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Theater Survey

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What is Theater?

As I wrote for the first time in my Theater Survey journal, the definition of theater is a tough thing to pin down. That day in class, we all discussed it, and it seemed that everyone had a different core definition of what theater is, despite the similarities of experience and emotion. I had not fully fleshed out my own opinion on it, and despite how long ago that discussion feels, I honestly haven't moved too far away in terms of not having a concrete definition of theater. However, after everything we have learned in this class, I can begin to put together the beginnings of an answer.

In Peter Brook's attempt to define theater, he identified four different types of theater: Deadly Theater, Holy Theater, Rough Theater, and Immediate Theater. The first of these four, Deadly Theater, Brook describes as the most common form of theater, it is also the "bad" theater. It is formulaic and boring: never entertaining, never speaking to the audience, and never breaking away from some old definition. In Brook's words: "When we say deadly, we never mean dead: we mean something depressingly active, but for this very reason, capable of change." Moving on to Holy and Rough Theater, a good quote to summarize both is "The Holy Theater deals with the invisible and this invisible contains all the hidden impulses of man. The Rough Theater deals with men's actions, and because it is down to earth and direct - because it admits wickedness and laughter - the rough and ready seems better than the hollowly holy." Immediate Theater,

Brook's final type of theater, is alive and is in the present. It interacts with the audience and is relevant to issues of the day.

Peter Brook ends the book with the idea of truth. "Truth in the theater is always on the move." He acknowledges that even as we read this book the truth in it is already moving out of date. It has been over 50 years since Peter Brook wrote *The Empty Space*, and his idea of using all aspects of theater instead of just rhetoric to communicate a story to the audience still resonates today. Theater is not just a storytelling session. Actions, lighting, costumes, props and set combined with rhetoric can be combined to create a show that will truly resonate with the audience.

The audience themselves also play a part in theater. The audience is just as important as every other aspect. When one goes to see a show, they cannot just check in and check out when they leave. If they do, then they are not truly taking part in the theater. They won't receive the lessons and emotions that the theater is trying to convey if they don't come into it ready to engage. The performers don't just put on a production for themselves, and a good audience truly opens their minds to receive and participate in theater. In some way-whether big or small- one should leave the theater different than when they entered it. It is like Mr Mark says in Workout. When we enter the room, we are to be present. Whether napping, joining in the exercises, or simply observing, we are doing so as a participant.

Collaboration is also a key factor in the definition of theater. We watched a video titled *The Deep Dive*, in which a company demonstrates the importance of collaboration in the workplace. No one person was in charge, and all were encouraged to present their own ideas. Three main points can be taken away from this video. The first is don't

be afraid to move away from things that might not work as well or are unattractive because you are accustomed to them. The second is to try stuff, and ask forgiveness not permission. Finally, fail often in order to succeed sooner. When dealing with theater, the playwright, director, actor, designer, producer, and audience all play an equal part in its creation. Each “department”, for lack of a better word, offers a unique aspect to the production, all of which hold an equal weight. Without collaboration, the theater would not exist as an art form, because by nature the theater is collaborative.

Another idea that was talked about in class was the idea that theater is a mirror of its culture. Theater is always influenced by the times in which it is written. In fact, the best way to connect to an audience is by portraying subjects and stories that they can relate to and understand. The values that are held by the culture of the day can be used to further express the subject matter that the theater is trying to convey. This is why plays written by Shakespeare are often very different in nature to plays from the more modern centuries. His plays were not written in our time or with the cultural context/nuance of today. They were written for the audience of the day (Victorian England). Shakespeare wrote his plays for both the upper and lower classes, and used language that was commonplace for that era. Even plays that were written only decades apart can have drastically different cultural contexts.

The question, Is theater necessary? Is another difficult question to answer, and one that I am still developing my answer on. An incident that sticks out in my mind when I try to answer this question is seeing Hamilton in early 2018. It was a wonderful experience, and seeing it in real time on Broadway really solidified my passion for theater. However, the play itself is not what comes to mind when trying to find an

answer. My father had complained in passing about how expensive the tickets were, and that it seemed like a waste of time. My father -who has spent thousands of dollars on tickets to sports games- didn't see going to the theater as an enriching experience. In his eyes, theater was purely entertainment, and one that served no real purpose. And while yes, entertainment is an essential ingredient of theater, it should never be the sole focus, which is another issue that I will dive into another time.

I would argue that theater is extremely necessary, and an essential part of our culture. First I want to focus on the production aspect. For those acting in and working on the play behind the scenes, theater is an amazing way to build community. To this day I still keep in touch with people I have been in shows with in high school. In fact, the group chat for my senior show is still active. For me, theater has been a way to express myself. I struggle a lot with anxiety, and one of the only times I'm truly not afraid is on stage. This is not the case for everybody, but nothing makes me happier than performing with my cast mates in front of an audience. Seeing all of our hard work pay off and watching the audience react is one of the best feelings.

Regarding the arts in general, they are often used to communicate something, whether that be an emotion, story, or concept. Theater is able to combine all art forms, to put on a production that draws on all senses. A good play can stick with you for the rest of your life. I acknowledge that theater can be done poorly, but good theater should ask questions that make you think. Every art piece, theater or not, can be interpreted the way the audience sees it, and that's what is so beautiful about art. Two people can walk out of the theater with wildly different experiences and interpretations, despite seeing the exact same play. I feel that this is a part of what makes theater so relevant.