For a long time I bemoaned the “death of theatre,” predicting that theatre would be the “string-quartet of the 21st century.” Well the 21st century is here, and so is theatre. I was wrong.

Recently I have seen some powerful theatre. The experimentalists have won many of the battles over the “future of theatre.” Theatre, dance, and to some degree music, have joined. I don’t mean opera and musicals, though these too are enjoying a resurgence, but the line of work from Meyerhold to Grotowski and forward, represented in our own times by such diverse directors, auteurs, and choreographers as Eugenio Barba, Elizabeth LeCompte, Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, Suzuki Tadashi, Ratna Tihayam, Ivo van Hove, Laurie Anderson, Robert LePage, Pina Bausch, and Jane Comfort (to name only some of a very big cohort).

The kind of theatre these people do goes far beyond “spoken drama,” as the Chinese dubbed modern Western realist theatre. Spoken drama originated in Europe, a function of modernity. Spoken drama went global with colonialism. But during the 20th century, both the Western avantgarde and non-Western theatre artists, intent on recuperating their own classic and traditional forms, created alternatives to spoken drama. The two movements—experimental performance and the reaching for tradition—are intertwined. Spoken drama was exported as part of the colonial package, even as numerous influences from Africa, Asia, and Latin America streamed back to reshape the theatre of the home cultures. From a non-Western perspective, even as spoken drama was imposed and imitated, local, traditional, and classic genres soon enough reasserted themselves, becoming partners in the creation of fertile, vital hybrids.

As I write, this mixing continues on a scale heretofore unimaginable. Rapid advances in communications, media, transportation, and translatability, of course, abet this mixing. At the popular level people are not concerned with “purity” but with the availability of diverse possibilities. The situation is presently one of rapid and dynamic hybridity on a global scale. In dozens of cities located on every continent, one can attend performances that span the gamut and display a wild salad of influences and styles—local, regional, global, traditional, and new. At the same time, making the situation extremely complex, governments and other agencies support specific classic and traditional genres in their supposed “purity” as part of programs of national cultural identity. I say “supposed” because what are regarded as classic and ancient are often idealized reconstructions. No matter old, new, or restored: the traditional/classic is alive alongside the popular, the commercial, and the avantgarde.

Additionally, there is the enormous “community-based theatre” movement, as well as continued energy coming from performance art—what I have called “believed-in theatre” (see Schechner 1997). Community-based theatre
knits together politics, local action, and healing both personal and collective. Old-fashioned “community theatre” specializes in reruns of proven Broadway hits, operettas, and the like. Community-based theatre develops scripts and production styles from scratch, drawing on both local talent and for-hire specialists. Performance art has developed so many facets that it is not possible to summarize all that happens under its rubric. Suffice it to say, that lo-tech and hi-tech, solo artists and groups, fancy venues, and out-of-the-way clubs are all in play, with themes ranging from identity politics to art-for-art’s-sake, from highly personal confessional to stand-up comedy...and more.

Theatre has proven vital because it is extremely adaptable and not locked into one or another genre. Even spoken drama shows signs of a new viability. What’s happened is actually simple. Up until fairly recently, the repertory of realist dramas from Ibsen to roughly Mamet was almost always staged according to realist conventions. One could more easily fool around with Shakespeare than with Arthur Miller. This is not a matter of changing text, but of scenic and acting conventions. But, first through deconstruction—the Wooster Group’s uses of O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey into Night, Wilder’s Our Town, and Miller’s The Crucible—realist texts were chopped up and adapted to fit nonrealist montage-staging.

But more important for the point I am making is when the Wooster Group “respected” the text of O’Neill’s Hairy Ape and Emperor Jones and Chekhov’s Three Sisters while radically changing the scenography, acting, and mise-en-scene through which the play texts were expressed. The plays were musicalized and choreographed, their settings a function of their subtexts rather than surface texts. This way, Ivo van Hove and his colleagues completely reconceived O’Neill’s More Stately Mansions and Tennessee Williams’s Streetcar Named Desire.

What this means is that just as Shakespeare can be done in any style, so can Ibsen—and so can Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett (whatever his alleged “defenders” argue). Play texts of whatever kind are detached from their possible stagings and acting styles. In other words, the concept of “text” has indeed been broadened and operates now not only academically but in actual performance work. There is the text of plays; but there is also the text of behavior, of acting, of scenography, of blocking. Each of these is autonomous, and can be developed on its own and/or in relation to the others. Thus Wagner’s kind of “total artwork”—envisioned as a unity—may also be envisioned as disparity, contradiction, and the interplay of forces, a totality without the requirement of unity.

This does not solve the problem of so many talented writers and actors moving to media as soon as they are able—or never being in theatre at all. But it does open up a vast range of dramatic literature for radical interpretation and staging. And it does say to young writers—as to actors, directors, and designers—that theatre can give you a very open field of interpretive opportunity, with less corporate control than in the media. Relatively speaking, the theatre—the local and live arts—offers a better chance for individual and radical expression than the media do.

—Richard Schechner

Reference

Schechner, Richard