

DOES THEATRE MATTER?

Remarks by Howard Shalwitz

At Woolly Mammoth "Dinner on Stage"

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As someone who came from a family of doctors, started out pre-med in college, detoured to philosophy, then teaching, and finally to theatre -- not only did my career choices slide steadily downhill from my mother's perspective, but I was left with a moral conundrum, which is this: does my chosen profession, theatre, make a valuable contribution to the world when compared with the other professions I left behind? I guess this conundrum has stuck with me, because as recently as this past winter I made a list of seven reasons why theatre matters, and I'd like to share them with you briefly tonight. I have an ulterior motive for doing so, which I'll explain at the end.

First, theatre does no harm. Theatre is one of those human activities that doesn't really hurt anyone or anything (except for its carbon footprint, but let's ignore that for now). While we're engaged in making or attending theatre, or any of the arts for that matter, we are not engaged in war, persecution, crime, wife-beating, drinking, pornography, or any of the social or personal vices we could be engaged in instead. For this reason alone, the more time and energy we as a society devote to theatre and the arts, the better off we will be.

Second, theatre is a sophisticated expression of a basic human need, one might call it an instinct -- to mimic, to project stories onto ourselves and others, to create meaning through narrative and metaphor. We see this instinct expressed in children when they act out real or imagined characters. We have evidence of theatre-like rituals in some of the oldest human societies, long before the foundations of Western theatre in Ancient Greece. So theatre matters, in essence, because we can't help it. It's part of what makes us human; and through it, we come to know ourselves.

Third, theatre brings people together. For a performance to happen, anywhere from a hundred to a thousand or more people need to gather in one place for a couple of hours, and share together in witnessing and contemplating an event that may be beautiful, funny, moving, thought-provoking, or hopefully at least diverting. And in an age when most of our communication happens in front of a

screen, I think that this gathering function of theatre is, in and of itself, something that matters.

Fourth, theatre models for us a kind of public discourse that lies at the heart of democratic life, and builds our skills for listening to different sides of a conversation or argument, and empathizing with the struggles of our fellow human beings whatever their views may be. When we watch a play, we learn what happens when conflicts don't get resolved, and what happens when they do. We develop our faculty for imagining the outcomes of various choices we might make in our personal lives and our political lives. It's not surprising that, in repressive societies, theatre has often been aligned with the movement toward openness and freedom. In South Africa theatre played a role in the struggle against apartheid; in Czechoslovakia, a playwright became the leader of a new democracy. If our own representatives and senators in Washington went to the theatre more often, I suspect we'd all be better off.

Fifth, both the making of theatre and attending of theatre contribute to education and literacy. Watching the characters talk back and forth in the theatre is tricky, it requires sharp attention, quick mental shifts, nimble language skills. It teaches us about human motivation and psychology. In historical plays we get lessons in leadership and government. In contemporary plays, we learn about people and cultures in different parts of our own country or in other countries. Studies have shown that students who participate in theatre do better in school. Making plays together also draws kids out of their shells and helps them learn to socialize in a productive and healthy way.

Sixth, theatre as an industry contributes to our economy and plays a special role in the revitalization of neglected neighborhoods. We've seen this quite clearly in our own city. You can look at the role that the Studio Theatre played along the 14th Street corridor, or Shakespeare Theatre along Seventh Street, or Woolly in both these neighborhoods, or Gala Hispanic Theatre in Columbia Heights, the Atlas along H Street, or the new Arena Stage along the waterfront. As each of these theatres opened, new audiences started flooding in, new restaurants opened, jobs were created, the city improved the sidewalks, and neighborhoods that were once grim and forbidding became vibrant hubs of activity. And this pattern has been repeated in cities across the United States and around the world.

Finally, the seventh way that theatre matters -- and this one applies to some kinds of theatre more than others -- is that it influences the way we think and feel about our own lives and encourages us to take a hard look at ourselves, our values, and our behavior. The most vivid example of this I've ever experienced was during a post-show discussion at Woolly Mammoth when a woman said that one of our plays made her and her husband decide that they had a serious problem in their marriage and needed to go for counseling; and she was pleased to report that they were still together and much happier as a result. Now, I'll admit, I don't hear things like this every day. But speaking more generally, isn't this one of the things we go to the theatre for, to measure our own lives against the lives we see depicted on the stage, to imagine what it would be like if we had those lives instead? And isn't it a very short step from there to saying, gee, maybe there's something I should change about my own life? And it may have nothing to do with the message that the playwright wanted to deliver! Maybe the play is about a fierce battle during a family dinner that breaks the family apart over irreconcilable political divisions -- but maybe you watch the play and say, gosh, wouldn't it be nice to at least have a family dinner once in a while, and so you decide to plan one for next month.

So, those are my seven ways that theatre matters: it does no harm, expresses a basic human instinct, brings people together, models democratic discourse, contributes to education and literacy, sparks economic revitalization, and influences how we think and feel about our own lives.

Now, as to my ulterior motive: I want to ask you to think especially hard about the seventh reason why theatre matters, that it influences how we think and feel about our own lives. I said that this applies to some kinds of theatre more than others, and what I probably really meant was that I hope it applies to the shows you see at Woolly Mammoth in particular. Most of you know that Woolly has been hosting tons of post-show discussions, interactive lobby displays, expanding our blogging and podcasts -- all in an effort to promote a higher level of public conversation around each of our plays. Much of this has been under the banner of a new department at Woolly called Connectivity, which seeks to both reach out to new audiences and to draw all of our audiences into a livelier sense of inquiry at the theatre. It's easy to think that this is just another form of marketing, but to me, it's something quite different. It's part of a battle I've been waging for thirty-

two years, a battle embedded in the DNA of Woolly Mammoth, which is a battle for the relevance of theatre. We all know that we live in a society that tends to make a commodity out of practically everything, and my problem is that I refuse to think of the work we do at Woolly Mammoth as a commodity, and stubbornly insist on thinking of it as an form of public betterment, if for no other reason than to convince myself that it's just as valuable a contribution to society as medicine or teaching, the careers I left behind.

So I want to ask you to help me in this battle for relevance. As some of Woolly's closest friends and supporters, as ambassadors for Woolly to your own circle and to the community at large, I want to ask you to talk about our work in a new way. I want you to say to your friends that they should come to Woolly Mammoth not because they'll absolutely love it or be dazzled by the acting or the sets or rolling in the aisles or shaking with convulsions -- all of which are of course true. I want you to say that you're inviting them into an energetic and often intense and occasionally inscrutable conversation that has deep relevance and urgency for their lives and for the life of our society, and for that reason they simply can't afford to miss it.

And to help you do that, we've started supplying a provocative hook for each season, and this coming season's hook is, I think, as provocative as it gets -- does our civilization have an expiration date? We all know that our society is for shit these days, our government can't function, the left and the right hate each other, our economy is in shambles, there's more poverty than ever, global warming is accelerating, God seems to be punishing us with hurricanes and earthquakes and tsunamis, our infrastructure is crumbling, governments are collapsing around the world and unleashing all manner of chaos. So at Woolly this season we're just jumping ahead and inviting you to contemplate, in both humorous and horrifying ways, a variety of roads toward the apocalypse. And perhaps by heightening our awareness of the path we're on, the season will open up a conversation about ways that we might, as individuals and as a society, get on a better path. And that's a conversation we all need to be part of. And at the very least, it will help me feel like my life in the theatre actually matters, and for that I'm grateful to all of you.