**The Experience of Theatre**

**by Debra Bruch (1990)**

From the very beginning of civilization, the theatre has helped us discover and understand ourselves and our relationship with our world, with others, and with God (or the gods.) As such, it is and always has been an affirming force in the world. As Ludwig Lewisohn (1882-1955) stated, "In all ages the drama, through its portrayal of the acting and suffering spirit of man, has been more closely allied than any other art to his deeper thoughts concerning his nature and destiny." Unlike any other art, the total, intense focus of theatre is on the human being, his or her existence, and his or her relationship with life. It is a part of human nature to need to examine who we are in relationship with where we are. Consequently, basic elements of theatre and drama exist in every society.

While not true in all societies, the United States as a society trivializes the arts, including theatre. At the same time, Western religious organizations have traditionally condemned theatre. Consequently, artists find it necessary to constantly justify not only their work but who they are as productive human beings.

 Yet United States' society is in transition. As Jane Alexander, past chair of the US. National Endowment for the Arts, pointed out in an interview with Sunday Morning, society suffers from a "crisis of spirit." Violence pervades our society and compassion is disdained. But, as Jane Alexander stated, "If you give a child a paintbrush or a pen, that child will not pick up a gun." The reason for that brings us back to potential. It is a part of human need to explore and discover the self, and then express that discovery. When we deny our own need to explore ourselves in our own world and express that exploration in healthy ways, our potential becomes corrupted and consequently our lives are caught up in illusion. The arts counter-attack that corruption. The arts as a medium specifically engages a person in positive discovery and expression of the self.

Every human being has an artistic sense. As evidence, observe healthy young children. They dance, sing, paint or draw, and actively engage in imagination. An artist is a person who has a highly developed artistic sense, has studied and has well-developed the discipline or technique of the art, and is able to transform his or her work as cultural or universal symbol. An artist also usually attempts to make a living with his or her art, because an artist has an overwhelming need to express, and many also have an overwhelming need to give his or her work to society. Many lay persons in United States' society seem to see these characteristics as seeking fame, but it usually is not true.

The theatre is a created thing, and its very creation determines what it is and what it does. We create the theatre in such a way to express meaning, feeling, and spirit so that the audience member will have an opportunity to experience what we want them to experience. For instance, we may want the audience to experience what it is like to live in a cardboard box in an alley in order to get them to feel and understand urban problems. At the same time, we may want to affirm the worth of persons. A person living in a cardboard box has worth.

Yet the experience of theatre is more than this. It is a part of human nature to separate ourselves from people who are different and live in different situations. The theatre breaks that barrier of separation. Somehow, the theatre allows us to experience the world of another person and at the same time experience ourselves in our own world. The theatre ties us and our world to another person and his or her world. We come to experience and understand, emotionally and intellectually, that our lives connect to another's life, and our world connects to another's world. This way, the theatre ties together our own humanity.

In the late nineteenth century, Richard Wagner asserted theatre as a synthesis of the arts -- painting, sculpture, architecture, music, writing, etc. However, today's theatre scholars see theatre as an art form in its own right. To practice theatre, we use other art forms, but theatre is more than the sum of its parts. Theatre is not merely an arrangement of art forms or of dramatic elements. As Susanne Langer points out, "A work of art . . . is more than an 'arrangement' of given things --- even qualitative things. Something emerges from the arrangement of tones or colors, which was not there before, and this, rather than the arranged material, is the symbol of sentience." Theatre (in performance) expresses in such a way that we experience something that we cannot truly explain.

**Theatre as Experience**

Throughout the ages, people have tried to discover what theatre is. Scholars have approached the study of theatre three different ways. One way is to study the relationship between the artist and the work of art, with a focus on the artist. For instance, in *Ion*, Plato examines what happens to the artist when he (and to Plato, it's always he) makes a work of art. Also, the premise that a playscript reflects the society in which the playwright wrote follows this approach and leads to historical, sociological, and biographical methods of criticism.

The second approach is to study the work of art. Aristotle was the first scholar to use this approach in the *Poetics*. Twentieth century New Critics discovered the value of empirical analysis to help understand a work of literary art. While this approach helps us understand the written dramatic text, it does not completely help us understand theatre as performance.

The third approach is to study the relationship between the work of art and the audience (or spectator or reader), with an emphasis on the audience. In *The Republic*, Plato first used this approach. Later, Horace in *Ars Poetica* created principles and precepts about the relationship between art and audience which strangled art as an art form for centuries. Today, many scholars are concerned with the relationship between the work of art and the audience. Overall, they see the relationship in terms of experience.

**The Significance of Theatre**

So why have theatre? In some form or another, theatre is a part of every society. Why? How is theatre important?

The theatre is important precisely because we are human beings. And being human beings we need more than food, security, esteem, and love. We need to be self-actualized. That is, we need to create; we were meant to create. And the height of creating is experience. Unlike all other art forms, the theatre is a creation of the experience of human living.

Theatre is expression. Artists create an experience about our relationship with our world. We express who we are by exploring the relationship between ourselves and God (or the gods), between ourselves and other people, between ourselves and nature, between ourselves and our society, and between ourselves and ourselves. That exploration leads to a literal experience for audience members as well as artists. This way, audience members share the expression. By sharing in the experience, audience members also become expressive. Actors recognized this phenomenon as "electricity" or "being connected" during a performance. As human beings, we are driven to explore and understand and feel and express ourselves in our world.

Theatre is creation. Unlike all the other arts, the theatre creates a world. As human beings, we need to actualize ourselves by creating. The theatre, as an art form, is the height of creation, for we literally create a complete and living world which focuses on ourselves as human beings. The experience itself, both by the artist and the audience member, makes the created world living. The situation (writing the script, actors acting, sitting in a theatre house, etc.) may be made or fabricated, but the experience is completely real.

Because the experience is real and vital, the theatre literally creates the world in which we live, at least during the actual experience. Theatre, then, has the potential to significantly change lives, and help create the world outside the theatre.