe can draw on as needed. This is an initiative which is being championed by

Casely-Hayford. “It is particularly helpful in these resource constrained times,” says Ispahani. “If any Globe loyalists or new friends are reading this and would like to learn more about it they are most welcome to contact me.”

“Coming as I do from Bangladesh,” Ispahani says, “the importance of education is fundamental, and it’s something that my family has supported for many generations. We’ve set up schools there for girls and boys for a very long time. So [at the Globe] there was an element of continuity of purpose for me because I was building on things which I had grown up knowing in my own family were important: to help create more inclusion by making education accessible.”

In 2017, Ispahani told the *Financial Times*: “We were brought up with a sense of duty, which was based on looking after the communities in which you lived.” It did not escape him, working in the City in the 1990s that over the river in Southwark was London’s poorest borough.

Independence, grit and self-reliance were also Wanamaker hallmarks and had meant prudent financial governance, without ties to state funds, says Ispahani, “but nobody was prepared for what befell the world with the pandemic”. He acknowledges and appreciates the lifesaving government support package during the pandemic, though he points out that this was not a panacea for the self-employed, but admits there are no easy answers for what comes next. “We have to do what we can in this environment, and we will grow again, focusing on the things that we do well.”

There’s an undeniable personal benefit to his Globe association, too, he says. “[Wanamaker’s] vision engaged my latent enthusiasm and passion and harnessed it in a wonderful way.. It has been an integral part of my adult life, and given me much more than I could ever expect to get from anywhere – a sense of being part of another family.”

What might the Iraj of 1991 think about what has been built from that founding vision now? “I think humbled by what we’ve achieved,” he says. “Second, one should always have a big idea and get behind it, tilt at windmills, because, you never know.”