

## Seana's View: Getting the Most Out of Theatre



I was at a movie recently where a man answered his cell phone and thought it was enough to get out of his seat and talk in the aisle! Sometimes people are just unaware that what they are doing is affecting anyone else. But if someone in the cinema is talking loudly or snapping bubbles with gum, the show will likely go on. Not so in the theatre.

Let me suggest some practical ways to make the theatre-going experience enjoyable for everyone.

If you bought tickets early, check them carefully! Make sure you have the right date and time, and at large festivals, the right theatre. I have seen many patrons find out at the last minute that they should be in another theatre, or like visitors to a

garden, that they should have come last Friday.

Know if latecomers are allowed, in case you get caught in traffic, and know if there is an intermission, or use the washrooms ahead of time. For older patrons, that might mean less coffee right before the show. Though we want you to be alert, we also want you to be comfortable

If you have a hearing problem, check if there are audio aids at the theatre, and if you wear a hearing aid, that they are compatible. As an audience member, if you hear the loud hum of a hearing aid next to you, let your neighbour know it is making a noise, as the person will likely not be aware of it and it is very difficult for ushers to detect. There are few sounds more brain-numbing than the piercing din of a hearing aid gone wrong.

Speaking of sounds: unwrap your candies before the lights go down. If you must unwrap during the play, do it quickly. It is much better to have one short sharp burst than the endless "I-am-doing-it-quietly" crinkle. And do it during a laugh or a scene change. If your candy unwrapping obliterates the words which reveal who did it in a "who-dunnit," you might find your neighbours not as friendly as when you first sat down. There is no rewind in live theatre.

So turn off your cell phones, and don't text either! The newest challenge with student audiences is the

blue glow of students texting on cell phones. Not only is it distracting, it is unsafe. Actors can use certain lights in the house for landmarks if they are dancing or doing physical stunts. It is not just the cell phone ringer than can destroy a moment onstage for actors and the audience.

Please respect the stage and the set. If you are in the front row, don't treat the lip, or front part of the stage, as a coffee table for your programme, or a footstool for your feet. To theatre people, that is like placing shoes on an altar. It is where we work, it is part of the world we are trying to create for you. Foreign objects may be in our path as we walk, run, fight or dance across the stage, and are safety hazards. Mostly, they are distractions, and may result in a rattled or offended actor losing concentration and not giving you a best performance.

I have nudged someone's feet off the stage as I came toward the audience, and snatched someone's program off the stage as the curtain fell.

At intermission or after the show, linger and look at the stage if you like, but please don't walk on it or touch it. The set and props on the stage were made, found or bought with great care, and have to last for the run of the show.

But by all means, respond to the performance. If you feel like laughing, laugh. Don't be intimidated if people look at you or shush you! They didn't find it funny; you did. I have been grateful when a line that I thought was funny finally got a laugh. I wanted to meet the person who had the same sense of humour as I.

The only time shushing is appropriate, I think, is if there are long discussions going on in the audience during the play. In some cultures, discussion is the norm, and encouraged. Here, we discourage off-stage dialogue while the play is in progress. But the audience is our *raison d'être*: you are why we do what we do. Your response gives us clues as to whether or not we are succeeding in our attempts to make you laugh, to capture your attention, to rivet you to your

seats, to make you breathe with us, to make our story clear, to connect.

I was once asked if people ever respond too much, or inappropriately. At a student matinee of *Antony and Cleopatra* in Montreal, the obscene comments from a small group

of boys resulted in the actor who was playing Antony walking off stage, with me following. It took half an hour to get us back on stage, and students who couldn't miss their buses had to miss the second act. The few ruined it for the many.

Everyone there that day learned that the theatre is live, and that contrary to the old adage "the show must go on," the play can indeed stop. Live human beings are doing it for other live human beings, and the experience of "playgoing" relies on the mutual suspension of disbelief. If you interfere with that suspension, it is as if the fluorescent lights have abruptly come on at closing time. And the moment of magic is gone.

Another memory of audience response that was a highlight of my career came during *Medea* at the Tom Patterson Theatre at Stratford. As I was reaching for the hand of my very young son to take him to his death, he hesitated and looked back to the women of Corinth. He then looked at me, and as he took his first step towards me, a woman in the front row involuntarily whispered "Don't go." This still gives me shivers. At that moment that woman in the audience became a woman of Corinth who lived thousands of years ago. She was not only watching and listening to this ancient story, she was in it. I will never forget it. I knew that we were all in this together, this theatre, this life, these stories. And that we were doing our job.

My last suggestion for getting the best out of the theatre experience: applaud, even if you hated it. It is an act of generosity and kindness, and is simply courteous, to acknowledge people who have shared time with you, who have worked hard, and who have tried their best to please you. At the very least, they learned all those lines. We hope.

Seana McKenna in the lead role of *Medea* in 2000 at Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

PHOTO BY RICHARD BAIN

*The award-winning Seana McKenna performs in The Trojan Women and Fuente Ovejuna at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival this season.*