



Seana's View: Why Bother with Theatre?

formed by a specific group of people for a different group of people each night. It is, to use 1960s' vernacular, a "happening." Each performance is unique, because even if the cast is the same, the audience is different every night. And the audience is a crucial part of the experience. Unlike cinema, the audience affects the players.

Your laughter as a group may force actors to pause, even to stop the play for a while. The actors will skirt around and through your reactions, because they hear you. The relationship between actors and audience in the theatre is two way. While the audience may go out of a theatre saying "That was a great show," or "That was dull," the actors may say "What a fantastic house tonight" or "That was a tough crowd."

You are not unnoticed, even if you are in the dark. When you see a movie, you don't care if the theatre is full. You may be thrilled to be the only one there. But with

a play, you want to be surrounded by other theatre-goers. It is a collective, communal experience. Strangers come to hear and see a story told by other people, who are not larger than life, as in film, or smaller as in television, but life-size. And usually, except in musicals, you are hearing the natural voice, unamplified. If someone cries in the same room as you, they are revealing themselves to you at that very moment. It is intimate, voyeuristic. And can be uncomfortable. Or exhilarating. Or comforting, because you realize "I have felt that. I am not alone." Actors performing are in the same city as you, at the same time. They have probably read the same news as you, gone through the same snowstorm, shopped at the same stores. A line in the play might be especially relevant that day, and the actor saying it knows it, and the audience knows it.

I was in a 1950s' play that mentioned the levees in New Orleans, and Hurricane Katrina had just hit that week. It had new resonance and we all felt it. Even with a play that is 400 years old, it is contemporary, because it is interpreted by, performed by, seen by and

listened to, by people who share the planet, the theatre, at the same time. And that time is *now*.

How to get the most out of going to live theatre

Make an informed choice. Read the descriptions of the plays in theatre brochures or on the Web, or in listings, to see what appeals to you. You might want to read reviews, but there is no guarantee you will have the same response as that reviewer.

In my younger days, when I still read reviews, I attended too many plays where I thought the critic must have been watching a different production. It is all about taste, aesthetics and consequently, totally subjective. You have to see for yourself.

If you are going to a Shakespeare play or a classical play, you might want to read the play first. The language is English, and if delivered by good actors, will be accessible, but it is far denser than our ears are used to these days. But the rewards of classical language, and listening to the thoughts and feelings that that language can encompass, are well worth the effort. Sometimes it is hard to believe something was written hundreds of years ago, it seems so current. Some familiarity with the language and the plot can allow you to focus on the performance.

Fabulous places to see theatre in Ontario

There are the festivals: Stratford, Shaw, Blyth. All the theatres in Toronto, the Theatre Aquarius in Hamilton, The Grand in London, professional theatres in Kitchener, Guelph, Orangeville, St. Catherine's. There are summer theatres and "theatres in the parks" all over the province. There is infinite variety, yours for the asking. And the paying, of course. But when you pay, you support local industry and living artists. And when someone says, "You had to be there," you can say "I was."



Seana McKenna as Anne Hathaway in *Shakespeare's Will*, 2007 at Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

PHOTO BY RICHARD BAIN

Seana McKenna, an accomplished and award-winning actor, is performing in The Trojan Women and Fuente Ovejuna at the Stratford Festival this season.