

PRESENT TENSE


Has the audience left the building?

BY SHERRY TURKLE

The author of *Alone Together* has started to wonder how technology is affecting the relationship between artists and audiences.

Last January I attended the Old Vic's production of *Richard III* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Kevin Spacey played Richard in Hollywood shades and (at one point) with a Groucho Marx cigar, revealing how his conquests (sleep with me because no one will ever want you more/follow me because no one will ever care for you more) made perfect sense—and no sense at all—as he seduced and murdered his way to the top. As the first act ended I felt frightened, but it wasn't for the bloodied Plantagenets on stage—it was for myself and my country. We were the ones who seemed vulnerable.

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During intermission I sat on a bench in the lobby and considered my fellow theatergoers. A group of seven (three couples and a single woman) sat in front of me. I was curious to know what they were thinking about the play. I had been so upset by the first act that I had the impulse to talk with them—I wanted to share my feelings with others who had experienced that stunning performance alongside me. I would even have been happy to just eavesdrop on *their* conversation, to find out what they were thinking about the show, but they gave me no opportunity—they were hunched over their phones, texting, not talking. While two of the couples would occasionally touch with easy affection, their eyes never left their tiny screens.

That intermission brought me back to other times at the theater; I recalled my introduction to it, growing up in Brooklyn. On Sundays, usually twice a month, my Aunt Mildred would take me to a matinee in “the city.” With Mildred, intermissions were for talk, and those

Over the past 15 years, I’ve studied technologies of mobile connection and talked to hundreds of people, young and old, about their plugged-in lives. I’ve learned that those little devices in our pockets are so psychologically powerful, they don’t only change what we do, they change who we are. We’ve gotten used to a new way of being “alone together.” We want to be with each other, but also elsewhere at the same time, connected to wherever we want to be. Parents text during breakfast and dinner while their children complain about not having their parents’ full attention. We text (and shop and go on Facebook) during classes, presentations, corporate board meetings, and even funerals. We remove ourselves from our grief or our reverie and disappear into our phones.

In the world of “alone together,” when people gather together they also want to be free to take themselves out of the places they are, because the thing they value most is control over where


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conversations were part of the play, arguing about whether or not Richard Burton was playing “Richard Burton” or Hamlet, or analyzing the moment Henry Higgins fell in love with Eliza Doolittle. From the time we entered the theater, my aunt and I lived in the space of the performance.

Today’s audiences don’t seem to engage with the performing arts experience as they once did. We live in a new, demanding communications regime—one in which people are not so quick to give up their attentional autonomy.

they put their attention. They want to customize their lives, so while they want to go to that class or board meeting, they only want to pay attention to the bits that interest them. One businessman I’ve interviewed—who sits on several corporate boards—is unapologetic about texting and emailing during meetings. He tells me that he considers himself a member of a “tribe of one,” and he knows what is best for it.

What does this “alone together” sensibility mean for the performing arts? For many during that intermission



at *Richard III*, it meant that there was something guaranteed to be more compelling than talking about the play: checking their phones.

People tell me that whenever they have a moment, any moment, they check their mail, look through their texts, Facebook, Twitter. They come to this habit of cycling through apps with a burning question: Who has wanted me? Who has reached out to me? It turns out that the most compelling thing we can find online is the feeling that someone is looking for us, or, in the argot of social media, has mentioned or liked us. Not only does constant communication

I have spoken with a friend, the director Melia Bensussen, who explained to me that what happens between performers and audience is analogous to what goes on in relationships. An actor, she tells me, can feel an audience breathe, and can sense it drawing close and pulling away. Her analogy made me wonder: What becomes of that bond when the audience members decide to behave as though they are in “tribes of one” and give themselves permission to change the focus of their attention?

As a frequent and fervent theatergoer, for years I have been upset by people


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encourage us to look to others for validation, we use our phones to share our thoughts and feelings even as we are formulating them—often before we know what they are. I call this way of relating “I share, therefore I am.” It’s not only a way of relating to others; it’s a way of relating to the self. Conversation during intermission can’t easily compete with all of this. We have come to expect more from technology, and less from each other.

But what does the “alone together” sensibility imply for performance itself? How does it impact the experience of the artist and the connection of performer to audience? In most theaters, a sonorous voice reminds us to turn off our phones before the show starts. But increasingly, people interpret this as “don’t use your phone in an intrusive way.” People are glad for their touchpads and dimmed screens. They feel silent and invisible when they check their messages and give themselves permission to absent themselves from the moment.

texting during performances. Once, I even confronted a friend who checked her phone while sitting next to me during a Eugene O’Neill play—although I feared it couldn’t possibly be good for our relationship. She thought my upset was unjustifiable. “Well, what if I just tuned out, just let my mind wander? You wouldn’t mind so much, would you?” She’s right. I wouldn’t. I know the kind of attention we give to our phones is not the attention of a wandering mind—it is the attention of a focused mind looking for validation. And when it gets what it wants, it wants more.

I am preoccupied by the idea that the space of performance leaves room for moments of reverie, but not of concentrated correspondence. For example, I believe that plays, like relationships, do more than survive moments of hesitation and silence; they grow through them. These are times when we reveal ourselves to each other—when a piece reveals itself to us, and an audience reveals itself to those



on stage. But today, when pace slows for good reason, do directors and actors have reason to fear that the audience won't breathe with them, and will instead disappear into their electronic devices?

And yet, hoping to raise audience "engagement," some suggest that texting in theaters should not be discouraged but expected, and perhaps even encouraged. According to this way of thinking, the job of the contemporary performing artist is to respond to social media by adapting to its ways.

In this spirit, experiments begin: special sections in the theater are designated so audience members can tweet during performances, just as it has become routine in academic circles to tweet during lectures and conferences. There are interactive theatrical and musical programs where audiences can, via text, decide how performances should unfold (at one Symphony Space event in Manhattan, the audience decided which of the six *Così fan tutte* characters ended up with their original fiancées, with the maid and Don Alfonso standing by). Other organizations, like the New York Philharmonic and the Indianapolis Symphony, have asked concertgoers to vote for their encore choices by text.

Every technology provides an opportunity to ask if it serves our human purposes, which forces us to consider, once again, what these are. Now, technology is asking us to clarify what is most central to us as makers and audiences of the performing arts. If actors were nourished playing to an audience they could feel breathing, can they be as gratified by a group of spectators, alone together? Under these conditions, can they possibly deliver what will, in turn, nourish the audience?

I savor experiments that bring technology into art. I enjoy new genres.

But when we tinker with attention and the theatrical experience, I think we need to proceed with caution. Technology can make us forget what we know about life. It can make us forget the importance of conversation and the difference between conversation and mere connection.

And now, it might even make us forget that an audience that disappears into their phones (to text, to tweet, to check messages) may be breaking the very contract that makes the performing arts work: presence. In the "alone together" world, we check out of relationships during the "boring bits." We always think we have the option of going to the web, where there are more compelling things to see and hear. We've come to feel that way at dinner, at our places of worship, and at the theater. I think we're getting ourselves into trouble: trouble in our friendships, trouble in our communities, and now, trouble in our relationship with the arts.

It is tempting to have an information backchannel to performance, and it certainly seems the thing of the moment. But beware: you can disappear into a reverie and be pulled back with a phrase, a sound, a movement—all of which lie within the toolbox of writers, actors, and directors. But if, during a performance, you disappear into a world of information, into the pleasures of simulation, and into the gratifications of online validation—you may be in your seat, but you have simply left the theater. ■

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