

QUEBEC MESSAGE by Annabel Soutar



Photo Vivian Doan

I wish it were easy for me to pronounce a celebratory statement about the role of theatre in our lives today. But it isn't.

Right now an actor or other stage artist is delivering these words to you. The fact that you are here in the theatre to witness his (her) live presence speaks of the value you attribute it. It would be so thrilling for me to imagine that our society in general shares your point of view, but I can't imagine that because I know that almost all stage artists are paid a pittance for their work.

It would be so exciting for me to believe that this place, this theatre, is a universal and truly essential space for human dialogue today – a space that actually has an impact on the political and moral imagination of our society. But I don't believe it because, when compared to other media today, theatre is widely considered a marginal and elitist entertainment platform.

I am deeply conflicted about working in the theatre today because all around me I am experiencing a deep debasement of the values that theatre represents for me. Practically speaking, I am finding it very difficult to make an honest living as a stage artist. I don't think I am alone in this.

Of which values do I speak? Let's start with Truth.

Truth in the theatre is the achievement of years of collaborative work by artists who strive to understand human behavior and then to animate their knowledge for a live audience. Yet today we don't go to the theatre in large numbers to discover the truth about our world. We generally refer instead to mass-produced current event stories with daily doses of truth wrapped in sensational detail – private information about peoples' misfortunes often extracted illicitly and sold for profit.

What about Freedom? Today we are free to go anywhere and to choose any form of entertainment to fill our leisure hours. And yet for some reason we often elect to stay within the confines of our own homes to consume stories conveniently pumped to us through our cable wires. The outside world, after all, can be a hostile place – there's no parking, the weather is unpredictable, and the bus rarely runs on schedule. When we do go to the theatre it feels like a risky detour. 'What if I travel all the way across town to a place where I don't recognize the street signs or don't speak the language to see a play that doesn't feature a well-known actor or an award-winning playwright? And what if *then* – after tolerating all these impediments – I don't *like* what I experience? I should have known not have taken a chance if the theatre critic from my favourite newspaper didn't cover this production.'

Is my mind really free today?

Perhaps many of you by now are thinking 'it's not fair what she is pronouncing. After all, I am here. I go to the theatre, and so do many of my friends.' But did you ever ask yourself why you are such a minority today? Because you are. Let's face it, you are. We are.

Theatre is not a popular art form today.

Of course this statement comes as no surprise to anyone, and we all have developed inner mantras to buffer ourselves against the depressing fact of being devoted to a medium that doesn't reach many people: 'quality is better than quantity', 'only the select few understand me', 'true art is never popular', 'every medium eventually surrenders its spotlight to the passage of time and the introduction of new technologies'.

But these reassurances falter when we recall the two great eras of Western theatre - in ancient Greece and Elizabethan England – which both produced popular entertainment that was also deemed high art. Not to mention the fact that 2000 years passed, and much new technology was invented, between them.

I truly believe that theatre is supposed to be a popular medium. And when I say 'popular', I mean in the simplest sense of the word – it is supposed to be *populated* by the masses because theatre is one of those precious spaces where the mass can defragment into a healthy community of individuals who benefit from telling stories *together*.

Those of us who are still fighting to create and to attend theatre today are capable of making it popular again. But we will only succeed if we start promoting theatre as the most effective action against the biggest problem of our time: human inaction in the face of monumental political, social and environmental crises. In my opinion those of us who work in this trade must start recognizing that the stage actor is better trained than a United Nations ambassador to mediate peace, that the best playwrights and directors are *experts* in meting out social justice, that local live story-telling can be *as mobilizing* as any global internet campaign, and – most importantly - that theatre audiences *will* grow freely and abundantly when they are addressed as engaged citizens rather than as a random gathering of dis-associated consumers.

My love for the theatre is anchored in my belief that it should be a hub for political and moral dialogue in our communities today. If this were the case we could expect the actor to be well paid, the playwright to be honoured like a Judge, and the theatre producer to be considered one of the most valiant defenders of social justice. Today, however, we are far from realizing this vision for ourselves.

I dare to believe this situation will change. It has to.

Written by Annabel Soutar

Annabel Soutar is a playwright, director and theatre producer. In 2000 she founded Porte Parole with actor Alez Ivanovici and she has acted as Artistic Director of the company since its inception. While at Princeton, under the tutelage of renowned American playwright Emily Mann, Annabel learned about the documentary approach to theatre and since 1998 she has been applying it. Her original plays, Novembre, 2000 Questions, Santé!, Seeds, Import/Export and Sexy béton have been mounted in Montreal. Annabel's 2005 version of Seeds was named the best English production of the year by Montreal's Association of French theatre critics. Last fall Annabel's play Sexy béton was a finalist for the prestigious Quebec playwrighting award Le prix Michel-Tremblay.

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