

Brendan Walsh (btw596).

Year 4.

How to Make Community Worth Watching: A Problem of Theatrics

We were born with an instinct to learn — how else could we survive in this world? — and so we cannot help but watch. We watch our parents laugh, our brothers run, our sisters sing. We watch and we repeat. Apes: we see— we do. But this is only half the picture. Our natural education necessitates a person on the other end of the sightline; a human being to watch us in return, and guide us in our inevitable error. This is the picture of education, and this is how we learn what matters in our all-too-human world: our culture, our definitions, our values, all passed down through this process. For our part, we look and we copy; but it is our *community* that allows us to be *seen*, and to be corrected. This is how we are raised: by watching, and by being watched. We grow up learning the art of theatre.

My definition of theatre is broad. It is not limited to any wooden stage. I see theatre as more than a *type* of art, but an art *in and of itself*: the art of *watching* and *being watched*.¹ I say this because in a very real sense, everything we do is theatre — so long as it is being watched.² We engage in theatrics when we play the role of the customer, the waitress, or the diligent student. It is theatre when we wink at a lover, present a gift, conduct a meeting, or speak up to draw the attention of our class. This is theatre because we are making action worth watching.

We say theatre makes action “worth watching” because it’s a question of value. ‘Worth’ implies value; people that are valuable to us are worth watching.³ That’s because theatre is something we’re raised with. It is through theatre that we learn values: what’s worth watching, and what’s not; what is valuable, and what isn’t. Every public action we make, every role we undertake, is a theatrical endeavor. That’s because we want our actions to matter to someone. We want to be worth watching.

¹ We can thank Paul Woodruff for these words. See his landmark 2008 work, *The Necessity of Theater*.

² This is lexically true for the Greeks, whose word *theatron* was simply a ‘place to be watched (*theathenai*).’ If you can be watched anywhere, *everywhere* is a theatre. So goes Shakespeare’s “all the world’s a stage.”

³ Conversely, people that aren’t worth watching — nobody will look eyes with the homeless — aren’t valuable. Or so it seems in our society. Please say “hi” to the homeless. Treat them like human beings or don’t pretend to care.

And so our sense of community is also a sense of theatrics. Community is a feeling we get through a theatrical intuition. To an individual, it is an affirmation of worth — being part of a community means that you're worth watching, and that you think others are worth being watched. When you speak, you are heard. When the group acts, they act alongside you. Theatre gives a person's place in the group value. You create community by engaging theatrically with the group, and the group returns that energy to you. This is what builds community. And this is what is so disrupted in a world of purely digital communication.

To tackle the challenges posed by “Zoom University” (as the Oilbirds commonly call it), we first need a clear picture of what we're facing. And while unstable connections and awkward engagements contribute to our poor sense of community, these difficulties are trivial compared to the deeper issue. The real problem is a one of value, and it lies underneath the surface.

Today our sense of theatre is totally confused. We can no longer play the same roles, our actions aren't as visible as before, and all intimacy is lost. And so our sense of value has been violated. This is not just a problem of communication. While there is quite a bit of meaning “lost in translation” over Zoom, meaning is always second to value.⁴ We haven't only lost meaning — we've lost *value*. Why care about *what* you're saying if nobody cares *who you are*?

This is what happens when theatre fails: Talking to someone over zoom is *worth less* than an in-person conversation. This deficit is multiplied tenfold in a group setting, where there is even less certainty that your comments are being heard, your eyes met, or your face seen at all. Remind yourself of our digital world — in this world, there is no certainty in your being seen. So no one knows if they've met another's incredulous gaze to react to a classmate's oddball comment, or to punctuate a pivotal line in lecture. There is no choosing who watches you; no one hangs around after class. There is no sense of group focus; no one is sure when it is their turn to talk. There is no telling who's paying attention, so how could anyone know their value?

⁴ Here we could discuss body language at length, and cite the customary statistic that “55% of our meaning is communicated through body language” or whatever the numbers say. But we already know that. We can feel it. Anyone will tell you this: in today's era of digital talking heads, the connection between human beings is only as stable as the WiFi. But we have to see the problem runs deeper than faulty circuitry. It's not a problem of crossed wires, it's a problem of crossing gazes. This is a problem of theatrics. But if you are interested in data, consider this: the most dehumanizing interaction reported by the homeless is that nobody will look at them. They are not worth being watched. Has anyone yet made Zoom their home?

And so there are a hundred new barriers between us and our natural ability to form community. Each of these reminds us that an online community is fundamentally different from a natural congregation. We have lost a sense of self-worth that comes from being part of a troupe, a team, and a community.

A theatrical problem requires a theatrical solution. Look at distant cousins of ours: *The Birds* of Aristophanes, first performed for a civic audience in the 5th century BCE. The ancient Athenians considered theatre, conventional theatre, a civic institution. Festival was their answer to community. During the festival of Dionysos, “the whole city [went on] holiday ... business was abandoned; the law-courts were closed ... even prisoners were released from [jail], to enable them to share in the common festivities.”⁵ These performances were put on by fellow citizens, who were responsible for dancing in the chorus together. Most Athenians would go up on stage at some point in their life. Most would learn to be watched. They were required to take a stand before the eyes of their entire community — there was no sitting in the back of class. This was a stage where citizens learned how to watch together. They learned how to watch actively, and participate actively, so they could be watched by an active audience. They watched each other, and they learned how to be united.⁶

Our solution is the answer to this question: how do we help people feel watched? It is clear that what we have now is no substitute for the old ways of interaction, though it tries to be. But in trying, it only highlights the essential nature of human interaction — something that doesn’t come naturally through digital means. If we want people to feel part of a community, we need a structure — a stage — where they can feel watched (and therefore valued), a structure that requires their *active participation*.

What does that mean? It means assigning new recruits to collaborate on video newsletters where they relay club information to the student body. It means featuring community meme

⁵ Arthur E. Haigh, *The Attic Theatre*. Published in 1898.

⁶ I can only mention briefly the moving passage in Xenophon’s *Hellenica*, where a soldier and religious herald shouts across the battle lines of the Athenian civil war: “Fellow citizens! ... Why do you want to kill us? ... for we shared in the sacred rites and sacrifices and the most splendid festivals ... we were dancers together!” The allusion to the intense civic bond of the *chorus* only makes the heartbreak of civil war more crushing. One might take this lesson in theatre beyond Zoom, but politics has no room here. [Xenophon. *Xenophontis opera omnia*, vol. 1. Oxford, Clarendon Press. 1900 (repr. 1968). Section 2.4.20]

submissions at the end of each month's recap. It means giving new members the final decision on movie night or the next group reading. This means democratizing the coordination of our service projects, giving each member a valuable and visible job; a stage where they are not overlooked grunt workers but celebrated equals.

It means giving them something to do that's worth watching, something of their own that's worth being watched, and a seat in this new-fangled audience where they can learn how to be an Oilbird. That means recontextualizing the solution with reference to the problem, and nourishing community, but not pretending to provide it. It means ensuring the feeling of being seen to each new member of our team; giving them a chance to do something that matters. We need to provide a new stage where members can make themselves worth watching (we will *all* have to learn how to watch, anew, together).

It does not mean passing out new T-shirts to the masses; it means asking them to *make* shirts. Neither is it asking them to follow the group on instagram; it's allowing them to *post on it*. More than anything, it is a mindset. Members are not customers needing to be pleased. They are human beings who need reasons to care. So we do not need to put new recruits in a passive position— they are already there. We can't ask them to watch without letting them *be* watched. They will feel part of our community when we let them do something for it — something that matters; something worth watching. This is the only way they will feel valued. That is the structure we must provide as leaders in the digital age.

If we want an authentic solution, if we want to help restore *value* to our communities and to our members, we've got to open up channels for them to provide that for themselves. Channels of theatre.

Bibliography

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics, 1996.

Haigh, Arthur Elam. *The Attic Theatre: A Description of the Stage and Theatre of the Athenians, and of the Dramatic Performances at Athens*. United Kingdom, Clarendon Press, 1889.

Woodruff, Paul. *The Necessity of Theatre: The Art of Watching and Being Watched*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Xenophon. *Xenophontis opera omnia*, vol. 1. Oxford, Clarendon Press. 1900 (repr. 1968)