

THE UNCIVIL WARS -- WHAT TO DO WHEN AUDIENCE MEMBERS ACT RUDELY

by Nancianne Pfister, Stage Directions, February 1999

"They won! The '49ers are going to the Super Bowl!" The football fan had been listening to the game on a radio and wanted to share her joy. Unfortunately, those around her were enjoying the second act of *For Me and My Girl* at the San Jose Light Opera.

That's right. She brought a radio to the theater and listened through earphones to the game during the show. In her rapture at the outcome she competed with the performers for the audience's attention.

Rude? Decidedly. Rare? Not rare enough.

Experience -- along with horror stories from our readers -- indicates an increasing number of such incidents in theater audiences. When patrons act this way, they can damage -- even ruin -- a performance. A film will be exactly the same whether it's played to an empty house or to an audience in full riot. But commotion in a theater can be heard, seen, and felt by the other audience members as well as by the performers. They may be distracted and lose focus, if only for a moment, and thus influence the quality of the theatrical experience for everyone. If the interruption is severe, it can lead to dropped lines or the ruin of a skillfully-built dramatic scene.

We asked house managers across the country for solutions and appropriate reactions to audience discourtesy. They generally agree that discourtesy more often than not comes from ignorance, not from malice. Patrons often don't even realize they're causing a problem. But how do you deal with audience members who are rude -- inadvertently or not?

It's not always simple, they say, because dealing with an offending audience member may be more disruptive than the bad manners. Also, in small communities it could be uncomfortable for an usher to correct the behavior of someone he knows. Struggling companies often are reluctant to eject disruptive patrons, fearing consequent loss of revenue.

The goal of the theater staff should be not so much to punish the offender as to assure a pleasant experience for the rest of the audience. A little education wouldn't hurt either.

Tardiness was high on the complaint list, with a special grievance toward those who think it's acceptable to arrive -- or to talk -- during the overture, not considering it part of a show. Some companies solve this problem by not seating people during the overture. At the end of it, the conductor pauses, the house lights are brought up, the latecomers are seated and the show continues. This is a lesser evil than interrupting the enjoyment of those who arrived on time.

Many companies have a stated policy that latecomers to a play will be seated "during the first appropriate break in the action," which often means during the first scene change. If the show is a musical, seating tardy patrons is a bit easier. The basic rule is "Move during the applause." Those who must remain in the lobby waiting for the applause at the end of a song may feel deprived and resolve not to miss anything the next time.

When the production does not have convenient pauses, late patrons can be seated in unsold aisle seats until intermission. If the house is sold out, the decision to seat or not is up to the house manager, usually after discussion with the director or stage manager during rehearsals.

Realizing the benefits of an ounce of prevention, you can discourage tardiness by starting your shows on time, every time. Holding the curtain because patrons haven't arrived is appropriate in cases of storm or traffic pileups, but if you develop a reputation for starting late, patrons may linger over dessert and coffee instead of getting to the theater.

There's a good reason theater seats face the stage: That's where the important stuff is going on. Noise from the house is appropriate only for laughter and cries of "Bravo!"

That's why house managers say that children brought to inappropriate shows are a major concern. No one blames the young ones; a toddler cannot be expected to behave well at a performance of *Sweet Bird of Youth*. And it's difficult for theater staff to turn away children who attend with adults who presumably know what their child can withstand. Usually an usher will not ask an adult to remove a disruptive child unless there has been a complaint from someone in the audience. Save yourself and your patrons grief: announce or publish information about the best ages to appreciate the shows offered.

Talking during a performance, though irritating, is less of a problem for a theater staff, as the offenders are usually silenced by those around them. The same is true for patrons who think it shows their familiarity with a musical if they hum along. The attitude of those in their vicinity runs along the lines of, "I didn't pay to hear you sing; get your own show."

Some theater companies educate audiences through short "Theater Etiquette" tips in the printed program. This is the place to set forth the proposition that the sound of cellophane being unwrapped from a piece of candy not only is distracting, but downright irritating. Or that making a mad dash for the exit during the curtain call -- and stepping on feet in the process -- is plain, flat-out rude.

Some distractions are more than annoying; they are illegal. Recording or photographing a performance of a copyrighted work is almost always a violation of contract for which the producing company can be fined. Also, the act of taking photos is distracting to everyone else in the theater.

One of our readers told of a photographer in the audience who used a flash camera during a show because "there was not enough good light on the stage." Aside from the insult to the lighting designer, there is the danger that distracted, momentarily-blinded actors can step off the stage. In this case, the staff made it clear that the safety of the performers took priority over the loss of a patron's good will. The cameraman was unwilling to surrender his camera to an usher and left the theater.

In Broadway theaters, solutions to such transgressions range from confiscating cameras and film to calling the police. However, for the most of us, prevention is the wisest procedure. Anyone seen entering the theater with a camera should be asked to leave it with the house manager and be given a receipt for it.

One tactful way to enforce the rules is to put the blame on the absent entity, especially a governmental one. Try saying something like, "We could lose the rights to perform this show if you take photographs" or "The city can revoke our permit to use this building if you bring that drink in here."

Our high-tech age brings new challenges -- the personal alarm, the digital watch, the cellular telephone, and the pager. To avoid having performances disturbed by incessant beeping, our house managers once again advise you to be proactive.

In the play program and other written material, suggest to audience members that they turn off their beepers and other devices during the performance. Many pagers and phones now have a "vibrate" instead of "ring" setting; suggest that patrons switch to this setting while in the theater. But what about those who cannot bear to part with their equipment, or who do not have a "vibrate" setting? If they need to know when a call comes in, they can leave their phone or pager at the box office along with the location of their seat. If the beeper goes off, an usher can easily get to the owner.

Occasionally, audience rudeness may go beyond the inadvertent. It's difficult to believe that any audience member would deliberately endanger a cast but one patron threw BBs on the heavily-raked house floor at New York's Circle in the Square. The astute stage manager held the curtain, refusing to allow actors to take their places until the last of the offending pellets had rolled down the stage and the floor had been swept.

When rudeness has crossed over that line, sometimes the performers need to take matters into their own hands. We are cheered by this story from Portland [Oregon] Opera.

An open dress rehearsal for Jenufa was sold out in the 2500-seat theater. During the overture, a child began whining. After ten minutes of this, the conductor stopped the orchestra. She turned, faced the audience, and said, "Take. The. Child. Out." The house erupted in applause, the child was removed, and the conductor began the overture anew. Brava!