

International Theatre Institute ITI

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President of Iceland 1980-1996

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"Why are we struggling to have a living theatre in days when you in a technological age can have everything at home?"

Or / is it necessary to run a living theatre in days of television, videos and CDs?

Despite the fact that we have a treasure chest of magnificent classical and modern plays and a wealth of talented actors and directors all around us, we are constantly being told that the theatre is in a state of crisis. This crisis seems to be twofold by nature: on the one hand, there is the question of money, or the lack of it, and on the other, the question of usefulness, or lack of it. When these two things go together, people grow nervous and question the role and place of theatre in modern society.

In reply to this, two questions could be asked: firstly, when has the theatre not been in a state of crisis? And secondly, if it is and always has been, why haven't we abandoned it as an art form long ago? It's obvious that financial and other problems have dogged the theatre for centuries. A number of our greatest dramatists have been lucky enough to be a part of thriving theatres, but many others have had to struggle without any financial reward and sometimes without proper recognition. Getting people to the theatre has also been a problem, and one that has led some companies to court popularity and offer what they think audiences want instead of what they themselves would like to perform.

But despite all the problems that go with keeping our theatres running, why we have never abandoned them? Could it be that we human beings have an instinctive urge to act out roles and watch them being acted out by others? Some things are learned by experience, others by example, and the theatre is the wonderful art form that provides learning by example, by watching others go through things that show us better the truth about ourselves as human beings.

The theatre has a million visions of life, but they all have this in common – we sit back and engage ourselves at what we might call an "intimate distance". Very few other art forms allow us this mixture of the subjective and the objective, the intellectual and the emotional at such a profound level.

But is not just the form, it is also the artists who provide the form, artists with extraordinary energy. There are those who say they do it for the applause, and certainly we all like to be appreciated for what we do well, but actors are people who have to act. They have an inborn urge and desire – and the courage – to become, for brief moments of time, someone other than themselves. Playwrights, directors and actors are artists who interpret the world they live in through complex role playing.

Both the theatre and the international arena demand care and concern, but no less do they demand optimism. Without optimism, mixed with a good helping of realism, no theatre can survive. The theatre, as a microcosm of our society, reflects and sometimes reinvents what we do in the outside world. All human conflict and strife, ambitions and dreams are generously depicted there. The entire world's a stage, as a rather well-known English dramatist put it, and on that stage, the actor becomes the symbol of man with all his shortcomings and frailties, with all his high hopes and ideals.

If comedy is the form in which we see the weaknesses and faults of others and accept them, then tragedy is the form in which we see ourselves and try to change (hopefully...). In both forms we learn something of the road to survival – in comedy we learn compromise, and in tragedy we learn what happens when there is no room for compromise.

Of course the theatre has to deal with competition. Who hasn't these days? Does theatre then still have a role in a society where cinema, television and the computer are so overwhelming popular? The answer is yes – for whatever else these media have to offer, there is one thing they cannot give us. The cinema is, as everyone knows, larger than life. That is part of its function and its appeal. Television and computers, on the other hand, are usually smaller than life, forms which crush a world of experience onto a small screen. But theatre is exactly the same size as life, neither larger nor smaller. Its subjects and its concerns may take on larger dimensions, but the form itself is life-size and that is how we receive it. Its excitement and its pleasures are therefore of a different kind to cinema, television and the computer, and its level of engagement is fundamentally more human and more intimate.

So let us wish the living theatre a long and prosperous life and be grateful whenever the curtain rises for a new or a renewed theatre performance wherever in the world it takes place.