

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why Theatre Will Survive, Part Two

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 22nd, 2014

Hooray for [Adam Leipzig's](#) paean in last Thursday's *Cultural Weekly* to the survival of theatre vs. the survival of "the movies, TV and radio," all of which are technology-dependent, whereas theatre is not. (For the record, Adam also included music as technology-dependent but, like theatre, music will survive. It needs technology only to be *recorded*, not to be *performed*, which it will always be.)

It's true. Theatre is not technology-*dependent*, but neither is it technology-*averse*. Historically, it has been resourceful and very good at adapting to whatever comes along that provides a better way to get things done. And while it remains ephemeral (here today *only*), technology has made a number of tasks in theatrical production a whole lot easier to achieve.

First there is the computerization of set design (huge), as well as lighting and sound cues. Where before lighting and sound had to be served at each performance by a human hand pressing all the right buttons, it is now programmed into a computer that triggers the right cues at the right time each time, without much further attention, for the run of a show.

In addition to these backstage shortcuts, consider the new welter of dazzling effects *on stage*. Some have been very exciting. Aside from the mechanized set pieces that glide silently on and off stage, pop up from the stage floor or descend from above, think of the unlimited array of computerized projections that enhance every type of performance.

Those have added many new thrills to the art, delivering glorious sunsets or Dante's circles of hell or the view, on a back wall, of a painter's brushstrokes as the painter paints on stage. Occasionally, a company indulges in technical effects simply because it can and when it really shouldn't (excess is always excess), but these instances are rare.

So the models have changed, and theatre has adapted. But if these enhancements were to disappear tomorrow, the art of making theatre would not. That's the difference. It would adapt again and go on, because storytelling (which is all theatre is) is the way we get to know ourselves. It instructs us about who we are. And it does this not with screens, but with live human beings who share the space with us. It's a live connection we cherish and we will not let it go.

But there has been a pernicious recent trend that is an indirect offshoot of our technological evolution and it has had a less desirable effect. Call it the invasion of the marketers.

When we were young and foolish, we believed that if we put on a really good show the people

would come. Cause and effect. Word of mouth would pull them in. It was an arrogant attitude and more than a little naïve.

As the regional theatre movement took hold across the country in the 1960s and 70s, and audiences began to appreciate that it might compete favorably with the commercialism of New York, and even complement it, the costs and refinements of delivering professional theatre escalated. So did the need to pull in larger audiences and sell more tickets. Federal, foundation, and even corporate support for all of the arts had improved, but it did not keep pace with expenditures. So serious marketing was introduced.

Logical, right? It should work. The problem is that while a marketing effort is entirely reasonable and necessary, no one counted on the advent of the internet and social media and the avalanche of demands that followed them through the gate. They transformed how we sell theatre, just as they transformed how we sell everything else, and this development turned marketing into marketing on steroids. Everything began to change.

The issue now is a question of how much. How much emphasis should be on marketing, how much emphasis should be on putting on the best show possible. Some of the super marketers that were recruited in the most recent push — and the push was/is everywhere — come from the corporate world. They are sought out on the assumption that they would know how to do marketing better.

But all sales pitches are not the same. Many of these marketers rarely know much about the art they've been hired to sell and, in that void, apply to the selling of theatre seats whatever worked in the selling of beach chairs — just as they might apply what they know about selling cars to selling what turns out to be an entirely different kind of vehicle.

As marketing models grew more complicated, the marketers brought in their corporate toys: the demographic charts, the groupthink, the meetingthink, the workplace psychologies, the language shorthand (mostly unrelated to plain English) and employee bloat (assistants to the assistants to the assistants of the CEO).

With this explosion of social media, all hell broke loose and the results from that sharp bend in the road aren't all in yet. Now you have to cover every outlet, every blog (this one too), send emails, send out email blasts, create websites, design and redesign them, install lobby monitors, program them to expand on what audiences are about to see, remind the same people they have tickets for the 2pm matinee, check in with them ten minutes after the curtain falls to find out how they liked the performance and would they like to tell you all about it.

In short, track, stalk, walk and molly-coddle your audiences every crazy step of the way.

Such “creative” ideas are contagious and passed out as freely as, in at least one instance, that tray of hors d'oeuvre passed out to audiences waiting in the lobby for the theatre doors to open. Do we really need hors d'oeuvre to convince people who have bought a ticket and are waiting to enter the theatre that doing so is worth their time and money?

Granted, this may be an extreme example and probably soon abandoned, but much more serious in the totality of this equation is the substantial squandering of treasure in the pursuit of such ancillary strategies. (Think about support personnel, phone banks, equipment, maintenance, implementation, evaluation and so on). They will deny it, and may not even realize they're doing it, but marketers are subliminally influencing artistic choices too, with more theatres settling for too many crowd-

pleasers and “safe” programming, while vigorous innovation remains principally a fringe activity. And we may have reached a tipping point, where budgets that support production are being squeezed in favor of expanding marketing ones. If that isn’t putting the proverbial cart before the horse, what is?

The October 16, 2014, *You’ve Cott Mail*, a daily online compendium of articles about the arts culled and edited by Thomas Cott, had this startling headline: *Today, marketing and managing a theatre is more important than the artists creating the work*. It goes on to quote an October 15 article by Jeff Meyers of the *Detroit Metro News*, who states, among other things, “... Today, the marketing and management of a theatre is of more importance than the artists creating the work. In the more cash-strapped venues, the staff must handle both jobs, further blurring the lines between art and commerce. This has incited a creative, racial, and generational death spiral of artistry and attendance, with programming that has become oppressively safe and predictable. Regional theatre is seen by many as just another commodity, catering to an ever-smaller clientele...”

This danger from business and technology is not unique to any one venue. It’s everywhere. And it has been catching on abroad where once-generous central governments have been steadily shrinking their support for the arts.

The heart of the issue is the old, persistently nagging one: how to keep afloat while keeping standards of creative excellence high and moving forward with new work. There are no easy answers, but what’s certain is that spending more on marketing and less on production is not it. All you have to do is look around at all the storefront and other smaller theatres that keep multiplying and that manage, against incredible odds, to continue to do what is frequently breathtaking work on shoestring budgets.

That is not a solution either and certainly not a solution to the bigger picture. That requires a much more thorough examination of the entire issue. But it *is* evidence that if we were to remove technology entirely from the creation of theatre (or music), we would only be removing something that was always an add-on.

The core essence of theatre — boards and a passion — will not disappear. Not, that is, unless the human species is wiped out. As long as we’re still here and still retain a capacity for language, I agree with Adam. The theatre will survive. But watch those marketers.

To check out Adam Leipzig’s Oct. 16, 2014, piece, *Why Theatre Will Survive*, go to <https://www.culturalweekly.com/why-theatre-will-survive/>

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