



## The American cultural invasion

### Lead-in

Name one of each of the following. Tell your partner about them, and say what you think of them.

- 1 An American TV programme that is popular in your country.
- 2 An American movie that is popular in your country at the moment.
- 3 Your favourite American movie star.
- 4 An American play that was recently performed in your country.

American cultural product is popular all over the world. Some people think, however, that too much of it has a negative effect on the culture of other countries. What do you think? Discuss the questions below.

- 1 Do you think that TV stations in your country should be obliged to show a high percentage of home produced programmes, or do you think they should be allowed to show whatever they want, even if most of it is American?
- 2 Do you think that cinemas in your country should show home produced movies rather than Hollywood ones, even if fewer people want to go and see them?
- 3 Would you rather go and see a play about issues in your country, starring actors from your country, or well-known American plays starring famous Hollywood stars? Why?

### Reading 1

You are going to read a newspaper article about how American plays now dominate London's theatre district – the West End.

Look at the sentences below and check you understand all the words. Then read the passage and decide which are true and which are false, in the writer's opinion.

- 1 American plays are not as good as the publicity for them claims.
- 2 Only theatre in Britain is dominated by American product.
- 3 Both Britain and the United States should support writers and actors from their own countries.
- 4 American plays should be banned from Britain.
- 5 There are twice as many American movies as there are European ones on British TV.
- 6 The themes of British and American plays are very similar.
- 7 American plays are more glamorous than British ones.
- 8 The people who decide which plays and films we watch should choose to show things from other countries, not just the United States.

## **American dominance in the West End by Michael Billington**

### **A**

Overrated, overhyped and over here, American fare dominates the West End, the television and British cinemas. We hear a lot about London theatre's domination by stars. Less noticed has been its surrender to the stars and stripes. Whole weeks now go by in which, as a critic, I see nothing but American product and I learn far more about life in Manhattan or the midwest than Manchester or Midlothian. But that is merely a symbol of a far wider phenomenon in which Britain's cultural and political agenda is increasingly set by the world's one surviving superpower.

### **B**

Some will argue that this is merely a healthy symptom of cultural free trade and of a historical tit-for-tat. Britain has long dominated Broadway; now American theatre is getting its revenge. But I share the view of critic Robert Brustein, who argues, from an American perspective, that the anglicising of New York theatre "has not only worked to exclude the best work coming out of Europe, but has also managed to eclipse our native traditions". I am not asking for the erection of cultural barriers, simply a measure of moderation and a recognition that both Britain and America need to nurture their native talent. What really appals me is Britain's capitulation to American economic and cultural power. It's hard to find a non-American film at the local cinema. Only last week 34 of 46 movies on mainstream television were American, while only one came from continental Europe. American fast-food chains and coffee shops cover the country. And now there is even talk of the Booker prize, which has done an immense amount to stimulate British, Irish and Commonwealth writing, being open to American fiction at the behest of a financial services company.

### **Glossary**

Midlothian = the area around Edinburgh, Scotland  
The West End = London's theatre district  
Broadway = New York's theatre district  
The Booker prize = an annual literature prize

### **C**

Does it matter? Isn't this merely a symptom of the new globalised era in which we all live? Without descending into little-Englandism, I think it matters deeply, because we are increasingly cutting ourselves off from other sources of supply and neglecting our native strengths. In purely theatrical terms, we would much rather do a mediocre American play than a good one from Europe, Africa, Australia or Canada. And the traditional British belief that theatre is a means of analysing society as well as exploring character is in danger of being eroded by the American fixation with personal psychology. American plays habitually ask, "Why am I not happy?" British plays, at their best, ask, "What's wrong with the world?" None of this means that I want to prohibit the best American work: I still want to see great American plays like *The Producers*, Edward Albee's *The Goat* and Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* in Britain. What I am against is the lazy belief that everything American is invested with a glamour and radical edge lacking in Britain.

### **D**

For what it's worth, my own observation, after a week recently spent in New York, was that articulated by Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian's* opinion pages: America is a society that currently stifles genuine debate and dissent. And, although I saw a handful of good shows in New York theatre, I came away convinced that our slavish submission to everything American is unwarranted. We are in danger, given the current artistic deluge, of becoming the 51st state. It's high time our cultural arbiters woke up to the fact that there is a world elsewhere.

*The Guardian Weekly* 6-6-2002, page 18

## Reading 2

Read the passage again and match each brief summary below to the paragraph being summarized.

- 1 Americans should encourage culture produced in their country. In Britain, local culture should be encouraged, rather than buying in to American culture, often for economic reasons.
- 2 Britain is wrong to import so many American plays because, although some are good, the United States is not open to discussing many issues at the moment, and British plays, or plays from other countries, may well be better.
- 3 There are too many American films and plays on in Britain, many of which are not that good. This is typical of how American culture influences many aspects of British society.
- 4 It is important to worry about this trend because we are in danger of not seeing plays from countries other than the United States, and of discouraging British plays which address very different issues from American plays.

## Vocabulary in context

Match the verbs from the passage on the left to their definitions on the right.

erode	help to grow and develop
set	put into words
stifle	encourage
nurture	make less
stimulate	put in place
neglect	ignore
articulate	stop from expressing

Which of the verbs in the list on the left above best collocate with which set of nouns below?

1	beliefs	values	confidence
2	dissent	debate	comment
3	an opinion	a point of view	an observation
4	the agenda	the table	
5	youth	talent	creativity
6	interest	creativity	writing
7	strengths	your health	children

### **Follow-up**

Think of a film or play from your country or culture. In what ways is it typically different from an American film or play? Think about the following.

- 1 The story.
- 2 The setting.
- 3 The style of acting.
- 4 The message or theme.
- 5 The budget.

Talk to your partner.

**Teacher's notes**

**The American Cultural Invasion**

If you have a monolingual class of students from the same country, you could start the lesson by brainstorming popular American programmes and films on at the moment. Ask the students which they enjoy and why? Are they better than home-grown product?

Ask the students to think of a programme, film or play then discuss with a partner. Have a brief class feedback.

Give the students a few minutes to prepare for the discussion, and perhaps take notes to prepare their opinions. Put the students in groups of three or four to discuss. Monitor. Briefly feedback the most interesting comments.

**Answers**

Students' own ideas.

**Reading 1**

Read through the introduction and the sentences with the students. Check they understand all the words. Then ask them to read the passage and decide which sentences are true and which are false. Let the students check with a partner before feedback. They should try to use dictionaries.

**Answers**

1T 2F 3T 4F 5F 6F 7F 8T

**Reading 2**

Ask the students to look back at the passage again and match the summaries to the paragraphs. Let the students discuss the answers with a partner before feedback.

**Answers**

A3 B1 C4 D2

**Vocabulary in context**

Ask the students to find the verbs in the text then match them to the definitions. They could use dictionaries to check their answers.

**Answers**

erode	make less
set	put in place
stifle	stop from expressing
nurture	help to grow and develop
stimulate	encourage
neglect	ignore
articulate	put into words

Then ask the students to collocate the verbs with the nouns in each list. Point out that one of the collocations in each list occurs in the text.

**Answers**

- 1 erode
- 2 stifle
- 3 articulate
- 4 set
- 5 nurture
- 6 stimulate
- 7 neglect

**Follow-up**

Give the students a few minutes to think of a film or play, and prepare things to say. When they are ready put the students in pairs or small groups to tell each other about how films or plays in their country are different from American films.