

The Role of Live Theater in Modern Society

By 221109 HB Paper

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In today's society, it is possible to instantly access many forms of entertainment from the comfort of home, yet people continue to love the experience of going to live theater. This may be due to the energy within the theater setting that transcends the individual and creates a collective experience. We attend live theater to lose ourselves, thereby affirming the grandeur of life.

Last night, as the lights faded and the cool night air became simultaneously voiceless and incensed with excitement, my friend leaned close to me and whispered, "Look back." Fortunate enough to have a prime seat near the illuminated stage at the Los Angeles Hollywood Bowl, I looked back and had to gasp at the sight of the thousands of filled seats in the theater. During the production of "Guys and Dolls," I was enchanted by the music and performers on the stage before me, but, several more times I gazed back, each time feeling briefly breathless at the sight of the crowd. I was entranced by our shared experience of the classic musical.

In an age of rapidly increasing technology, we are no longer required to flock to live theater for entertainment, yet there continues to be a desire in society to do so. It seems this is only partially due to what I saw in the moments I was looking forward. Rather, the choral laughter, the harmonious sighs, and the nearby whisper of a friend's voice bring us a life-affirming connectedness that makes the theater a magical necessity in our society.

When "tragodia" rose to popularity in 6th century B.C.E., audiences filled theaters similar to the one I was in last night. Dithyrambic performances were staged in honor of the gods, primarily Dionysus, who is related to life renewal and passion. Therefore, the spectators of these performances were considered the gods, while the seated audience were thought to be participants in the sacred and joyous experience. The dramatic pieces unified the Athenians for a higher spiritual purpose that celebrated life.

Though this idea may sound quite foreign to us, perhaps we are motivated to attend the theater for similar reasons and the effects of our experiences there may be essentially the same. Today, I searched the Internet and located several video recordings of the production I saw last night. I enjoyed the video. The songs still beat the same. The voices

were as clear and strong, and every gesture was captured on screen. The only loss was that of the spontaneity and passionate collective excitement that I had felt while in the theater. The recording could not duplicate it exactly. Seeing it live had, literally, brought a sense of “life” into the atmosphere. We had come to the theater for a purpose similar to that of the ancient Greeks. Still, today, at the theater, the actors and audience contribute to an environment in praise of life. We feel celebratory at the theater. We cease work and the stresses of our busy schedules to collectively experience heightened passion and invigoration.

Playwright Dr. Sudipta Bhawmik praises this life-affirming quality of live theater, writing, “There is something magical in watching an ensemble of actors performing on the stage in front of you, telling you a story that you share with a room full of people...when we watch good theater we almost go through a life changing experience” (2009). Over one hundred years earlier, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of the transcendental nature of theater in a similar way. In “The Birth of Tragedy,” Nietzsche equates the theater experience with “the powerful approach of spring,” saying it, “penetrates with joy the whole frame of nature” (1872:440). He goes on to identify the result of this joy, noting, “the individual forgets himself completely” (1872:440). His central idea concerning drama is that it should disrupt our “principle of individuation,” meaning the differentiation of self and other. This seems a particular necessity in today’s world. We have become so consumed with our individual lives and hectic schedules that we sometimes forget the vital importance of forgetting ourselves and remembering life.

As I sat in the theater last night and, at my friend’s request, “looked back,” I lost my breath because I lost myself. I lost my individuality and became part of a higher wholeness.

I looked back and found the Dionysian principle of life. Theater continues to exist in society to fill this extraordinary purpose.

References

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