Why Does Theatre Survive Essay, Research Paper

Why does theatre survive?

3rd term acting studies essay by Ralph Gassmann

“All the world s a stage ” to quote the world s most famous playwright William Shakespeare who rose to prominence in the 16th century during the reign of Elizabeth I, and who s plays have excited and obsessed the generations since and will doubtless continue to do so as we approach the 2nd millennium. On this stage the actor represents the symbol of man with all his imperfection and weakness, with all his morals and ideals.

Theatre provides us with a mirror of the society within which we live in and where the conflicts we experience in life are acted out on stage before us. In the space of a few hours, we participate in a story where the facets of life unfold before our eyes and anything can happen, be it tragic, serious or hilarious! On the stage real people take on characters and we can identify with the emotions and actions as they happen and share the experience in real time. When this miracle occurs, when the audience and those on stage breathe a exactly the same time, there is a unique feeling of a fulfilled desire, which transforms the theatre into an immortal place: a combination of ecstasy and empathy for the human experience — an inspiring event!

Another fact which provides the survival of the art form of theatre lies in the very nature of mankind: its inner voyeuristic drive. The desire to watch other people dealing with their conflicts and fates challenges as well as reinforces values and the morality of society. As human beings we are learning by examples from others and our own experiences. What better place therefore than the theatre to form for ourselves an idea of life and its consequences? An inviting and exciting opportunity to watch believable stories and situations as they could happen in real life, showing us a bit better the truth of our nature. Even children can be seen to be acting out stories and learn from the consequences of their actions: The hero survives and the baddy dies! Apart from being philosophical and educational it can be also very entertaining. And so is the theatre: If comedy is the form in which we see the weakness and faults of others and accept them, then tragedy is the form in which we see ourselves and hopefully try to change. In both forms, we learn in an entertaining way something of the road to survival – in comedy we learn compromise, and in tragedy we learn what happens when there is no space for compromise.

But it is not only the form, it is also the artists who create the form, artists with extraordinary energy without which there would be not any theatre. All actors strive naturally for fame, and applause is the recognition they receive for a job well done. However the true actor is a person who is possessed by the basic need to act, whatever the role, be it Hamlet or a tramp in the street. This need is an intrinsic part of his/her personality, an inborn urge and desire – and the courage – to become, for that brief moment in time, another human being. Playwrights and directors are artists who interpret the world they live in trough theatre and give the actor, as the creator, the basic material to work with. These people will always find a way to express themselves through the art of

acting and therefore guarantee the continuance of theatre in whatever form it may take.

The history of theatre is testament to this; even when theatres and stages were closed down not so very long time ago, the actors always found a niche in society and remained unsuppressable.

Which ever form of theatre we chose, be it historical or street theatre, it has always existed as an instrument to pass on a message to its audience. The stage is a very useful tool when we try to impress or influence people. We only have to look at cultures which are under repressive regimes for political, religious or ethnic reasons, where theatre provides a relatively safe venue to explore and challenge the establishment – a place where every dream can come true. People as famous as for example Berthold Brecht, Aphra Behn or Martin Sherman have for various reasons affected the changes of society and minorities. Theatre can be a powerful propaganda machine.

For as long as mankind exists, theatre will always take on an important function within its cultures. Through theatre a culture expresses itself, reflects its society and displays its individuality. It shows the people the things that set their community apart from others and gives them something that binds them together, something they can identify with like for example a common history or tradition. The Chinese community always act out the age old tradition of the portrayal of the animal signified by the new year and the whole of the community takes part in this tradition. Another aspect is that whenever a play was written, it reflects always to a certain degree its time and becomes an immortal witness of history. The ancient Greek theatre whose plays are still performed over 2000 years after they were written are celebrating the religion and its gods. They give us a detailed insight into the culture of their times! It is safe to say therefore that theatre expresses the incomparability of each culture on this planet in different ways and forms. These events unite all ages, races and classes, enabling them to breach the gaps between cultures and contrasting ideas of life throughout the various types and styles that exist as a facet of every nationality and creed.

But why theatre at all? Will theatre then have a role in the society of the future, where cinema, television and computers rise to an overwhelming popularity? The answer is yes – In the 20th century theatre is no longer the only form of media entertainment. But despite all the excitement technology has brought with it, they will never replace the theatre because it has something which nowhere else can be offered. The cinema and its larger than life world appeals as an affordable alternative. The TV now installed in almost all households as are computers are both examples of gigantic experiences crushed into a small screen. Theatre on the other hand is life-size! Its contents and matters may take on a larger dimension but we receive it directly in flesh and blood – one to one. The magical atmosphere between actor and spectator who are constantly aware of each other and the theatre s level of engagement is fundamentally more human and more intimate.

We are constantly being reminded that theatre is in a state of crisis, for one reason or another, financially and also from the point of view that theatre has in the 20th century outlived its usefulness. Both of these issues therefore make people question the place of theatre in modern society. In reply we must ask ourselves two questions finally, when did theatre and crisis not hand in hand? And secondly if this is so, why haven t we abandoned theatre ages ago? I think I have already answered the second.

Theatre survives because of its greatness, it is not just a performance, it is in its entirety the courage of its creators, and the hopes/expectations and delight to all who in the space of just a few hours are transported out of our chaotic pace of life and into the magical world of theatre. Theatre draws its reason for existence from its strength and diversion, its urbant human contact, its passion, its energy and its excitement. A world I am proud to belong to.