

Arts in the Next Century

# Live and Kicking

Experts say theater in for change

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Editor's note: Today, we begin the first in a week-long series exploring where the arts are headed in the next century.

In the 21st century, it looks as if people may never need to leave their homes.

They will be able to talk to friends, do their shopping, check their stocks, read the morning newspaper and talk to their friends, all via the World Wide Web and e-mail.

As technology continues to advance, it seems social interaction will become less of a necessity.

How will people react to this? Will the 21st century produce a race of zombies glued to computer screens?

Or will people become discontent and be driven out of their homes by a need to interact with one another?

Some experts in the theater field believe the latter, and they think it will help the theater world survive — if not prosper — in the upcoming century.

"I believe the need for community and live interaction will make theater a much more viable

with technology, who want to deal with important topics in a give-and-take environment, into the theaters," he said.

Since theater began, it has been a reflection of social concerns and matters in society.

Although Shakespeare and other classics will continue to be performed, these smaller theaters will focus on contemporary subjects.

"When I say theater will be contemporary, I mean that topics in the news and concerns of people today will be the theater today," Miller said.

But Miller stressed the classics would not be forgotten.

"Productions of the classics will be rethought by directors under 30, maybe younger, who will communicate old subjects in new production styles," Miller said.

What makes theater significant and will always make it significant is that the actors are right in front of the audience relaying their message.

"Theater is the only art form that distinguishes the actor and the living human being as the medium," said William Grange, associate professor of theater at UNL. "In music, it is always the instrument, and in painting, it is the canvas or the paint, and in architecture, it is the stone. Whereas in theater, the human being is the medium or the message of the art experience."

"The theater has always capitalized on that and will continue to do so."

If theater doesn't continue to capitalize on this strength, the death of theater, which has always been predicted, could happen.

Film has been one of the biggest threats to theater and was supposed to cause its death at the beginning of the century.

"Film was a technological innovation that took over theater at the beginning of this century," Grange said. "It tried to take over where theater had left off."

To combat this, theater tried to imitate what was going on in Hollywood.

"Theater was trying to do plays with chariot races and locomotives trying to run over girls tied to railroad tracks and stuff like that," Grange said.

The theater industry realized it simply could not compete with what was going on in Hollywood.

"Theater can't do the technological, spectacular things that movies can do," Grange said. "So what happened was the mass audience left theater and went to the film."

Theater's audiences decreased but did not die.

"Film is the mass art form of the 20th century, not the art form," Grange said.

Theater has lived on because it has continued to produce a bond between audience members and the actors on stage.

"What happens in the theater is the exchange of energy that takes place between you and the actor, or if you're the actor, between you and the audience," Grange said. "That remains constant, and that's a basic fact of human nature."

"If you were to go outside the theater, and somebody was out on the street looking up at the sky, what would you do? You'd look up at the sky. It is maybe because of our fear of the sky falling," Grange said.

"That's what the theater capitalizes on. You're interested in what that guy is interested in. It's a



MATT HANEVDN

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art in the 21st century," said Tice Miller, a professor of theater at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Miller believes people will continue to want to get out and see new and classical playwrights.

And Miller's not just talking Broadway.

His "gaze" into the future includes an increase in smaller theaters scattered around the country. Young directors and actors will run these theaters, and their goal will be to present new work, he said.

"These theaters will reflect the contemporary aesthetic and draw young people bored to tears

brain stem activity. It is something you don't think about. You just do. What the theater does is take that response and string it out for five hours," he said.

"That is what the theater has done and what it must continue to do if it is going to be theater, let alone survive. If it doesn't do that, it's not theater any more, it is something else."

Kathryn Lampkey, central regional director of the Actor's Equity Association, said in the next century, theater would continue as it has.

Like Grange and Miller, she believes theater's live element will carry it through.

"The live element has remained the same, no matter what the century," she said. "It's an experience to go to live theater. There's the live one-on-one thing going on."

Unlike film, seeing a particular theater production is, in a sense, a "once in a lifetime experience."

"A live production is something that won't ever be repeated exactly," Lampkey said.

Because theater is different, it will continue to prosper.

The film industry, Lampkey said, is nothing more than a bigger version of what a person can watch at home on his or her television screen.

She said a desire to get out and interact more would bring people out to the theaters.

But, she also said there would be a need to attract younger people to what she described as the "graying audiences" going to live theater now.

She agreed a way to combat this will be putting new twists on classic productions.

She said producers would be able to do this more for one reason: The authors of the scripts would no longer be around to complain.

Although theater may be a future release from the overwhelming world of technology, it also may be able to take advantage of what the World Wide Web has to offer.

Web casting of live plays, which is already going on, will continue, Lampkey said. In the future, people may be able to see a Broadway play

without ever going to New York.

Lampkey stressed that theater productions on computer screens would be more of a promotional technique than anything else.

"Hopefully, it will bring people out to the shows," she said. "Watching a play on the computer screen defeats the purpose and significance of theater because you are watching it on a flat screen."

So continue to survive and adjust, theater will. But compete with Hollywood, it probably won't.

"Theater can't compete with film," Grange said.

He compared theater's fear of film to film's fear of television in the 1950s. People thought one would take over the other, but they both survived.

"They are different experiences," he said. "Theater will never be this mass thing, but of course it tours, and many people are able to see these tours."

Also, theater is the minor leagues for actors wanting to break into Hollywood.

Grange said approximately 80 percent of movie stars get their start in theater.

"It is difficult for a young person now to avoid the lure of Hollywood because there is so much money out there," he said. "But if you want to be active and get started, you start in the theater."

There are many, many more theater productions cast yearly than movies; if actors want to get a start, they go to theater.

So aspiring actors and directors will continue to put out plays in the 2000s, just as they always have.

Styles will change, but the basic purpose theater serves will remain constant.

"There are going to be enormous changes in the 21st century. What they are going to be, I don't know," Grange said.

"Theater chronicles time," he said, and then quoted Shakespeare saying, "Theater's job is to hold the mirror up to nature."

"The 21st century is going to be fascinating."