

Cultural Daily

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How Theatre Invented Democracy

Adam Leipzig · Friday, October 29th, 2010

As we look ahead to next week's elections, let's look back – way back – to the foundations of democracy. No, not the California initiative process. No, not the Constitution. Back to ancient Greece before there even was democracy. To the theatre.

Yes, theatre. If you look closely at the chain of events, you'll find that the invention of theatre, especially ancient Athens' annual theatre festival, gave birth to democracy. Democracy began as theatre began, and Athenian democracy ended when its great theatre ended.

Democracy and theatre – and by extension all creative culture – are inextricably bound.

For most of the sixth century BCE, Athens was a city-state divided among four warring tribes. Clan conflicts resulted in a series of strongmen coming to power. The word “tyrant” dates from this period.

In 560 BCE a general named Pisistratus rose to authority. Toward the end of his 33-year dictatorship he began to believe in the value of creative culture. He supervised the first written versions of Homer's odes and established the first Athenian library.

While there were theatrical events at the time, they did not bear much resemblance to theatre as we know it. They were loose choral shows, played throughout the city separately for the different tribes. In 534 BCE, Pisistratus, tired of the divisions among his fellow citizens, invented the annual theatre festival. With this stroke of genius, all theatre activity came together at a single place and time. All four tribes came into a common space and shared a common experience.

The result was nothing short of revolutionary. Athenian consciousness changed. Within a generation, in 508 BCE, democracy began.

It began when Cleisthenes, an aristocrat, reformed the Athenian constitution, which had institutionalized the four tribes' power in a way that led to tyranny in the first place. Instead, Cleisthenes created a new system that “redistricted” the city-state and instituted a legislature where the members were chosen by lottery, instead of by clan or heredity. “Demo” in “democratic” means “common people.”

The next 104 years were the “golden age” of Athens. Democracy flourished, and so did the theatre

– Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all wrote their plays during this period, and competed with each other at the annual festival.

Sophocles and Euripides both died in 406 BC. The 27-year-long Peloponnesian War ended in 404 BC with Athens' defeat at the hands of Sparta. The great age of theatre was over. And as Athens crumbled under Spartan rule, so was Athenian democracy.

Do I really believe there was a cause and effect linking theatre and democracy, especially the birth of the democratic system? I do. I believe that a flourishing common culture brings out the common aspects of people. When we share experiences, we find we are all so much alike – we laugh and cry at the same moments. Such shared experiences lessen our feelings of loneliness and isolation; they make us feel in community. From community comes democracy. By the same token, when democracy is not possible, as with an authoritarian political system, artists are not free to express themselves, and the culture of common experiences disappears or dives underground.

Taking this to heart, I believe we should focus much greater attention on our creative culture, especially those aspects of creativity that provide us with communal experiences. Our theatre, movies, music and performing arts protect and advance our democracy – and the better they are, the better our democracy will be.

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