

“Why have a theater at all?”

That's the question a friend of mine (almost an ex-friend) recently asked me after I spent an hour grousing about the slings and arrows incurred in directing plays and running a theater company.

“You're not listening,” I replied. “I'm just venting. There's a big difference between whining and advocating the end of civilization.”

“Civilization indeed!” he snorted. “You theater types are all the same. Do you actually think that if every playhouse in this country closed tonight anyone but a few actors and a handful of playwrights would notice? There are a lot more important things to worry about in this world than a strong second act or a dazzling curtain call. I repeat, why have a theater at all?”

I'm not often speechless, but there I was, dumbfounded. This was a “civilian” I was talking to, a fellow not of the theater. Could he be saying out loud what millions were silently thinking? Had I spent so many years in the Drama Club that I had lost touch with reality? I paid the bar bill, said a speedy goodnight, and skulked away.

Whenever I'm confused or agitated I do one of two things: I either clean my house from top to bottom or I make lists. Since I didn't feel like going home and cleaning, I decided to walk along the riverfront and make a mental list instead. From the big question “Why have a theater at all?” I created a sub-topic: “Why do we need a Pittsburgh Public Theater?” Here's what I came up with:

1. First and foremost it's a vehicle for the **creation of art**. If we assume that art matters (and is there anyone out there, except for a sect of deranged creatures, who would argue against art?), then the company that helps create the art is a valuable entity that deserves our tender, loving care.
2. Secondly, a theater is a place for actual **human contact**. Let's face it friends, most of us spend way too much time in front of the television set, alone in a car on the way to work, fixated in front of a computer, or strapped to our cell phones. Except for places of worship, how often do we get together as a community to celebrate, concentrate and communicate? The theater welcomes all – it practically screams “Come on in!” I remember, vividly, the weeks after the September 11th tragedy. The Public was producing *Medea*, Euripides' thrilling study of revenge and the unbalanced mind. You'd think it would have been a tough sell. But audiences flocked to the theater, aching to come together to share their grief, their fear, and their anger. Art heals. No doubt about it.
3. **Continuity**. By that I mean a tangible connection to the past. During our production of *Much Ado About Nothing* one of our actors created a sort of family tree/time line that linked Shakespeare's original production of the play (and therefore Shakespeare himself) to our group of actors. Our six degrees of separation made us feel only a hop, skip and a jump away from Elizabethan England and the embrace of the world's greatest writer. The theater can do that. A great play can help us understand what people thought and felt a thousand years ago. But it can also speak to us about who we are today. Why do you think teenagers stampede the box office when *Romeo and Juliet* is on the bill?
4. In an era of homogenized (some would say sinisterly controlled) news, Americans have few opportunities to be exposed to powerful and controversial ideas. With the demise of the town meeting as a forum for discussion and debate, the theater has never been more essential as a place where opinions, no matter how outrageous or difficult to digest, can be freely expressed without unbridled censorship. The theater has always been, and will always be, **a safe haven for original thought**, the minority voice, and the bold new plan. I still get a thrill when Nora slams the door at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, leaving behind her family and the shackles of her past. That play was produced in 1879 and is still a rallying cry for anyone who envisions a world where men and women are treated equally and fairly.
5. With federal, state, and local governments cutting back funding for arts education, it is imperative that our cultural institutions pick up the slack and help introduce our young people to the beauty and power of music,

poetry, painting, dance, and theater. Here at the Public, we have stepped up to the plate in a big way and are considered **leaders in the areas of education and outreach**. We have classes for children of all ages, including acting, creative dramatics and playwriting. We hold an annual Shakespeare Monologue and Scene Contest that actively involves over 900 students from 90 different schools. We perform special student matinees with pre-show and post-show events. We still offer \$12 tickets to students and anyone 26 years or under as a way of building the audience of the future for all the arts. Above and beyond our commitment to youngsters, we also have a wonderful adult lecture series (Mondays with the Public), a new play reading series (Public Exposure), exhibits, and post-show talkbacks (all free of charge, by the way), as well as some excellent classes for adults. Some call it audience development, some call it missionary work. At the Public, we call it business as usual.

6. Some theaters are built like fortresses, implying that only the very powerful can break down the walls and be let in. The O'Reilly, home of the Public Theater, is all windows and doors. It's open to absolutely everyone, as every theater should be. This company, which has been around for 30 years, is not a fancy boutique but an active participant in the life of this community, **a good citizen**. Next year the Public will host its 20th annual AIDS Task Force benefit, the longest-running association between a theater company and an AIDS service organization in this country. We also continue to give free performances to those individuals who simply do not have the financial means to attend the theater but want the thrill of seeing a live performance. We look for ways to pitch in and help. We're not called the Public for nothing.
7. **Entertainment**. Also known as laughter, tears, pleasure, excitement, fascination, and just plain fun. Sure, movies and television are great (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Sopranos*, *Oprah* – need I say more?); I even love the radio. But nothing, and I mean nothing, will ever take the place of a live theatrical performance. Is there anything better than 600 people all laughing at the same joke at the same time while the actors whirl about the stage? Or a gorgeous play that moves a packed house to a silence so hushed that you actually can hear a pin drop? Let me offer up a cliché: theater celebrates the human condition, in all its variety, its glory, its foibles, and its potential. Often said, but still true. Plays are about us. And each of us is wildly different. Shouldn't our theater reflect that? That's why the Public strives to bring variety and diversity to each and every season. Sir Alan Ayckbourn, August Wilson and Oscar Wilde are all on the roster for season 31. So are two splendid young writers, Doug Wright and Dael Orlandersmith, the authors, respectively, of *I Am My Own Wife* and *Yellowman*. So is Tom Atkins in *The Chief* and Mark Rylance in *Measure for Measure*. Even Hollywood is exuberantly represented by the inspired lunacy of the Reduced Shakespeare Company. Next season has everything including, literally, the kitchen sink.

My walk by the river did me a lot of good. I dashed home and called my friend. (It was two in the morning by now, so I had the pleasure of waking him up from a deep sleep.) Before he could speak, packed with adrenalin and flushed with confidence I bellowed, “That's right! Civilization! That's what the theater is all about. It's about people and history and beauty and tragedy and children and laughter and language and optimism and politics and splendor and teamwork and rage and magic and treachery and love. It's about life – stark naked or in full armor. Vulnerable or magnificent. Swathed in darkness or blazing in light. And I wouldn't give up a second of it for anything in the world. So what have you got to say to that?”

“Sir, you've got the wrong number. And by the way, you're nuts.”

True story.

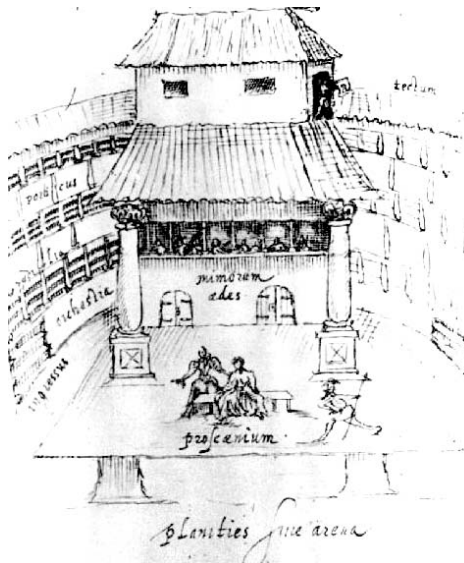


Ted Pappas
Artistic & Executive Director

PS: If I don't see you, have a great summer!



The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens.



The famous DeWitt Sketch, the only first-hand drawing of an Elizabeth theater – either the Globe or the Swan.



Our home, the beautiful O'Reilly Theater.