



Ken Campbell's millennium project is to create a world language. The key step in this plan? To stage Macbeth in Pidgin at the National. (That's *Macbed blong Wilum Sekspia* to you)

Wol nambawan!

We could have a World Language by next Thursday. Everybody able to talk to everybody. For my millennium project I am alerting the world to this opportunity. I do nothing these days that isn't in some way towards the World Language goal. And my intention is to keep going until noon, January 1, 2000, and then look back and see how far I got, and swank or weep. If you wanted to come up with a World Language that could be learned in a couple of days, and was quite beguiling once learned, how might you go about it? Here's one way: you round up thousands of geese, preferably illiterate, none of whom speak each other's language, barbed wire them in a compound, make them live and work and play together for years, and for the guards round the compound get Irishmen. Actually, you don't have to do all that, because it's already been done. And we the Brits do it. The Great World Lingo Experiment began in 1863. Obviously, back in those times it was difficult to get adequate funding for large-scale language experimentation, so it was done under the guise of supplying us with cheaper sugar for our tea. Eighteen sixty-three saw the opening of the mighty sugar cane plantations of Queensland. We would have used Aboriginal labour, but it was too good at getting away. So we went slaving and blackbirding for staff up the Cannibal Island chain of the New Hebrides: Tanna, Erromango, Malakula, Espiritu Santo, Pentecost, Ambrym. Take the small island, Tanna — there are 26 utterly different languages on Tanna. Each tribe speaks in a completely different tongue because they don't want the other tribes overhearing their dinner plans. Eventually, in order to communicate, the slaves adopt and adapt the one linguistic constant, the language of the guards. And that was English as spoken by Irishmen. As new "indentured labour" arrived on the plantation, they wanted to teach the newcomers the Plantation Language (*Tok blong Planteem*) as quickly as possible. By means of song and dance and fooling around they were able to have a new recruit ably expressing himself in a couple of days. Today, millions speak it. It's the official language of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and the Republic of Vanuatu (formerly the "New Hebrides"). It's called variously "Tok Pisin", "Pidgin" and "Bislama". And it takes but two days to learn, whenever you are from. To speak English is an advantage for the first hour or two, but then it holds you back, because you start making assumptions. There is a lot of English



speaker has to unlearn. World Language for World Language is *Wol Wantok*. "Wol" means world. "Wantok" — one, "tok" — language. Why is it so easy to learn? Because it's got virtually no grammar. It's got a few habits, that's all. I spent years learning adequate German and poorish French, and tenses are the number one (*nambawan*) hold up. Wol Wantok doesn't bother with them. If it's in the past you bung in the word "bin". (And there's no one to bother you about whereabouts in the sentence you stick it) and if it's not happened yet, in the future, you say "bambae", like bye-and-bye, and if it's now you would assume so, wouldn't you, but if you want to stress the nowness of your communication here's a useful little word: "now", pronounced similar to the English "now". Subjunctives they looked into, but reckoned they'd not really brought anyone any happiness. And how about this: no verb "to be". It turns out you don't need one. Take the simple sentence "I am here". "I", yes we understand that; "here" yes, get that, but what does the "am" mean? What nuance do you get from the "am"? "I have" surely does it? But Wol Wantok thinking is that "I" might get muddled with one of the things in your head you see through so it opts for the clarity of "me here" (*mi ia*). I've been really getting ahead with my millennium project and on Saturday July 25 and Saturday August 1, Trevor Nunn has given over to me the Cottesloe to present

my Wol Wantok production of Shakespeare's Macbeth. (*Wol Nambawan! Makbed blong Wilum Sekspia. wantok singin konset samting.*) A dozen absolutely top notch young and youngish performers, calling themselves, for the occasion, the Pidgin Players, have not only learned Wol Wantok, they have committed the entire text of Macbeth to memory, all the parts! And the audience will choose who they want for the major roles on each occasion, following a little demo by each contender. Maybe they'll go for Tim Newton's Toshiru Mihne Seventh Samurai Macbeth, or maybe they'll vote for my daughter's Beano Spiv cum football hooligan Macbed, or maybe they'll go for Nina Cant's Fort Moresby-Spoons Assassin. And if none of those appeal there are another nine (all godfids) to choose from. The plan is then for the company to split into ones, twos and threes and go off round the wol doing productions of Macbed and other stuff with local talent, thus doing their bit to spread the tok. What's it like then, Macbeth in Wol Wantok? An improvement. Reducing iambic pentameters to rude voodoo telegrams is just the thing the piece has been needing. The plot seems much more likely in Pidgin — there are a couple of holes which become apparent when you de-sopporfice the text and these I've dotly bunged. Like, for example, Fleance (*Fleance*). The witches (*Kewas*) tell Banquo (*Banoktu*) that his kids and his kids' kids are going to be kings (*bigala yif*) in the future (*bambae*). The only child we meet is Fleance, and he gets away, but then some arse makes Malcolm (*Maklem*) jif (*king*, I mean). I don't think the New Millennium Wol wants to be served this sort of dramatic sloopiness, so I've fixed that. (*Maklem fleance*.)

The Great Lingo Experiment began in 1863. It was difficult to get funding then

Pidgin Macbeth is at the Cottesloe, London SE1, on Saturday and on August 1.

Guardian Wol Nambawan



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