

The Problem with Theatre in the Digital Age

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Centuries ago the Greeks put on their first theatrical production in their amphitheater, a religious performance at a festival in celebration of Dionysus: god of wine, vegetation, pleasure and festivity. Soon after, the art form spread throughout Greece and the Roman Empire. Fast forward several centuries later, and we have theatre dying out in Rome as citizens opt for the bigger, better, and bloodier entertainment – gladiator contests, chariot races, and the naumachia (reproductions of naval combats).

Is history repeating itself?

In today's world theatre is not competing with live fights to the death, or mortal naval combats, but with an age of live streaming, video games, ADD, and bloody battles filling up the multiple screens we carry around daily. How can live theatre compete with that?

This particular problem we face in the industry has been evolving for decades. After all, we are not a culture derived from live theatre, but one ingrained in “escapist” art forms resulting from the first talkies on the silver screen meant to divert attention from the pain and suffering of the Great Depression. Theatre in its original forms belongs to Europe. Technically, as citizens of the United States, we borrowed it.

Now that we have made it into something of our own – and we have with the good old-fashioned American musical, and hundreds of esteemed playwrights we are lucky to call American born and bred – we seem to be losing it. By “it” we mean the creativity, the imaginative spark, the originality that comes along with live theatre. Out of the thirty shows running in major theatres on Broadway, at least three are revivals, seven are based on books or movies, and at least five are long-running (five or more seasons). For commercial theatre the trend seems to be: if it's still making money, appealing to the tourist industry, it stays.

So, we are losing “it,” that special spark that makes live theatre something to seek out. It would seem that maybe our theatre is suffering like Roman theatre did. The problem comes down to this: are we actually losing live theatre to technology?

And if so, how do we fix it?

The typical Broadway audience:

Broadway League puts out an executive report of Broadway audiences every season to show the average demographics of the Broadway audience and the trends. In the past four seasons (we still await the 2014-2015 report which will come out later in June), the average age of audience members is stable around 44, the audiences are predominantly Caucasian, accounting for 78% of audience members in most seasons, and the audiences are particularly affluent and well educated.

These findings tell us that in the past couple of years, Broadway audiences have been dominated by white, upper to middle class, educated people. Of course, this is not to say that younger generations, lower class people, and more diverse citizens aren't heading to the theatre at all. In fact, the 2012-2013 season reports a notable increase in the diversity of their audiences, as well as a season that attracted the largest number of theatregoers in the 18-24 age range. Despite these reports, the averages don't lie.

Does this mean we are barring out entire communities of diversity, younger generations, and lower class people?

The truth is that Broadway is just not very accessible to these people.

The Economics

The average ticket for a Broadway show has recently surpassed \$100. Most of us can admit that this is a ridiculous price, and the majority of people my age range (18-24), and younger cannot afford to throw money on something "frivolous" like a ticket to a show, even if we are interested. Sure, there are student rush tickets and discounted prices, but they are limited, not every show offers them, and why spend hours on a bus, train or in a car to get to the city and find that there are no rush tickets left? Even Christopher Durang, a notable Broadway produced playwright claims he cannot think of a single show he would want to spend that much money on. The truth of the matter is that so much entertainment these days is free. It can be downloaded and watched immediately.

Why is Broadway so expensive compared to, say, West End theatre in London? In London (a very expensive city), the average ticket price is \$70, around \$30 cheaper than our average. The explanation is as follows: the shows we put on in this country are larger scale, more expensive to produce, our actors and theatre practitioners are paid more, and we advertise on the television. That's the long and short of it. Theatres need to make money in order to recoup their investments, so ticket prices go up to meet the needs of a big budget show. This makes sense economically, but at the same time it limits the audience by age and class.

So, the price of a ticket limits what kind of person can attend a Broadway production. But does the content we are "creating" in this digital age do the same?

Technology, Technology, Technology...

Kids these days. Wrapped up in their video games, their apps, and their texts. I am twenty-one years old, so I'd consider myself a part of this digital generation, the difference for me being that I grew up going to the theater so much so that it has become my life. Not every kid has that. Diane Paulus, Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theater, and prominent director on Broadway, says that the younger generation is not to blame for their apathy towards the theater. Paulus says that maybe theatre should adapt to make something they would be interested in seeing.

“Maybe it’s us,” Paulus states in her interview with Harvard Magazine, “maybe it’s the arts producers. Not just the writers and actors but the whole machine—perhaps we have to do a better job of inviting this audience back to the theater. Have they left? Yes. Have they not developed the habit of coming? Yes. Is it their fault? No!”

The biggest fear for the theatre industry today is that technology is taking over in a couple of ways. First of all, the instant gratification of technology takes youths away from experiencing live theatre. Maybe even more importantly, the way in which technology is inserting itself into live theatre is a fear as well. In all fairness, technology in live stage productions has been around since Edison introduced moving pictures in the 1890s. Theatres had been incorporating “film” technologies for “spatial and conceptual illusions” since 1898. Only now, as technology becomes more in-depth and ever changing are we worried about how projections are being used more often to create a movie-like experience rather than your traditional play. I saw *Les Misérables* on Broadway in March and rather than the traditional rotating stage, projections of seas and sewers were used to take us on Jean Valjean’s journey, more akin to the 2013 movie version than anything else.

However, this growth in technology is not all bad, and even has the potential to bring theatre to a more widespread audience, which is desperately needed in this industry. Last year millions of people tuned in to NBC’s live studio production of *Peter Pan*. This is theatre, using technology to reach a wider, younger audience. The National Theatre, a publicly subsidized theatre in London, live broadcasts its productions straight from the stage to your television, providing access to critically acclaimed drama to the less privileged public. This is the way of the future, and rather than fearing it, these are the ways in which technology should be embraced in theatre.

Technology is a two-way street. In some aspects it helps us bring theatre to wider audiences with live streams and broadcasts, as well as shows that incorporate big budget technological effects (*Spiderman: Turn off the Dark*, for instance) are more appealing to a younger crowd. However, technology in everyday life is quick and cheap, keeping many potential audience members out of the theater.

John Lithgow, actor on both stage and screen, claims that Broadway has become an amusement park. It is all about the next biggest thing, biggest star, and best special effects in order to compete with Hollywood. The digital age has allowed us to lose some of what makes live theatre special due to the commercial market attitude, the ticket prices, and the blockbuster effects on small Broadway stages.

The Solution?

For just a moment, let’s go back to the era of the Great Depression. While the silver screen worked its magic in escapism, allowing beat down people to lift their spirits, the live theatre world was getting an upheaval of sorts. In 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted the FTP as one of his programs in the New Deal. In a time when hundreds of theatre and arts professionals were out of work, the FTP was instituted to amend that. FTP stands for the Federal Theatre Project, and it was exactly as it sounds – a federally funded program that allowed actors, playwrights,

directors, and theatre people in general to create new work. Under this program, the Living Newspaper – an incredibly important theatre group that worked to present current problems straight out of the newspaper on the stage for the public to see – and many other small, but socially important theatre groups evolved, changing the face of theatre in the thirties. The FTP was shut down in 1939 due to Congressional objections to the overtly left-winged political tones of some FTP productions. Despite the fact that it was shut down, the federally funded program was responsible for developing hundreds of new works that are solely American and that resonated with the times. Today the United States has nonprofit theatres that are hugely important for generating new, experimental, and risky works outside of the commercial realm. These theatres can afford to take risks with what they produce because they have backing apart from ticket sales. If their box office sales suffer, the show can still go on rather than being shut down immediately like it would on Broadway. However, we have nothing like the FTP, a nationally recognized organization, specifically meant to produce new artistic endeavors, funded by the government. The debate for government subsidization has been long running. The arguments for it are always inconclusive and too subjective for anything to come out of it. However, the need for something like this is still present. A study by the Arts Council of England in 1999 estimated that the United States government spent \$6 per person while, Australia and the United Kingdom each spent about \$25, Canada and the Netherlands \$46, and Germany and Finland more than \$85 per person. Clearly, there is a gap between what our government is willing to spend on the arts than what other countries are willing to spend. While arts funding in America has increased in the new millennium, we aren't close to what these other countries are providing for their artists.

Why is that? What can art and theatre do for our country? Why should our government bother with providing more subsidies for the arts?

The economic, educational and civic benefits of the arts in a community are resounding. As Daniel Reid states it in his Yale Journal on arts subsidies, “in a pluralist democratic state, the government has an obligation to encourage citizens to reap the civic benefits of the arts.” The government is responsible for fostering an understanding amongst its citizens, and the arts are a part of that. Furthermore, the arts help communities prosper, create jobs, attract tourism – contributing more than \$171 billion each year to the U.S. economy – along with many other economic benefits. Additionally, according to the Arts Education Partnership, reports show a positive relationship between students involved in art, particularly drama, and academic, cognitive, personal, and civic and social outcomes. The benefits of the arts in a community are immense, so why doesn't the government properly fund the arts?

With government subsidization for theatre and arts in general, shows on Broadway would have backing to continue running despite ticket sales. Tickets could be cheaper! Younger people, less wealthy people, more diverse people could experience the joys of live theatre! Theatres could find a way to live broadcast their productions, following in the example of London's National Theatre. Furthermore, and possibly most importantly, federal funding of theatre and arts could mean more educational programming in the arts for kids. Let's face it: arts budgets are constantly being cut from school programs when they really should be better provided for. Theatre and performing arts teaches compassion, imagination, and creativity in a way that is needed for the

future. Federal subsidization of theatre may be the solution we are looking for in this digital age and the audience deficiency in Broadway theatres.

A Quick Summation

Theatre has been around for centuries. It is a constant, something that will (hopefully) never completely go out of style. But it is changing, and it has to change in order to keep up with these changing times. In this digital age, theatre suffers. It suffers from lack of enthusiasm and originality, lack of young people, lack of diversity, and lack of support. If we want (and we should want) a theatre that is worth our time, we need better funding for the arts. With subsidization comes accessibility and education, which leads to young people working in the theatre and attending the theatre, leaving their screens behind and entering a world of imagination.