The Future of Theatre by Hannah Hill

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Performance has been part of human culture for at least 10,000 years. Music and dance have always been popular mediums of storytelling-expression, and eventually this translated to stage. Theater is thought to have become popular in what is now the United Kingdom with the arrival of Medieval morality-plays; a manner in which the church could engage and educate the common-folk. It was already popular by the time of Shakespeare, but the plays attributed to that name caused an explosion of interest. Contrary to popular belief, most Shakespearian plays were not restricted to the wealthy, and the Globe Theatre's performances were unbelievably popular spectator-events among the public.

It is undeniable that theatre has hit rockier shores in recent years. Many critics protest that theatre is an entirely different medium to digital technology like television and cinema. However, it was around the advent of television and radio for common use (that is, the early 20th Century) that audience numbers began to dwindle. Music-Halls, home to all kinds of performances, and having kept the people of the country entertained during the First World War, drew increasingly thin crowds, and most had closed by the late 1940s. Indeed, the exclucivity of theatre (i.e. limited seat-numbers) has, in some cases, driven ticket-prices up in recent years, and the price can be a dissuading factor to those with anything but an avid interest in the medium.

That is not to say that Theatre has nothing to offer audiences, or is even close to 'death'. Critic Scott Walters once described modern Broadway as "artistically bankrupt", comparing it to an adult-centric Disneyland. For theatre to survive, it has to appeal to everyone, and not just a limited number of regulars. To do this, it must adapt to the modern society - whereby much of culture is presided-over by so-called 'pop-culture' derived from film, television and music. Many people expressed bemusement at the announcement of 'Shrek: The Musical', but this is just an example of the thespian industry reacting to an extremely successful (and arguably music-centred) film-franchise. The various forms of media (radio/podcast, television, film and video game) feed-off one another constantly. Films generate spin-off games and television shows, podcasts exist solely dedicated to singular novels and so-on.

Why, then, should theatre be prevented from adapting to this inter-connected entertainment market? Because of outdated presumptions on what constitutes 'art'? The success of so-called 'experimental theatre' over the past few years pretty much shatters that feeble argument. Of course, one's taste in art is one's own, but theatre must ultimately be financially successful, or fail.

It is likely that theatre will always survive. It is its own medium, after-all. It cannot become film and television, but it is not trying to. It simply represents a very successful mode of expression, attempting to mold itself to the times. The fact that big-budget Hollywood films have seen Broadway stagings does not eclipse the value of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' any more than the existence of Horror 'B-Movies' reduces the enjoyability of Casablanca. Times change, the perspectives of audiences change, and art too must change with them, or else slide forgotten into history.

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