

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why Theatre?

Sylvie · Thursday, September 10th, 2015

In my recent review of Rob Mersola's *Luka's Room*, a play that straddled comedy and soft porn with some dexterity but not much wit, I had to ask myself the question (yet again): What is the point of theatre? That was my opening line. And I attempted to answer it. Up to a point. But it remained on my mind during Cultural Weekly's summer hiatus and it seemed like a good way to launch the fall season.

In a world totally given over to film and technology (which can be wonderful in certain applications and holds promise for a mind-boggling future), what *is* the point of making something as antediluvian as theatre? I happen to agree with Harold Clurman that the history of the theatre is the history of bad plays, but the same also could be said of any other performing art form. There is certainly nothing more deadening than a bad play, but nothing more exhilarating than a good one.



... in *Stupid F—g Bird* at The Theatre @ Boston court in Pasadena.

Theatre is a very expensive, labor-intensive, highly collaborative, frustrating, exalting and creative undertaking, exceeded in expense/return ratio only by the making of opera and symphony orchestras. And what is the point of buying those expensive tickets that can easily top \$100 and often rise to \$300 and even \$400 in some cases? There are, after all, no guarantees the money will have been spent well, either in the making or the viewing.

Films — good bad and indifferent — are forever. Bad plays mercifully vanish quickly, and the ones that manage to emerge above the fray are unforgettable.



The Cast of Deaf West's production of *Spring Awakening*, seen at The Wallis in Beverly Hills. Photo by Kevin Parry.

A week after seeing *Luka's Room*, I visited back-to-back the San Diego Old Globe's productions of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and Ken Ludwig's *Baskerville, a Sherlock Holmes Mystery*. *The Comedy of Errors*, staged by Scott Ellis (his first Shakespeare), was a swift 90-minute delight set in 1920s New Orleans, with great costumes, inventive sight-gags, terrific acting, live New Orleans jazz musicians parading in and out of streets, houses and action, tooting their horns, beating their drums and strumming their instruments. The waves of exuberant energy spilled over into the audience with abandon. Master Shakespeare would have been thrilled.

Baskerville was differently inventive, but also very clever, and Ken Ludwig, its playwright, interviewed in the program, made a couple of statements that struck a chord. When asked if he considered himself primarily a writer of comedies (which his body of work would confirm), he replied with a reference to plays that have stayed with him:

“The great Shakespeare comedies that inspire us all —*Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado*, *Midsummer* and the rest—are works of divine intervention and beyond imitation. But what I can aspire to,” he added, “are plays like *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Private Lives* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. These are the works of literature that I just love in my bones. **They are bound up with the nature of good fellowship and humanity, and nothing else delights me or interests me in the way that they do. So what I’ve done is spent my life trying to write them. I’m not interested in anything else.**”

The bolding is mine because Ludwig’s statement answers my question more fully than any other. I know dangers lurk in such absolutism, but after years of going to the theatre on a regular basis, this view only reinforces the primary — and perhaps only — reason to do so.



... in *Happy Days* at The Theatre @BostonCourt in Pasadena. Photo by Ed Krieger.

Let’s face it. Television and films have sucked the air (and the money?) out of the other performing arts and seem on course to only grow in popularity, mainly because they are so portable, durable, widespread and talked about. They also, many of them, have taken up the cudgel of the sloppy (not to say stupid) story with calculated and baffling success. They are primarily concerned with satisfying that giant maw called the Public Appetite. And judging by the enormous monetary returns, at home and abroad, of so many current American films, violence, abuse, explosive disasters and other catastrophes are the reigning ingredients that deliver those monumental financial rewards. Good fellowship and humanity? Nowhere in sight. You will find them at the multiplicity of film festivals and shrinking art houses. Are they ever blockbusters? Rhetorical question.

Yes, there are those amazing exceptions — the boutique movies, the elitist art films, the independents, and their level of *niche* success very much imitates that of the theatre. These films do concern themselves in a more existential manner with the human spirit. Some TV series, the ones offered by HBO, Netflix, Showtime and the like (including the occasional cable documentaries) have lapped at the edges of more serious entertainment. It could be only a matter of time before growing competition alters and tames content. But while theatre offers many examples of devilishly absurdist satires and delicious farces that will continue to claim our attention, scratch the surface of any of them, even the most ridiculous, extreme and wacky, and you’ll find that kernel of feeling and intelligence — the suggestion of that “binding up” with the nature of humanity that Ludwig pointed to.

That’s because since time immemorial the storytellers have held us in thrall since what we want from them is that deeper understanding of ourselves. Theatre provides it most of the time. So do some of the better films. Of catastrophes, you’d think the nightly news provides all we could stomach. Or has it unintentionally cultivated a wider taste for precisely that which should repulse us? It’s a depressing thought, but possible.

In that case, to borrow from Pope Francis, who am I to judge?

So pick your poison or your balm. You may not have seen all (or any) of the productions I'm about to mention, but perhaps you were lucky enough to have seen one or two. So... think of the The Theatre @ Boston Court staging of Andy Posner's supersmart satire of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, retitled *Stupid F---g Bird* and Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* with the husband/wife team of Brooke Adams and Tony Shalhoub (so notable for Adams' performance); or the Deaf West production of *Spring Awakening*, mounted with hearing and non hearing actors, now on a path to Broadway; or The Ebony Theatre's exuberant revival of *The Gospel at Colonus*, a call for redemption that quite miraculously coincided with the horrific shooting at Charleston's Emanuel AME Church. Lee Breuer and composer Bob Telson created Colonus in 1983, years before that crime took place at Mother Emanuel, and yet it seems an almost proprietary response to it.



Glenn Howerton (standing) and Rory O'Malley in The Old Globe's *The Comedy of Errors*.

Photo by Jim Cox.

Further afield, there is Mary Zimmerman's elegant refashioning of the Chinese legend of *The White Snake*, pure mystery and enchantment recently seen at the San Diego Old Globe; or Mark Rylance's giddy-with-love performance as Olivia in the Royal National Theatre's all-male *Twelfth Night*. Or the 2001 Jack O'Brien Broadway staging of Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* that should have swept the Tony Awards, but was knocked out of the running by the outsized popularity of *The Producers* that year. Awards being the flawed manmade creations that they are, *The Invention of Love* remains a production that will never leave me.

Beyond all this, consider the vast verbal and gestural vocabulary available to the theatre, with its malleable potential for a visual and aural poetry that is ever-changing and employs words, movement, costumes, images, light, music, sound and enough other effects to invent and reinvent itself...

How often does film deliver that kind of wallop? As the man said about the plays that refuse to be dislodged from our heads, *they are bound up with the nature of good fellowship and humanity, and nothing else delights me or interests me in the way that they do.... I'm not interested in anything else.*

On to a new season and, we hope, some fresh surprises.

Top image: The cast of The Gospel at Colonus at the Ebony Theatre.

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