

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Theatre and Democracy, Part 2

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, November 3rd, 2010

We awake this morning to mid-term election results, and I'm sure you're wondering what happens next. But the real question is more basic: How much do you trust democracy?

Or to put it in theatre-terms, How much do you trust the audience? Again we look at theatre and democracy.

Last week I wrote about ancient Athens and explained how the invention of theatre led to the creation of democracy. Many of you responded, and there were some excellent [comments](#).

Some caveats are in order. Athenian democracy was nothing like our ideal of democracy. Athens' sizeable slave population had no vote, nor did women, who were treated by ancient Athenians as the Taliban treat their women today. The Athenian revolution in democracy wasn't about a universal vote – it was about decoupling power from heredity. When Athens' constitution changed to allow the “demos,” or common people (non-royal-blood male citizens), to vote, that was a cataclysmic change.

The “golden age” of the city-state followed, and the invention of drama, created by the great playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. But war also followed – the Peloponnesian War, which lasted for 27 years, destroyed the city, and ended with democracy in ruins and Athens under the control of Sparta. In this atmosphere of destruction and broken ideals, Plato wrote his Dialogues to try to understand what had gone wrong. How could the greatest city-state have failed?

Plato blamed democracy. Specifically, he blamed the theatre. By Plato's reckoning, the worst form of government was “theatocracy.” No, that's not a typo – I don't mean “theocracy,” which means government by a religious elite. “Theatocracy” means government by the theatre, that is, government by the audience, the “rabble,” as Plato called them, the “commoners,” the “mob.” Plato believed they were too easily swayed by the extrovert emotions of a theatre-event, too easily would jump to their feet to applaud. The audience, he wrote, reacted collectively as a mob and tossed individual reason aside.

Plato did not trust democracy. He believed the “common people” did not have the intellectual capacity or education to govern themselves well. And before you hoot with derision at his point of view, consider that America's founders didn't trust democracy either – that's why they didn't permit direct election of senators. (That wasn't changed until 1913. Women got the vote in 1920. The Civil Rights Act, which eliminated some of the most egregious practices that limited African-

Americans' vote, passed in 1964.)

Consider some of the commentary we've been hearing on the news this morning. That the voters "didn't understand the issues well." That they voted with their "hearts not their heads," for "short-term instead of long-term goals." Today these statements are coming from the left; two years ago, they were coming from the right. Each of these analyses runs along the same line as Plato's and comes from the position that the commentator knows more than the "common people."

So how do you feel about yesterday's election? Do you trust the audience?

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