# "IS THE CURTAIN CLOSING ON LIVE THEATRE IN AMERICA?"

*(In July 2009, I was invited to speak at the Aspen Ideas Festival. One event was a panel titled "Is The Curtain Closing on Live Theatre in America?" The members of the panel were Anna Deavere Smith, Michael Eisner and myself. This was my opening address.)*

Frankly I was a bit surprised when I heard the title of this panel. First, because Sophocles probably faced a crowd much like this one under the same title in 438 B.C. when receipts were down in Athens. Second, because – from my perspective – there's no sign of theatre going out of business. I hate to take Broadway as a general example, but theatre is one of the few things in New York, at least, that did well in a terrible financial year. In fact, it was a banner year for Broadway both financially and in terms of the shows that went up, including a lot more plays than usual. Actually, there are other media that probably ought to be worried about the curtain coming down. The movies, for example, are going to change technologically in all kinds of ways in the next 20 years, and the movies we love will look like antiques, the way the silents do to us now. Theatre doesn't age that way. That's because nothing can match the simple nondigital presence of a live actor. And beyond that – on Broadway, for example – you have the higher version of that phenomenon: the luminous presence of a star. People will still pay exorbitant prices for it, and I can't see that that is going to stop anytime soon.

I'm not saying that theatre isn't troubled in many ways. The death of Off-Broadway troubles me – the result of real-estate scarcity and the inability of producers to make middle-sized theatres profitable. Off-Broadway has been the source of so many fantastic shows over the past half-century and I'd hate to see it go away. But fringe theatre, what used to be called Off-Off-Broadway, seems to me to be thriving. Just read the listings. People are putting up plays in all kinds of venues – the kinds of plays that wouldn't and probably shouldn't go to Broadway.

There are two theatres, you see: the commercial theatre, which is based around money and is an arm of the entertainment industry; and a much larger and richer theatre where people find a space, set up a chair and two actors and invite people to come. That's the theatre that made me want to go into the theatre, and even if the commercial theatre went bust this second theatre would go on because people do it because they have to. They do it for love, which as far as I can tell is the only good reason to do anything you find meaningful. Playwrights themselves are now becoming their own producers. Groups like 13P, for example. I know a director who hooked up with a playwright and they've dedicated themselves to doing nothing but that playwright's work – and they cop great reviews for what they do, too.

In fact, I feel incredibly lucky to be a playwright right now because as far as I'm concerned we're living in a golden age for theatre. I've always been fascinated by the great gaps in history where plays are concerned. Whole centuries go by when plays were being performed yet no play has survived that's worth performing, or has survived period. After ancient Greece, in the West, you have to go all the way up to the Middle Ages before you find a play worth doing, then another blank to Elizabethan times, another blank up to Restoration comedy, another hundred years when there's no play that I know of that's still being performed, up to Sheridan, then another hundred years' blank to Oscar Wilde.

But look at the playwrights writing in English who are alive now, or recently with us. Beckett, Mamet, Albee, Sam Shepard, Pinter, August Wilson, Tom Stoppard. You can probably name a dozen others. And even if none of those people had written a thing we also have a giant among us in the form of Stephen Sondheim, who's spent 50 years chronicling our time for all times in shows that I don't doubt will be done for a very long time.

We mustn't forget the vitality of American musical theatre. The musical is actually the closest we get to the theatre of the ancient Greeks: an extravagant, exuberant representation of the world mixing song and speech that goes straight to the heart of its audience. It's given us outstanding American works of art. *Carousel*, which is heartbreaking. *The King and I*, a perfectly made show. *My Fair Lady*, also perfect. *West Side Story*. *Sweeney Todd*, which is the American *Hamlet*, and *Follies*, which is our *Lear*. After all, along with jazz, the airplane and the martini, the musical is one of the few native American inventions, and it shows no sign of losing its audience. What's more, it feels as if musical theatre is going to get a whole new life as people figure out how to use rock and pop to make shows, and draw in a younger audience than we have been. You may have noticed that the Tony – not to use it as a measure, but anyway – that the Tony this year went to a musical by a bunch of young guys about bipolar disorder and drug addiction. Now *that's* what I call interesting theatre, and there's going to be a lot more of it coming up.

I'm actually sorry that we're having to talk about theatre as business when there are so many other interesting things to talk about about theatre. But I have to say that I don't know anybody who's in theatre, or primarily in theatre, for money, or to make money. You have to be an idiot to go into the theatre for money. That means there's a kind of Darwinian winnowing-out of greed. I went into the theatre for love, because I had to, and I would have written plays even if nobody had paid me to. That is the exuberance of theatre, and why it's likely to go on – whether the plays from our time are remembered or not – for a very long time.

I've always been fascinated by a weird convergence: that democracy and Western theatre both happened at the same moment in the same place, in Athens. It can't be a coincidence. Theatre is the perfect expression of democracy: it's a bunch of people setting aside

their differences and deciding to pool their thoughts and talents and emotions to make Something Good. That's the exhilarating part of the theatre. If the government were smart, in fact, it would fund drama classes from K through 12 because there is no greater socializer and civilizer than theatre. It teaches you to work with other people, and think and feel with other people. What government doesn't want citizens like that?

But let me mention another weird convergence. Anna was talking about how artists get infantilized and think that it's not so bad if they don't earn anything for their work. So listen to this convergence. Follow me.

I would bet that if I asked this audience to name an American play from before 1900 nobody could name one. Or maybe only *Our American Cousin*, because Lincoln got shot at it. Two hundred years of American history and not one play that's memorable or still on the boards. Now consider this. In 1925 there was a sort of strike by the biggest playwrights in America. All the big guys, George S. Kaufman and so on – everybody but George M. Cohan – refused to give their plays to producers until they got a fair deal, a contract that paid them their worth. That's because up until that point the situation was the same as in Shakespeare's day: a producer could give you five pounds, or five hundred dollars, and make five hundred *thousand* dollars and you had no right to any of it because your play was just a product that they owned.

But in the 1920's, the major playwrights got together and formed the Dramatists Guild and forced producers to come up with a contract – basically by striking, by not giving them anything to produce. Think about what happened in American theatre after that date – and once again, I don't believe this can be a coincidence. This is what happened: O'Neill, Wilder, Odets, Tennessee Williams, Inge, Albee, Miller – you can name another couple of dozen playwrights whose work is almost certain to last a very long time. And why? Because playwrights weren't

infants in the theatre anymore. They were the equivalent of adults, earning a fair wage for good work. They were not employees.

So listen. I'm as eager for producers to make money as anybody else. I depend on producers to do their work, too. It's how they make their money and off of whose back that I worry about. There is increasing pressure on playwrights right now: producers interested in less-than-fair contracts; not-for-profit theatres making profits off of playwrights in the form of subsidiary rights, for ten years sometimes (and don't ask me how they get that past the tax man). So, sure. Let producers make their money. But we must never go backwards from what happened in 1925. That's what will ensure a future life for the theatre.

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