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Keep the Ham Ends

I will (rather shamefully) admit that in entering this semester, expecting my first theater class in my schooling experience, I had less than an open mind about what the British Stage would entail. I claimed that I was “not a theater person”, and that the extent of my experience in the field was never something that I enjoyed. And that attitude persisted upon entering the class. Never would I have expected to love the Fringe Festival and our group plays as much as I did. As silly as it sounds, I did not associate the stage with humor, intense tragedy, or many other emotions; the extent of my time in the theater consisted of cheesy Christmas plays, children’s musicals, and mediocre performances at a local theater with my grandparents.

Fast-forward to the end of our three weeks learning about the British Stage, and I would claim that I did not want it to end. I loved witnessing the creativity and individuality of the Fringe Festival pieces and each of the plays we saw as a group. One factor that I think contributed to my love of the Fringe is the relative brevity of each piece. Not many of them lasted more than one hour, and I think that is an ideal amount of time for performances such as these. They captured my attention, and then held it through the play’s entirety without losing my interest. One thing I did not enjoy about the theater (granted this observation was based on my experience prior to Europe Semester) was its ability to drag on for too long, especially if the play’s topic was not intriguing to me. What I learned that I appreciate in entertainment is the ability to convey a main point without adding insignificant parts to make a piece more complex. There is no sense in going overboard on details when the same message can be conveyed in a shorter amount of time and/or words.

Secondly, I appreciated the overflowing creativity that is so evident in the Fringe Festival. People love learning what other people are passionate about; I feel good when I can experience what makes other people happy, and what inspires them to create something worthy of showcasing to others through theater. To see someone’s hard work come alive on stage is exciting to watch, and

in a way I felt important to be a part of their performance. I consider myself a creative person, but never have I thought to express myself through this type of art--I more enjoy writing and drawing, but I have appreciated seeing a different form of people conveying emotions and opinions. Of the six Fringe pieces that I saw, and the numerous plays we saw as a group, no two were the same. In fact, they were all very different from one another, in terms of subject matter, audience participation, venue, genre, and cast. I would not have wanted that to be any other way! Each performance was unique, reflecting the ideas of each individual playwright and director. In three short weeks, we were able to witness a wide range of theatrical shows, and I believe that broad spectrum encouraged a more positive view of the theater for me.

It is fascinating to debate and discuss a theater performance shortly after watching it. Every time we talked in class about the different plays we had been seeing, I loved listening to what other people observed or learned that I had not picked up on, and vice-versa. Everyone seemed to take away something different from the rest, and as a whole unit, we were able to dissect and interpret the major elements of each piece, and their meaning for us after being a part of the audience. There are four main elements in any theatrical piece: language, structure, conflict, and metaphor.

A playwright uses language to encourage the emotional impact and connection that the audience feels with the characters of a play. The sounds of words and lengths of words influence how listeners perceive what is being said. The use of language alone from a particular character helps us to understand their background and level of education, giving us a better sense of who they are and where they may have come from. From the start of *Waiting for Godot*, we see that these two characters likely are not well-educated based on their sentence fragments, English slang, and basic use of words. We then can try to develop their story and where they came from--perhaps they have experienced a war? Or came from impoverished families who did not value education? Or have been living on their own for so long that they have lost the ability to interact with other people well?

Based on how we see others communicate, we can interpret the character's whole persona, not just the tidbit we see on the stage.

The structure of a play entails the pattern that a story follows; it typically starts with the exposition, in which we are given the context and setting. The beginning of a play is when we learn all the details we should know about what hypothetically occurred in a story before we started watching it unfold. The exposition is followed by the complication, in which a character or key event is introduced to the story, and begins to change everything thus far. Without this event, a play could easily lose the focus of an audience. Next is the rising action. Here we learn the results of whatever complication we have just experienced. The climax is comprised of a series of conflicts coming together to create the most dramatic part of the play. This is the edge-of-your-seat moment that every audience member craves. The end of a play displays the resolution, where we see the results of the climax, and the potential future for the characters after the curtain closes.

There is never a play where everything goes well (which is especially true of *The Play That Goes Wrong*). For that, we have conflict to thank. Problems among characters are what keeps the audience intrigued about what is to come. We want to see how other people resolve relatable problems. The benefit of watching a play is that we can see potential consequences for actions, without having to experience it ourselves. Conflict can be with oneself, another person, an ideology, or even with God. A theatrical performance often includes numerous conflicts, not simply one problem. Such is life--we want to relate to the characters, and we can better understand who they are by the choices they make and how they end up by the finish of a play.

Everything on the stage has meaning; nothing is left to chance. Initially when watching a play, an audience member might be intrigued by the set design: Why is that there? What does it represent? How will it be used or demonstrated? What is it conveying emotionally? Our questions continue as we watch the play, wondering how different interactions represent something else we

might experience in life. Similar to conflicts, a single performance can be littered with metaphors. We can dissect these observations to potentially serve as everyday applications for our own lives.

As I previously mentioned, I loved that each piece we saw was so different from the rest. There is no way in which every performance can be lumped into one mass category--each one has individual factors that make it unique from the rest. Lighting and stage design create a set that differs from other performances. Lines, texture, mass, composition, and color all influence how we perceive what we see on the stage. Each one of these elements evokes an emotional connection between what we see and what we feel, and a director can manipulate those actions to get the audience to feel certain ways, often subconsciously. Lighting can subconsciously evoke emotions within audience members, and even the smallest of props are of great significance to the stage. For example, in the one-woman show *Pike Street*, the actress was covered in different lights depending on her character and location, helping the audience to be sure of exactly what they were watching. Light design also played a role in distinguishing a scene in which a strong storm is a severe threat to the characters, and as the lights flickered similar to lightning, we could sense an ominous foreshadowing of tragedy. She also was accompanied on stage by a single chair, avoiding any other possible distractions on the part of the audience. If there had been other props present, it would have been much easier to lose focus on the actress, as she was then able to (and very well) consume the stage so that all attention was on her story, not on the set.

A second major factor of a theater performance is the venue. The size, location, and layout of a theater factors into how the audience will interact with the actors. In *Manwatching*, a piece in which a comedian reads aloud (for the first time, without previous exposure to the writing) the innermost thoughts from a woman's journal, the venue was a small roundabout. The location served

to not only create a sense of storytelling on the part of the reader, but there was an added intimacy between the audience members as they were listening, because we could watch each others' reactions at all times during the play. In *The Great Gatsby*, which took place in a "secret" warehouse, the entire piece was based on audience interaction with the actors. The open layout and well-decorated set placed the audience in the play, as opposed to simply watching it unfold. With this kind of two-way feedback, we experienced aspects of the story that we likely would not have thought about from simply viewing actors on a stage. And without a venue such as a transformed warehouse, that would not have been possible. To contrast the first two examples, *The Ferryman* reflects the most traditional theater venue; the audience is able to sit back and watch a story unfold, free of any interaction with the actors. Of course reactions from viewers feed the actions of the cast, such as laughing, cheering, leaning forward in their seats to hear more. But in such a venue as this, there is little-to-no room for any verbal or physical communication between actor and audience.

In continuing with the concept of audience participation, one of the plays I loved most was *Lists for the End of the World*. Before entering the theater, each viewer was handed a sheet of paper with a topic, and asked to list personal experiences or items that fell into that category. Later during the show, the actors read many of our own responses back to us, making the audience reminisce and laugh about what had been written about "favorite childhood toys". The entire piece was composed of previous audience answers to different topics, creating a completely unique show *Lists for the End of the World*. Again, audience participation was used to develop a piece, and it is fascinating to think that in the cases of *Lists for the End of the World*, *Great Gatsby*, and *Manwatching*, no two shows are the same. The way the directors, designers, and actors interact with the audience influences the outcome of a piece.

Finally, script interpretation allows us to understand a story within a certain time frame and location. When a director uses an intrinsic script interpretation, he or she keeps the original setting of the play that is being reproduced, essentially mimicking the original piece. In an extrinsic script

interpretation, the location and/or time setting of the play can be changed, while preserving the writing of the script itself. We saw this in *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Globe--Shakespeare's original work was performed for us in a new context, the Mexican Civil War, as opposed to its intended fifteenth century script. Of course the words they spoke remained the same, but the costumes, lighting, and set design was quite different (I would imagine) from the story's original setting. In my opinion, this version of *Much Ado About Nothing* was much more entertaining to watch than the original version, due to the many bright colors, exciting gun scenes, and intense hate/love story in the midst of a war. It gave me a greater appreciation of Shakespeare to see his work in a new light, and appreciate it in terms of a story that I find interesting. To contrast, a play such as *The Great Gatsby* could not (easily) be taken out of its setting. Its conflicts and overall plot rely so heavily on the fact that it took place during the Prohibition, giving each element of the story an added sense of secrecy. We, as an audience, would not have been able to experience the same emotions if *The Great Gatsby* had been set in any other context. Stage design, script interpretation, lighting, venue, and audience interaction work together to make a performance what it is, and none of those factors ever occur by accident.

One thing that I have enjoyed after learning about the British stage and then being able to see it in action with all of the Fringe pieces and group plays is the ways in which we can analyze a performance while watching it unfold. We can do this using three broad questions: What is the play trying to say? How is it trying to say that? Is it worth saying? In class discussion, we used our knowledge of the different elements of a story, stage design, and character development to interpret its underlying messages. These guidelines significantly helped me to watch what I saw more carefully, and to be able to take practical applications away with me, instead of leaving what I saw in the theater when I left.

One of the greatest challenges and most eye-opening practices of Europe Semester has been the idea of not "lobbing off ham ends". Those words have been ringing in the back of my head since

our first week of class in Edinburgh, and have so far applied to not only Fringe and group performances, but also to nearly every foreign interaction I have had in these European countries. Just because something has always been said or done in a specific way does not mean it must remain as such. Always doing or saying what everyone else expects of you does not get you far in life; I have to be willing to try new things and take risks in order to achieve anything greater than I currently have, whether that be in relationships, knowledge, professional success, or points of view. This lifestyle of open-mindedness is not one that I plan to leave in Europe in December; I am using this time of independence while abroad to teach myself that it is okay to try things in new ways, have conversations with people who I do not typically reach out to, or enjoy things I previously did not think I appreciated, as in the case of the British stage. Only after stretching your limits is it acceptable to make assumptions about your own likes and dislikes, and even then this should remain a constant practice.

One of my favorite realizations this semester when it comes to theater has been God's place on stage. God designed us with the ability to create, and I can think of few better avenues to pursue when it comes to displaying our uniqueness. The arts allow for free expression, and we have the chance to use what God has gifted us with to help others. We are social creatures, and when watching a play, I have felt an emotional connection with both the actors and other audience members, allowing us to be in fellowship while watching a life event unfold. When we use our thoughts, opinions, and expressions to benefit others (and potentially share the Gospel through that work), we are fulfilling God's desires for our lives.