



ABTT Seminar: Theatre Then and Now by the SJA Committee

“In the age of technology, is live theatre yesterday’s art form?” by Sam Walters

Good morning.

We live at the moment in strange and difficult times when much seems to be hanging in the balance. And change is in the air.

If this virus is got under control much may be improved by the experience for we may have learned to value that which we previously ignored or undervalued. But some things on the other hand will have suffered irreparable damage.

The theatre, and other activities where people gather, might it would appear be in dire straits.

Theatre though survived the 20th century where first films and then television seemed to pose a considerable threat. But now, with the 21st century, new and perhaps more dangerous technology has reared its head.

We can be entertained at home, on our phone even, by a plethora of shows and films. And this can happen whenever and wherever we want and at our convenience - for we can record, and we can pause to take a phone call, or change our minds to continue the entertainment at another time. And the choice is enormous.

And with the virus keeping us indoors even theatres are finding ways for the new technology to bring their work into our homes as well.

SO why on earth should audiences go out on a wet, cold February night to sit in an auditorium with a lot of strangers to watch a live play? There is simply no need.

The same quality of entertainment can be enjoyed in the comfort of our own homes.

Now we can shop online, bank online, are encouraged to consult our doctor online, even meet our friends and family online and with the current necessity of working from home, surely the habit of doing things at home will soon permeate every aspect of our lives.

And here we are having a conference online from the comfort of our own homes and with one of us being beamed in from Prague! And if the older amongst us may have difficulty in mastering all the new technology, or even, like me, have a resistance to doing so, for the young it will be, and even now is, second nature.

And things do change and sometimes disappear. We no longer travel by pony and trap and although Morris Dancing may be stumbled upon on a summer evening it is hardly the activity it was.

Sometimes of course pastimes get transformed, but not necessarily for the better. We no longer visit the lunatic asylums to gawp at the inmates for our entertainment but instead we have reality television and Love Island.

So my question is – “is theatre yesterday’s art form?” Clearly those of us here think not.

There are though it seems to me 2 possibilities ahead of us:

1. Theatre will die and be displaced by technology and the comforts of home or
2. It will continue to thrive because we are basically gregarious creatures who want and need to gather together.

I am here as one of the people representing, as it were, the Stephen Joseph Association under false pretences for I never met him. And having read quite a bit about him I’m not sure if we would have got on! But I have become a fanatical convert to **Theatre in the Round**.

WHY? Because it is the form of theatre most different from, and most unrelated to, watching a screen.

For most of us our first experience of theatre is a Pros Arch Panto and most of us will have worked first in that form of theatre.

And of course live theatre is different from film and television. BUT in a conventional theatre the actors are on a podium segregated from the audience, who sit in serried rows looking ahead of them unaware of those who are sitting around them.

But take a 1/4 of that audience and put it behind the actors and take the next two quarters and put them on either side of the action and you have radically changed everybody’s relationship to everyone else.

The actors are now surrounded and the audience see the play against a backcloth of fellow audience members. It as though the audience have invaded the stage, or alternatively that the actors have descended into the auditorium and created space for themselves. We have been forced into a relationship with one another and the success of the evening will depend upon the interaction of all of us.

And how liberating that is for the actors and director. For now they can move and act as the play and the scene demand rather than pretending to do so while in fact playing in one direction only. And without the need to create a “set” for the audience to see the play against everything can be done simply. And the director and designer instead of designing a set for the play to be done in can begin by saying “what do we need?” and even “do we need anything?”

So - good for the actors because they can behave truthfully and really instead of artificially.

Good for the author for those same reasons and because the play can be seen and heard uncluttered.

Good for the director because the production can be allowed to evolve naturally – something of which Stephen Joseph would I understand have strongly approved.

BUT for ABTT members it must be said demanding!-

Demanding on the stage management because the props and the set will be under close scrutiny.

And the same goes for the designer.

And demanding on the lighting because of the 3-dimensional aspect of the production.

For we are now involved, as it might be, with a sculpture that will be scrutinised from all sides rather than a picture only looked at from the front.

And most important of all demanding on the audience - for they need to be involved in order to know where to look.

The Film director of course decides on that for them. They choose their shots and determine what the audience will see and when. And the end on stage director can place the actors in order to direct the audience’s attention, but in the round, where the performance is seen from all sides, the power

lies with the audience. It is they who have to decide where they want to look or think their attention needs to be. Film/TV/mobile phones/computers deliver their images to a passive, receiving audience and in the Pros Arch Theatre an audience member may flop into row J and demand to be entertained after a hard day's work. But that won't work in the round. **In the round the audience must be active.**

Theatre in the round empowers the audience. And makes demands upon it. And what is being created is a full **communal shared experience.**

I thought at this point I would try to say some provocative things in relation to Theatre in the Round that many may not agree with, but which might stimulate discussion if you want.

1. **Every play is better for being done in the round.**
2. **If there are problems they can be solved.**
3. **Often the solution to a problem is a real creative plus. I can give one particular example close to my heart.**
4. **Are there any problems that can't be solved? I'm not telling you!**
5. **The question of "who wants to spend good money to see Hamlet's arse" simply never arises.**
6. **Theatres in the Round do need to be small so that the audience are close to the action. That is a good thing.**
7. **When I say Theatre in the round I do not include open stages or thrust stages. I mean with the audience surrounding the action. Three sides is rubbish.**
8. **The round requires simplicity not spectacle – leave that to the films.**
9. **Sometimes having a small budget or even no money at all is good thing.**

If Theatre in the Round is so good, I can hear people cry, why are there not more of them?

Because we are lumbered with the theatre architecture of over 100 years ago, to say nothing of the social divisions that went with them. And then with the invention of electric lighting and the fire brigade fewer theatres burnt down.

And now they have preservation orders on them and, as they are in the majority, productions that are going to travel need to be created for the buildings that exist.

And these theatres are big and can make money.

BUT if technology might now be going to kill theatre perhaps the only theatre that will have a chance of surviving is the one that creates a shared communal experience in total contrast to staying at home and watching a screen.

So perhaps the technology that threatens and which we fear may kill us will in fact be what stimulates our future growth. And if that happens – and how are we going to make it happen? - we are of course returning to our roots for surely theatre began when the players simply arrived on the village green and the people sat round in a circle and enjoyed the show.

Thank you.