

THE CASE FOR ANALOG ENTERTAINMENT IN A DIGITAL WORLD

I rise to champion the horse-drawn carriage.

Shall we let broughams and shays, cabriolets and barouches fall prey to the tyranny of the internal combustion engine? After all, hansom is as handsome does. [Hissing from audience.] I apologize for that hackneyed remark. [More hissing.]

I am not an apologist for horse-drawn transportation, but my theme is almost as quixotic: in a world in which most entertainment is recorded digitally and delivered via discs or over the ether onto a bewildering variety of screens for general -- frequently solitary -- consumption at times generally of the individual's choosing, I am here to champion an art form whose creation and delivery are nearly as old as civilization: Theater.

And unlike the snake-oil salesmen who have preceded me, I shall not resort to videos or slides or other visual aids because I believe in the power of live theater. For that reason -- and because, like everything else I have ever done at Harvard, I did this at the last minute in a slapdash manner.

Theater is an economic engine. It brings diners to restaurants, foot traffic to local stores and overnight guests to hotels and motels. In New York City, some 80,000 people work in jobs connected to or dependent on the Theater. Despite the fact that Broadway is referred to as The Fabulous Invalid and has supposedly been dying for decades, it brings in more money than the Yankees -- more money, in fact, than the Yankees, Mets, Giants, Jets, Knicks, Rangers and all New York sports teams combined.

In smaller cities, Theater is what drives the regeneration of a decaying central business district. Just as no self-respecting European city would be without its opera house, a professional theater marks a US city as a contender, a city of significance, as a place where culture matters, where people have enough money, time and sophistication to lift their eyes up from their individual, quotidian concerns to join their fellow citizens in the pursuit of enlightenment, amusement and/or catharsis.

It is this coming together I wish to focus on, not on Theater as Economic Engine. I wish to focus on Theater as a builder of Community, of Connection. "Only Connect," said E.M. Forster in *Howards End*. (I was assigned this book at least once while I was at Harvard. I never read it, but I know the salient quote and where to drop the name: this, of course, is the very essence of a Harvard education.)

What I have to say is true of dance and live music, but since I dance as well as your average cow with an inner-ear disorder and I can play no instrument except the kazoo, I will leave that case for you to extrapolate.

As the President of the union of professional actors and stage managers, I am certainly not here to make the case for community theater, but Theater is Community. It is literally a space where people get their noses out of their individual electronic gizmos and actually see and talk to their neighbors.

Indeed Theater actually creates community; it is not a voyeuristic spectator sport such as movie-going. It demands participation -- the audience creates a theatrical even right along with the actors, it is a collaborative effort. Theater literally and figuratively brings people together.

Let's drill down into that creative collaboration. On Broadway, they are about to revive *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a musical in which the audience's vote determines the ending of the play. That is an extreme example, but each night's audience is a determining factor in how the show turns out. I did *Phantom of the Opera* 900 times, I did *Les Miserables* 2500 times, and people frequently asked how I could do that. The answer is twofold: one, that's where the craft and professionalism come in – creating it fresh every night – and that's what makes it a job; and two, no two audiences are alike – they make it a different show every night. [Also, in a long-running show, since actors get two weeks paid vacation per year thanks to that pesky union, it's rarely the exact same cast from one week to the next (and sometimes from night to night.)]

Let's return to that phrase "Creating it fresh every night." The screening of "Avatar" that I saw in New York was identical to the one that you saw in Weston. Stephen Lang's scenery-chewing as Colonel Quaritch matched bite for bite. Yet when Stephen played a similar role on Broadway in *A Few Good Men*, he was different every night.

Each performance of a show is unique. Theater is not off-the-rack; it is bespoke entertainment. It is a home-cooked meal – or it is at least tonight's special at the local restaurant as opposed to the Applebee's of film or television's TGI Friday's.

Theater as community is true on both sides of the footlights. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a small city to put on a show. Theater is very labor-intensive. That is one reason why the professional theater's effect on your wallet is more Lutece than Mickey D's.

But here's a dirty little secret (don't tell my bargaining partners): people love doing theater so much they will do it for free – or all but free. Consequently there are theaters all over this country where you can collaborate in helping professional Equity actors cook up fresh, never-to-be-duplicated-again entertainment for little more than the cost of an IMAX movie ticket.

You want to do this. You want to do this for the same reason that you carved time out of your zany busy lives to come back to Cambridge as the patsies of the Harvard Alumni Association's quinquennial fund-raising scam. (As you may have gleaned from the use of the words quixotic, quotidian and quinquennial in the same essay, this talk is brought to you by the letter Q.)

You want to connect with your fellow humans. You want to see your lives mirrored forth. When I come to reunions, I see myself in my fellow classmates. I see my good points; I see my bad points. I see people whom I aspire to emulate; I see people who are more of a cautionary tale. When I go to the theater, I see myself as well. I learn about myself.

Part of this is because Theater is rarely a casual, spur-of-the-moment choice. Like our reunion – and thank you, Reunion Committee -- it is planned-for, traveled-to. It is not the mere flick of a switch or the powering-up of an electronic device. There is an investment, so we bring more of ourselves to the evening's entertainment. We gauge and acknowledge our fellow theatre-goers: "Aha, so you too thought this was a worthwhile way to spend your evening." We literally experience -- in the same room, in real time -- the events and emotions of the evening, without the magic tricks of the film editor or cameraman.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (someone else I never read at Harvard) wrote a well-known letter decrying the proposed establishment of a theater in Geneva. Rousseau, who couldn't act his way out of a wet sac en papier, felt that Theater would distract people from their work and their lives – and that this was a bad thing. Video games and cell phones today would probably send Jean Jacques into an apoplectic fit and I would totally understand, but I think he missed the boat on theater. People, particularly today, need to be reminded of who they are – and Theater

does that. Theater broadens our perspective. In the midst of a world that is polarized politically, that is compartmentalized at work, and digitized in every way you can think of, Theater offers us the golden thread of Connection and lets us see how like we are to others and how much more we are capable of.

Don't listen to Jean Jacques. Avail yourself of freshly prepared entertainment regularly. You'll be glad you did.