

*Ian Butcher*

The Smell of the Greasepaint, the Roar of the Crowd ...

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## – *Disruptive Audiences*

*By Ian Butcher*

When actors are on the stage, their chief preoccupation used to be “speak up and don’t bump into the furniture” (Lunt 2014). Nowadays, however, they have an additional preoccupation: that of unruly audience behaviour and lack of theatre etiquette which can disturb the action on the stage.

This unacceptable behaviour manifests itself in two major issues: the way audiences treat venue staff, and improper behaviour during live shows. In a 2023 survey by the Broadcasting Entertainment Communications and Theatre Union BECTU (BECTU 2023a) of 1,500 members, 90% of members polled had witnessed bad behaviour from audiences, including assaults, fighting, vandalism, and racist language. Staff recounted instances of theatre audiences being sick, and one woman – asked not to keep leaving her seat to use the toilet during a performance - urinating in the aisle. 70% believed that the situation had worsened since the pandemic, and nearly a third of respondents had been involved or had witnessed an incident where a venue had to call the police. Half the respondents believed that the employers needed more rigid policies towards alcohol. West End theatre tickets are expensive, and some members of the public have a sense of entitlement that the show is a gig where they can consume large amounts of drink before they arrive. This is compounded by some theatres – pressured to augment profits to keep the theatre running – who allow consumption of alcohol during the performance, and who even deliver pre-ordered drinks to the audience at their seats.

In 2014 a contested *Theatre Charter* was launched to “instruct casual and future audience members as to what is acceptable behaviour – and to assist seasoned theatregoers in encouraging observance in others”; that ‘bad behaviour’ is putting off regular customers (Charter 2014). The campaign

achieved an initial welcome from theatrical personalities, though some criticised the cultural ‘snobbery embedded’ in it (Sedgman 2018, 44). This Charter was supplemented in 2023 when BECTU launched a *Safer Theatres Charter* (BECTU 2023b) and *Anything Doesn’t Go* (BECTU 2023c) campaign to tackle anti-social behaviour in UK theatres where management is expected to set clearer zero tolerance expectations about audience comportment.

Theatres are now reconsidering the use of over-enthusiastic billboards outside which may advertise “the best party in town”, or “you’ll be dancing in the aisles”, when, in reality, audiences would not be allowed to sing and dance in the aisles. Hence, the disappointed and aggressive reaction when told to sit down. An usher was punched at a performance of *Jersey Boys* in Edinburgh when he asked a member of the audience not to sing along loudly to the music. Riot police were called to a performance of *The Bodyguard* at Manchester’s Palace Theatre after a brawl broke out. In fact, “jukebox musicals” appear to be among the worst bad-behaviour offenders where audience members like to sing along at the tops of their (frequently off-key) voices to well-known tunes, often drowning out the performers on the stage.

Despite clear instructions before the show to turn off phones, the main complaints concern audience members using their phones, responding to emails, and occasionally actually answering calls during a performance. This led the actor, Benedict Cumberbatch, to call for the banning of phone use during performances. This was christened the *Cumberphone Campaign*. During one 2015 performance of *Hand to God*, a man climbed onto the stage and plugged his mobile phone into a (false) plug which was part of the scenery. Bianca Jagger was criticised for taking flash photographs on her phone during *Einstein on the Beach* at the Barbican in 2012, and James Norton objected to naked photos of him being circulated after being illegally filmed in *A Little Life*. An actor clearly saw a man in the front row watching porn during his performance. In 2017, one theatregoer at the Harold Pinter Theatre, not content with looking at his phone, actually got out his laptop to attend to work emails during a performance of *Hamlet*. Actor Andrew Scott stopped the performance until the laptop was duly stowed away.

Other irritations include talking loudly, singing or humming loudly to the music, stamping feet, brawling in the aisles, eating food, late arrival,

rustling sweet papers, coughing loudly, heckling the actors, getting up to go to the toilet during a performance, leaving before the end to catch a train home, and wandering in and out of the auditorium. Imelda Staunton banned food in the auditorium during her 2017 London production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Sometimes the food in question is not just sandwiches or crisps, ushers have seen audience members bring prawns, curry and even a full picnic. The cast could clearly smell the food which had been stored under a seat. Actors have reported one couple who appeared to have a mission to have sex during performances in every playhouse in the West End. They were spied in the front row of *Chicago* in 2009 and in a box during Aaron Sorkin's *A Few Good Men* in 2011.

Actors have had objects thrown at them on the stage. These have included a wheel of Brie, a mobile phone (considerable facial injuries), jewellery, flowers, a woman's mother's funeral ashes, and the inevitable underwear. The mobile phone thrower thought that it "might be fun".

Theatres have reported audience members joining in the dialogue or heckling the actors on stage. A man enthusiastically joined in the dialogue at a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and had to be led out, still shouting. Another, apparently disappointed that the actors in *The Life of Pi* at the Wyndham's Theatre were not actually at sea (he shouted "he's meant to be at sea!") was also led out. The 12-year-old boy soprano – Malakai M. Bayoh – was booed during a production of *Alcina* at the Royal Opera House in 2023.

A visit to the theatre in London is frequently part of the tourist experience. Groups who often barely speak English are herded into plays and musicals by the tour operators. It is understandably difficult for them to sit through a performance of which they understand little without becoming restless, if not disruptive. Focus seems to be on recording the experience on their phones, or asking each other loudly what is going on, to the irritation of other theatregoers.

The idea that an audience will sit in the dark in reverential silence does not fit with the reality of history of the theatre. Rowdy behaviour is not a new phenomenon. Over 2000 years ago, in 165 BC, the comic playwright Terence was only able to stage his *Hecyra* at the third attempt, fights having broken

out the first two times. Plato complained about “vicious theatrocracy” when vocal and badly-behaved audiences sometimes needed to be controlled using a stick. Entry-level Shakespearian theatre prices were comparatively cheap: one penny, the price of a loaf of bread, for a groundling. By 1600, the Globe theatre could take up to 3,000 people for the most popular plays. During the performances, vendors went around selling apples, oranges, nuts, gingerbread and ale. Actors were used to enthusiastic participation, even the throwing of projectiles. There were no toilets, but the floor they stood on was conveniently absorbent sand. At the Swan theatre in 1602, the audience damaged the curtains, chairs, stools, and walls. A French company was ‘pippinpelted’ (pelted with apples), possibly as the company was using women actors instead of the English boys-as-women tradition. In 1775, the apple-throwing theme continued, during a performance of Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, the actor John Lee was hit by apple-throwers. The proceedings were stopped while the audience was admonished. In French theatres, supporters of a playwright or actor would form a paid or genuine *claque*, where they would applaud ostentatiously and loudly. Recently, in a modern theatre, a group of fans of one actor came to laugh and applaud over-loudly at his jokes, and make disparaging remarks at the other performers when their hero was not in the scene.

There has been much discussion about the apparent eruption of this disruptive phenomenon, both for and against. Some argue that snobbery and cultural elitism about audience ‘over-enthusiasm’ stifles creativity. Some traditional, middle-class theatre-lovers claim that cheaper seat policies bring in the *hoi polloi*, the ‘wrong’ type of theatregoer who may be so unaware of theatre etiquette that they might, for example, commit the *faux pas* of giving standing ovations or applause between scenes. The “new” patrons, brought in by musicals and more accessible dramas, are often simply not aware of theatre etiquette, the expected boundaries and what is expected of them.

The counter-argument states that when you have paid a large amount for your ticket, you wish to make sure that the investment is worthwhile, which might – in the mind of the buyer – include getting carried away by participating in the performance rather than just watching and listening.

It is believed that the inexorable rise of social media has to take some of the blame as current technology has forced the generation gap wider and

“deeply affected and altered the way we think about ourselves and our relationship to time, place, to each other, and of course to reading, writing, theatre and participating... a twenty-year old clicks, surfs, chooses, downloads and deletes... feels free, autonomous, inventive, expressive, empowered, independent”. This “democratisation of culture” challenges the status quo in that “anybody can be the author of his/her own text... blogs challenge the authority of the critic... anyone can be a critic” (Patsalidis 2014).

Thompson discusses “parasocial relationships” (Thompson 2024) where audience members may form strong relationships with celebrities through a computer screen. The celebrity or actor may have a blog or appear on TV or films, and this intensifies the impression that the actor is known to the person. Hence the temptation to speak to the actor or throw “gifts” to the actor during the performance. The actor, of course, has no idea who the audience member is.

The received comportment states - possibly by older, white, wealthier, educated audiences - that performances should take place in “respectful silence” and “hushed reverence” respecting “quiet-audience etiquette” (Simpson 2018, 227 and 229). Simpson reminds us that “the concept of the quiet audience is a distinctly modern phenomenon”, pinpointing the movement in 1950s mainstream UK theatre (Simpson 2018, 227). The British Drama League sent out celebrities to lecture the public about the new theatre etiquette, and in 1963 the Royal Festival Hall included *The Plain Man’s Guide to Coughing* in the programme (Simpson 2018, 228). For any rogue audience member who crosses this cultural line, the theatre critic Benedict Nightingale suggests the very English snub of “a schoolmarm stare and an English sniff, followed by a reproachful smile” (Nightingale 2009). Self-policing among audience members appears to be a favoured tactic. Michel Foucault disparagingly called self-policing “docile bodies” regulated under their own surveillance (Foucault 1995, 135). Richard Wagner, when he opened his new opera house in Bayreuth in 1876, enforced a strict policy of silence on his audience. Apparently, no one dared break the rule.

This self-policing by the audience members themselves can be dangerous. Irked by a woman who was talking loudly, a nearby audience member prodded her in the arm and asked her to be quiet. The woman’s husband

got up and punched the man repeatedly in the head, actually breaking his eye-socket. Another example would be a performance of *Les Miserables* was seen by Just Stop Oil activists as a legitimate venue to stage a show-stopping demonstration.

On the other hand, there has been a movement towards ‘relaxed performance’ where children, those new-to-theatre, audio and visually impaired, or particularly neurodivergent audience members can enjoy the action without being censured for noisy or ‘inappropriate’ reactions. The Relaxed Performance Project is aimed at the community who find it mild torture to sit still, in the dark without moving, severing connections with the outside world for a couple of hours. The experiment tolerated higher levels of audience sound and movement at some eight high-profile venues between 2012 and 2013, playing to some 5,000 spectators. Some technical changes might be made to productions, including dimmed lighting, no surprising sound-effects and softer music. Audiences are encouraged to interact in a non-judgemental way.

One approach is to ‘condition’ audiences early by exposing children to theatrical productions. The Nordic countries have been particularly active in this. Researchers have admitted that “different theatrical conventions can also assume a degree of pre-knowledge that not all members of the audience necessarily possess” (Lindelof and Hansen 2015, 244). Theatre experiences can “offer increased knowledge of concrete productions or greater understanding of the theatrical institutions and their rituals” (Lindelof and Hansen 2015, 235-236). This does not always meet with success. Teachers admit that one or two disruptive children in a group can sabotage good intentions once in the theatre. A performance of *Besættelse* (Occupation) in Aarhus’ Svalegangen theatre in 2011 had to be abandoned when a few members among a group of seventy pupils did their best to shout provocatively at the actors and mouth derogatory remarks about the female lead. This intensified during some scenes of a sexually sensitive nature. The theatre director later requested a discussion with the children.

Nordic academics are pre-eminent in conducting research about the experiences of audiences and various ways to engage them. Their premise is that “theatres as well as researchers still know astonishingly little about what is really of significance for audiences when they visit the theatre, regardless of

whether they are accustomed or unaccustomed to going there” (Lindelof and Hansen 2015, 235). Suggestions include targeted marketing, in that a “target-led approach makes performances with specific target groups in mind...target groups are offered what they are expected to want” (Lindelof and Hansen 2015, 236). In addition, ‘theatre talks’ which consist in “focus group discussions about the performance carried out in the theatre immediately after the performance” (Lindelof and Hansen 2015, 236). These theatre talks are “able to enrich theatrical practice as well as the audience experience itself... a good long-term investment for theatrical institutions”, the idea being that “in order to develop an audience one must try to get to know them and listen to them” (Lindelof and Hansen 2015, 236-237). The audience is encouraged to give their opinion and comment on the performance. This methodology began in Stockholm around 1986 and expanded for use in Australia around 2008.

This Nordic research has shown that the physical organisation of space in the auditorium and the audience’s position in it is an important aspect of the theatrical event and can lead to differences in audience experiences. For example, the abolition of the proscenium arch can make the attendees feel more of an integral part of the audience. With ‘theatre in the round’, audiences can actually see the faces and body-language of the other audience members rather than the backs of their heads. This influences the way they receive the action (Lindelof and Hansen 2015, 245-246).

The balance between audience stimulation and over-stimulation, “absorbed silence” and bored silence is a fine one, given that there has been an increase in participatory, interactive and immersive productions. The famous director, Peter Brook, posits that, in the theatre, “the focus of a large group of people creates a unique intensity”. This intensity can manifest itself around the two ends of the pole of silence. There is:

Dead silence, the silence of the dead, which doesn’t help any of us, and then there is the other silence, which is the supreme moment of communication...the silence when everyone is so keyed to the same point that there is extraordinary life. (Brook 2017)



Sedgman talks about the fundamental thespian experience of “bringing bodies together in close proximity, theatre has always offered a concentrate space for rethinking the rules of social interaction” (Sedgman 2018, 6). Simpson agrees on the theatre’s “fundamental construction as a live, embodied encounter with other individuals” (Simpson 2018, 227). However, Sedgman quotes Barton that “the theatre is a club, that comes with a set of rules” (Sedgman 2018, 228).

Michael Billington, theatre critic, reminds us of the incongruity between sublime transcendence and the baser act of snacking. He observes:

we are engaging in a shared experience in which cast and audience are seeking to transcend the atomised isolation of our everyday lives. If people in the stalls are chomping, slurping, texting or crunching the beaker containing their post-interval drinks then that becomes more difficult. (Sedgman 2018, 37)

Following Brook’s ideas of forced silence not always being desirable, Sedgman posits “At its most extreme, the quiet audience can become an oppressive and indeed potentially depoliticised structure, turning the gathered spectatorship into a silent, undifferentiated, unspeaking mass” (Sedgman 2018, 232). One could argue that a more boisterous, more passionate audience will usually be more engaged.

Traditionally, it has been the events on the stage which have incited reaction and vociferous behaviour from the audience. One might argue that these reactions are legitimate and artistically provoked, rather than just senseless vandalism. Especially reactions to what is now known as “in-yr-face” theatre. In 1830, Victor Hugo premiered his new play *Hernani* which caused uproar and brawling in the audience as it flouted the establish rules. When Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* opened a performance in 1896 with the word “Merdre!” (the word for ‘shit’ with an extra r) the audience booed and hissed, and finally rioted when the curtain went down. In a production of Annie Ernaux’s *The Years* at the Almeida in 2024, several male members of the audience called for medical assistance, and stopped the performance for ten minutes, feeling queasy after a graphic abortion scene. Despite the cautions in the guidance documents, members complained that “there was no warning”, and that it

“was a disgrace”. Some forty audience members walked out in the first week of Sarah Kane’s challenging *Blasted* at the Royal Court Upstairs in 1995, as it deals in rape and torture of a vulnerable woman. The director of the production noted defensively that forty walked out, “but four hundred and fifty didn’t” (Masters 2010).

Pleas for quiet might even extend to those on the stage. During a rehearsal of his own play *Celebration* at The Almeida Theatre Harold Pinter was directing, Pinter has always been famous for his “Pinteresque” pauses and silences. One of the actors was suffering from a mild chest infection. During one of the pregnant silences, Pinter asked “Who’s breathing?”. The infected actor owned up, and Pinter replied “Well, stop it” (Leonard 2009).

There may be an important difference in etiquette and expectations between behaviours at a rock musical and a serious play. I am personally very much one of the faction in favour of reverend silence during a serious play, and am easily irked by even low levels of restlessness by my surrounding fellows. I agree with Mark Shenton when he complains “I’m constantly astounded by what people think is acceptable behaviour in the theatre [...] I sometimes feel like a one-man vigilante policing behaviour in the stalls” (Sedgman 2018, 44).

Perceived rudeness and the breaking of the ‘social contract’ doubtless stems from attempts to widen cultural participation. However, if we really wish a wider spectrum of audiences to enjoy the arts, maybe we need to examine the experience on offer, making sure it is appropriate for the way lives are lived today. We need to find effective ways of communicating with this new generation, new artistic models for the representation of new ideas, and new ways of activating audiences who have a hunger for the more exuberant forms of collective joyous experience. We need to celebrate the communal nature of a theatre, perhaps allowing a more permissive environment. As long it does not degenerate into abuse of staff or interruptions of the performance.

Respect for those performing is an unspoken rule. You enter the theatre with the expectation that your co-audience members will have the same level of consideration for those on the stage and those in the audience. After all, “theatre can help people see things as if seeing them for the first time” (Patsalidis 2014). A worthy objective.

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**Ian Butcher** is English and Belgian and spends his time both in Belgium and Denmark with his Danish wife, Marianne. He has degrees from the University of Kent, the University of York, and a Master of Arts (Distinction) from the Open University. He has taught throughout Europe, and was a *lecteur d'anglais* at the University of Nice. He spent many years in management consulting and is an independent scholar who has published a number of academic articles.

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