

Cultural Daily





Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Why Theatre Will Survive

Adam Leipzig · Tuesday, October 14th, 2014

This is part I of II. To read Sylvie Drake's second part of this series, [click here](#).

If life's but a walking shadow, how many shadows are cast along Hollywood's Walk of Fame? The answer is 10 million a year; it is the city's premiere tourist destination. A visitor recently stopped me and asked. "Are all American cemeteries are like this?" He imagined the celebrities had been interred below their bronze names.

Hollywood's Chamber of Commerce invented the Walk as a marketing gimmick. When it opened in 1960, with glamorous festivities, the Walk made international news. Its five-pointed stars are made of red terrazzo, cut into five acres of black terrazzo sidewalk. Each celebrity's name appears in bronze letters between the middle points of the star, and below, in the star's center, is a bronze icon signifying how the celebrity became famous. Originally, there were four icons: motion picture, television, recording, and radio. Animators from the Walt Disney Company created them with a design-moderne sensibility. The motion picture icon is a box camera on small tripod legs, with two film reels that look like Mickey Mouse's ears.  The television icon is a box with slightly rounded corners, rabbit ear antennas poised at a 45-degree angle, the better to receive signals from Mt. Wilson.  The recording icon represents the circle of a vinyl disc, with two concentric circles inside it, one for the record label, one for the spindle, while a phonograph needle – two lines and a dot – bears down like a conductor's baton.  The radio icon is a stretched hexagon wrapped by an upper line of metal as would attach the microphone to a boom.  All of these icons, representing industries and art-forms less than a century old when the Walk opened, are already weary and stale. If you go to a radio station today, you'll see the host wearing padded headphones and talking into a sleek cylinder, not a massive, hexagonal mic. Recorded music has largely disappeared from physical form altogether; now it's on your mobile device or in the Cloud. TV's don't have antennas and they don't look like boxes anymore. Movie cameras almost never use film, and now they're streamlined and small. The Walk's icons do not refer to anything in use today; they have to be explained to children.

But what about the theatre? It wasn't added to the Walk of Fame until 1984, and although the twin masks of comedy and tragedy are 2500 years old, it is the only icon that still represents its art-form. That's because the icons representing the first four categories – movies, TV, radio and music – don't represent arts, they represent technologies: the technique of "acquiring content" (the movie and radio icons) or distributing it (the TV and phonograph icons).

In other words, they are icons of commodity and consumption. Theatre may be economically

disadvantaged compared to other forms of entertainment and media, but that's because theatre exists independent of technology. While it may seem hopelessly outdated to have an art-form that relies on human labor instead of technology, in fact, that's what gives theatre its durability.



To be technology-dependent in today's world is to be impermanent. Technology wears and fades, just like the bronze stars, which are being polished away, footstep by footstep. In the past decade, we have seen the end of cassette tapes, CDs, and VHS tapes. This decade will see the finale of DVDs, celluloid film and iPods. Nor will the Cloud be permanent, because digital information degrades over time, far faster than paper, and the software to decode it also obsolesces. Some movies and television shows made as recently as ten years ago have already been lost.

Theatre, in the moment of experiencing it, appears to be so ephemeral, evanescent, fleeting like the stun of being jostled by a stranger in a crowd. I certainly thought so for the seven years I worked in theatre, before I started making movies. I actually looked forward to a career in film, where I believed my work would have some permanence. But then I made a movie that didn't attract attention, and it disappeared from cinemas right after its opening weekend; today you can't even find it on Netflix. I realized movies' permanence is illusory.

In my old theatre, a play would have a six-week run, and if that run sold a lot of tickets we might extend it or move the show to a larger house. If the play struck a chord, it could reappear years later in regional theatres across America or in other countries, refreshed, alive and newly-imagined.

Theatre may be ephemeral, but because it is made to evaporate it has an odd permanence. I doubt that any film I produce in the future will be around as long as a play written in the nineteenth century. So I return to contemplate the shadows. Celebrities aren't buried under the Walk of Fame, but ideas and media may be, along with a lot of sound and fury. Meanwhile theatre will survive, its icon more or less eternal, to mock the expectations of the world.

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*Top image: Ancient Greek theatre, photo by Matthias Süßen, under Creative Commons license.
This is an updated version of an article that appeared previously in Cultural Weekly.*

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