

THE THEATREGOER'S EPIPHANY: BECOMING A THEATREGOER

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the phenomenon of how an individual becomes a theatregoer. The paper suggests that in order to become theatregoers, people experience a moment of theatrical epiphany, a 'wow moment', at a production, after which they are set on a trajectory of theatregoing. From this moment they assume the self-identity of theatregoers. In order to experience a theatrical epiphany, a number of factors, explored later in the paper, appear to be present in a person's formative years. This paper aims to shed new light on the formative experiences of theatregoers, and the factors that help create the identity of a theatregoer. It further suggests that by using an appropriate interpretive, qualitative method such as the reminiscence workshop, researchers are able to encourage theatergoers to cast a 'retrospective glance' over their lives. By following the phenomenological approach of Schutz (1967, 45-63), theatregoers' past lived experience can be captured in the form of rich, meaningful data. The next section explains the research method in more detail.

METHOD: THE REMINISCENCE WORKSHOP

Reminiscence workshops are defined by Arigho as "the stimulation of social and creative activities, that value people as individuals, and that make positive uses of their reminiscences."¹ Reminiscence workshops are a form of biographical research, similar to oral history except that oral history research usually contains "groups of older people [...] whose main concern is the retrieval of past experience and its recording and preservation" (Bornat 2001, 5). In enabling participants to reflect on their lives through reminiscing in groups, individuals are encouraged to think about their theatregoing, an act that reinforces their self-identity (Giddens 1991, 5). The workshops are effective in gaining rich data through the dynamic interweaving of the narratives with participants encouraged to tell their stories to like-minded people. Data is built up weekly, building on previous sessions, with participants and researcher sharing the ability to both question group members and develop arguments and concepts in the workshops.

1 Notes taken by J. Lewis, Age Exchange Reminiscence Workshop, 24 January 2005.

This reminiscence project incorporated four separate series of reminiscence workshops in three English theatres: the Oxford Playhouse (two groups, the first a pilot study), the Pegasus Theatre, Oxford, and the Corn Exchange Theatre, Newbury. The reminiscence workshops took place in 2006 and 2007. Thirty-one participants took part, twenty-six females, five males, with the majority of participants in the Oxford Playhouse groups retired from work. All the Pegasus group members were employed, as were the majority of Corn Exchange participants.

Each workshop lasted an hour, and was recorded for later transcription, with transcripts approved by participants. Workshops explored early theatregoing and drama experiences, and then theatregoing throughout their life course (Giele and Elder 1998). A final note on reminiscence workshops as a research tool: generally in social science, participants would be anonymous. However, it is often the case in reminiscence work or oral history that participants wish not to be anonymous. Historical diaries and letters, for example, are not treated with the same levels of confidentiality (Bornat 2008). The participants' names are therefore their real names.

THE FORMATIVE LIFE OF THE THEATREGOER

For many participants in this study, it is within their early lives that they were able to identify themselves as a theatregoer. In undertaking this exploration, participants suggest three key factors are influential in creating the conditions for being receptive to a production where an epiphany is experienced. These factors are: play, magic and religion.

The concept of play encompasses notions of beauty, enchantment, secrecy and captivity (Huizinga 1949). Of the thirty-one participants, twenty-five recalled playing at theatre in their early years. Thirteen participants had their first introduction to live theatre at a Christmas pantomime, a form of attendance that became ritualised and routine.

Other group members reminisced about taking part in charades at Christmas. One participant, Rachel, reminisced about playing theatre at Christmastime:

We lived in an old house, and I remember my parents had a sort of a large alcove in their bedroom with a curtain that went round it and we... I have two sisters and a brother... and every Christmas when my cousins came over, we used to put together a little play. We used to perform it in my parents' bedroom and the adults would come in and watch us. I remember that was really, really good fun... it was probably around some religious story as it was Christmas and we just made it up, rehearsed it and then performed it to the adults. We did that for quite a number of Christmases... I remember she and my father used to write plays that the four of us used to act in at the town hall in Devizes for charity. My grandmother used to make all our costumes

with crepe paper which I can always remember being worried about, because you always expect it's going to break, and you're going to be left on stage with no clothes on [*laughter*] but we never did. My mother had some lovely evening gowns which we used to dress up in... (Rachel, middle-aged, mature graduate, secretarial employment).

Rachel's narrative suggests that formative drama experiences are important in the gaining of cultural capital. These Christmastime plays were enjoyable to stage, enacted in a simulacrum of a theatre, in the alcove with curtains recreating the theatre. The family takes the playing seriously enough to become audiences for their children's performance, albeit in a make-believe theatre. The drama had a religious theme in which pretend, dressing-up activity took place. The religious context for the drama is also relevant, and is discussed later in this paper. Because the family takes Rachel's Christmas plays seriously, the playing may not be primarily 'art for art's sake' but an indication of the value of religious capital that the parents intend Rachel to have when older. The plays took place repeatedly over the years, bringing the concept of regularity of theatrical attendance to Rachel. Rachel also recognised that she was following in her family's amateur theatre heritage, inheriting their cultural capital. The plays included make-believe costumes from crepe paper as well as high quality gowns, reinforcing Huizinga's (1949, 9) theory of play being beautiful. Another participant also recalled her youthful interactions with drama:

... But I think um it goes back also to things like hiding behind the sofa and jumping out and sort of being theatrical in the family and then later on charades. But I suddenly remembered that actually we had a little tiny theatre which, wooden, folded and you could unfold it, stood up, had a proper blue velvet curtain that you could pull up. It had footlights and we used to make the scenery. I had a friend, of course, the daughter of *The Times* music critic boarded with my family in Oxford for the week and so she and I were the same age and we did all these theatre productions and we got more and more ingenious with scenery. The thing that I remember was, I don't remember the actual story of the drama, but we created this dark tower with a light burning in it and then... the tower fell down at the end of the drama because the forces of good somehow triumphed over it [*laughter*] so um I feel actually I had an incredibly lucky childhood and stimulation of the imagination, just going, starting right at the beginning earlier than one can really remember. So that's a bit of my childhood. (Margaret, seventies, graduate, psychologist)

There are similarities with Rachel's reminiscence regarding performing to others as a child, but Margaret's story elicits other factors. She alludes to the excitement of theatre, "hiding" and "jumping out" from behind the sofa; excitement is a recurring theme of the findings. In terms of Margaret's intentionality, excitement, and "stimulation of the imagination" would be key ingredients of her motivation to go to the theatre. The theatre, although a simulation, attempts to be as

authentic as possible with its “proper” velvet curtain. The make-believe aspect of the drama occurs on the make-believe stage, but the stage itself is meant to be believable in the Platonic sense. Her productions are created with a friend (daughter of someone with high status) and the play is intended to conclude with a feeling of redemption, an allusion as in the above example, to a religious concept, but also a motivating factor mentioned at a later stage of participants’ theatregoing life histories. Rachel and Margaret, by playing at drama could be regarded as “bricoleurs” (Levi-Strauss 1962) because they understand by ‘doing’ how the whole play is put together.

A participant who is a generation older than Rachel shares with her the desire to perform in front of her parents at Christmastime:

From the time I was tiny, I mean, charades at Christmas, and when I was about six, my mother suddenly produced a large suitcase and it was full of dressing-up costumes that she had made for herself, sort of amateur stuff at her church. And it was all beautifully hand-sewn costumes. And from then on I was always making up plays, and um pretending to be a Russian Cossack or lavender girl, or a jester [*laughs*]. All these costumes she got and I was directing my friends in made-up plays in which I played the wicked witch and the beautiful princess. [*laughs*] And my friend came on at the end as the prince who awoke me. And the parents would sit there having to watch and my father would be saying “it’s bed-time, bed-time.” And I said “no, no, we haven’t finished! We haven’t finished.” And he would say: “right, five minutes.” As they sat through probably half an hour of gruelling histrionics. [*laughs*] Quite embarrassing for them. But um, um then was when I really enjoyed drama a lot. It was, sort of, part of me really. (Audrey, seventies, graduate, teacher)

Like Margaret, she directs friends in the performance. Audrey’s rich descriptions of the clothes from the dressing up box are mirrored in her later descriptions of the costumes and set during her theatre epiphany, indicating her receptiveness to the visual aesthetic. Audrey’s story is suffused with the themes of magic and fairy tales. Since she has already let her group know that her mother was artistic, and had acted before Audrey was born, it is most likely that her parents enjoyed the experience, rather than being embarrassed by it. That drama was “part of me” suggests that Audrey was aware at a young age that her future motivation towards drama and theatregoing is self-propelled, and that she is an agent in the sense conceptualised by Giddens (1987).

MAGIC

As Audrey’s reminiscence has indicated, the concept of magic, or the magic of theatre, often linked to fairy tales, emerges very strongly, reflecting the observation by Kierkegaard ([1843] 2009, 23) that young people with imagination are captured by the magic of theatre. One participant, Margaret, reflected “it’s so hard to know

what the quality of things one saw in the past actually was because one was so prepared to enter the magic." So for her, magic is related to the naivety of youth, with a certain lack of knowledge and understanding. Mauss (1972, 35) suggests that women are more prone to magic than men. It could be that this concept emerges strongly because the workshops had twenty-six female participants out of thirty-one. However, magic is not always enchanting, as one participant recalled:

...having been brought up from the very, very earliest age, on fairy stories, and realising their hardness, as well as their beauty. I always remember being taught this by my father that they are extremely hard, they are not sentimental in the least. (Priscilla, late seventies, graduate, prison worker and lecturer)

Priscilla suggests that evil is part of the content of the pantomimes she attended when young, but darkness was a constant factor of life during the Second World War. The evil of the pantomimes was a relevant emotion for her generation.

RELIGION

Seventeen of the participants came from families where members, usually parents or grandparents, were churchgoers. It has emerged strongly from the reminiscences that an association with formal religion has helped to develop a theatrical awareness during the formative years of these participants. For many of the participants, experiences of theatre and religion are synonymous, or complementary.

The data suggests that religion is associated with theatre in five ways. The first example has already been introduced, which is acting in Christmas plays. The second is attending performances within religious venues, usually churches or church halls. The third example is acting in a play with religious themes, or playmaking with religious, ritualistic themes. Priscilla, who was brought up in a religious household, reminisced about her childhood games:

One of the ways we entertained ourselves for hours was playing church. And we extremely um, we went to a lot of trouble and we had our own liturgy. We had some actual proper church toys that had been got from a church shop but we also made up some things out of plasticine and we made up some Latin because it was the old Catholic Latin mass and one of the big moments in the old Latin mass is *Dominus vobiscum*. And the congregation replied *Et cum spiritu tuo*. And so we had our own version and we'd go around the house singing *Tintum Biscum* waving a little [*big laughter*]... I thought it was tremendous. But fortunately our parents didn't think it was naughty at all. They thought it was wonderful. They didn't make us feel we were being naughty.

As in other instances of children's play, the parents are encouraging as Priscilla and her friends ritualistically create their own rules adapted from the Catholic

liturgy. Whereas Priscilla brings the religious play back into her home, Kate (sixties, librarian and teacher), and other participants, recalled that it was at school where they were involved regularly in religious drama, often Nativity plays: “We did a Christmas play every year”.

The fourth way is where there are specific church-managed theatre groups. One participant in Letchworth, Hertfordshire, and another near Bolton in Lancashire, attended St Paul’s churches for their drama groups where the fare was Whitehall farce and thriller rather than Shakespeare. The fifth example is attendance at explicitly religious ceremonies which are inherently dramatic, such as the Whit Walks in the north of England, related by participants who grew up in the north of England.

One final point emerges about the formative theatre experiences of the participants. Many of the group members appear to be doers, actively involved in performances. Eighteen of the participants took part in amateur dramatics when they were young, whilst another two joined dancing classes.

THE THEATRICAL EPIPHANY

The concept of the epiphany is adapted from Denzin (1989, 17) who defines the epiphany as “existentially problematic moments in the lives of individuals.” He suggests that after people have experienced an epiphany, they regard life differently. For Denzin, these epiphanies occur after a person experiences a loss, or a major illness. However, leisure is an important element in many people’s lives and the experiences related by participants in this study suggest that many theatregoers experience a theatrical epiphany of sorts. Following the epiphany, they create a new trajectory for their leisure lives. There are four types of epiphany in Denzin’s model. They can be major, which pervade every aspect of an individual’s life; cumulative, which are ongoing “eruptions” of events; illuminative, or minor, which are symbolic of major epiphanies; and relived, which are viewed as epiphanies with recollection (129). A theatrical ‘wow moment’ may fall into any of these categories at different moments of a person’s life.

Bourdieu (1983, 65) constructs individual trajectories having identified “critical turning points” in people’s lives, and so it is the case for this study. The revealing of epiphanies is a factor within reminiscing, when older people talk about their own lives (Bornat 2001, 6). Hewison (2007, 37) argues that arts organisations must make it their duty to create moments of epiphany for their audiences. It is after the epiphany that the now-theatregoer is able to adopt what Bourdieu (1983, 61-67) calls a “position”, which in this case is the person’s self-identification within the genres of theatre. Bourdieu assumes that such a “special study” of “critical turning points” would be difficult or impossible to undertake (65). Despite

Bourdieu's reservations, this study was successful in identifying participants' theatrical epiphanies, the results of which are discussed next.

Although some participants experienced a theatrical epiphany at a very young age, often at a pantomime, most were older. Eleven mentioned age descriptors such as "primary school age", or "teens". Of the teenagers, the most common age was fifteen, whilst the under tens were more varied in their ages. The data suggests that many participants experienced cumulative epiphanies. Participants reminisced how their second, or later epiphany, even if not as powerful as their first, could prove to be a turning point.

THE FAMILIAR

The narratives of the participants suggest that, except for those who experienced their epiphany as an adult, the participants were inspired, encouraged, or converted to attend a theatrical event by, or with someone, who is close to them. For eleven participants, the familiars are parents, or a parent, of the participant. Other family members also provide this role: an uncle or aunt (three), and in one case, a great uncle. Other familiars are a teacher (or school) (four), drama group leader (one), friend (one), and godparent (one). This is a person who is already receptive to the magic of the play. S/he knows and understands the rules, and the secrets, of the play, and is a regular to the prescribed places of the play. There is a strong relationship between this person and the potential theatregoer. They know each other well. I have coined the term "familiar" to describe this person. It has links to magic, because a familiar is a magician's magical creature, or supernatural spirit over which the magician has some sort of inspirational power (Bozman 1961, 207). The familiar is "the personal and effective agent" of the magician (Mauss 1972, 99), therefore the analogy could be made that the theatrical familiar provides a role far greater than that of an opinion former or advocate: s/he is indirectly associated with the 'magical' artists involved in the creation of the production. Also, like the epiphany, there is also a religious connotation to the familiar. The familiar is the term for an official of the Holy See who captures and imprisons an accused person (Bozman 1961, 207). It could be argued that the theatrical familiar 'captures' a person for theatregoing.

With some participants, epiphanies occurred at a pantomime. Kate was taken by her father to *Peter Pan* at the Grand Theatre, Leeds when her mother was in hospital having another child. Another participant reminisced about a pantomime at the Corn Exchange, Newbury:

I remember I sat on my father's lap, but the moment for me was when Cinderella's rags fell off and she turned into the wonderful princess. And that really was... it started me off on my theatregoing (June, seventies, graduate, teacher).

For June, it is the interaction of sitting on her familiar's lap whilst being receptive to the transformative magic on stage as Cinderella appears in her new apparel, that sets her off on her theatrical trajectory. Some participants were a little older for their epiphany, and were taken to more adult productions. Three participants reminisced about Shakespeare productions. Of them, Genevieve (sixties, graduate, lecturer) recalled her mother taking her and her sister to *As You Like It* at the Old Vic for her "watershed moment", whilst Robin recalled that his epiphany happened when he was ten, when his parents took his brother and him to *The Comedy of Errors* at Stratford.

In 1938 I lived in Birmingham and my parents took my brother and I to Stratford to see *Comedy of Errors* believe it or not. That's my wow. And it was [...] Komisarjevsky's famous production which is often quoted as sort of the turning point in Shakespearean production... So I fell in love with Stratford before the War and I've been going ever since every year and I go to everything, absolutely everything.

Robin's experience demonstrates how the effect of a powerful production can last a lifetime. From this landmark production onwards, Robin is on his trajectory as a committed theatregoer. Maureen, daughter of an unemployed Communist in London, was taken to Unity Theatre by her father for Tom Thomas' *Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, a play in accordance with her father's ideals, and one which fulfils Brecht's aim for theatre to be educative and for the theatregoer to leave desiring a fairer society (Brecht 1948).

For one participant, his epiphany occurred when he was taken with his sister by a "kindly uncle" to Bernstein's *West Side Story*. His reaction was strong and immediate:

I was absolutely transfixed by this. I would never have thought that I would do anything like it and indeed I haven't, but it really turned me on to musicals in a big way. (Richard, sixties, business manager)

Richard also indicates the gap between that and his own theatre-making where he could never himself replicate the magic on stage for *West Side Story*. He does not have the magic touch to create such a show himself.

Several participants suggested that teachers played the role of the familiar. One participant had her epiphany whilst taking part in her school play, *The Snow Queen*, creating a desire to be a professional actress, whilst for another, her teacher encouraged her to go on a school outing to *A Taste of Honey* at a little theatre in Salford. Other participants were taken to professional, high profile Shakespeare productions in London. Only two participants suggested in their reminiscences that it was a close friend who was their familiar.

For those who had an epiphany during childhood, they described the production in terms of magic (mesmerised, amazing, wonderful, extraordinary, fantastic,

transfixed) and escape (out of this world). The stage magic was often visual, created by the sets, costumes and transformations. For those who had their epiphany later on in life, the magic was created by the shared experience with the audience, or an “enclosing” atmosphere. Another theme suggested is that of the unexpected. For one participant, her epiphany was created by the excitement of not knowing what was going to happen next:

I suppose it was the total emotional involvement and never knowing what to expect next. The element of surprise almost. And I will never forget when I was about six or seven, and the birthday treat was to watch a Spanish group of dancers and there was a dish of water in the middle of the stage and somebody bumped into it and it smashed. (Catherine, fifties, graduate, hotel management)

Another participant experienced her epiphany on a work outing to the musical *Chicago*:

I just remember um because I have worked in an office, all my life, Monday to Friday, nine to five, it's my job, and it just struck me that these people are up on stage and this is their job. This is their day job in the evenings, you know, and weekends, and how hard they worked and they are just dancing around, and just giving it their all, and it was just so um strange to me, you know, just so different to what I had seen every day, so it was a great one to start with, definitely, because it was so in your face. And nice and loud and full of music. And I didn't know what to expect, I really didn't. And what the theatre was all about and musicals... (Sandra, thirties, secretarial and marketing)

Alone among the participants in this study, Sandra typifies the ‘big night out’ attender who “really loves” the liveness and the visual spectacle, preferring to attend big hits and familiar shows for motivations of relaxation and fun (Osborne, Wheeler & Elliott 1999, 16). The profile of this cluster tends to be female, under forty, not necessarily university educated, working, listening to rock and pop, and belonging to a work social group (16).

Many of the participants suggest they came away from their epiphany feeling excited from the unexpected nature of the performance. Kate could, still at the time of the reminiscence workshop, re-experience her initial feelings when attending *Peter Pan*:

I had absolutely no idea what I was going to. You know, it was the first time. And er we sat in this utter darkness, and this story unfolded in front of me, and it was absolutely brilliant. Even now, I eeeeh get the shivers thinking about it... Um it was just so overwhelming. I mean that was really my time. “That's it. I must go to the theatre.” So, since then, I've just been devoted really. It's the magic of it... the hook, yeah, I remember that scared me, absolutely terrified me, and um flying yeah the flying as well. It was the whole experience. It was just something out of this world.

Participants reminisced about excitement caused by factors extraneous to the show, such as travelling in a coach with the class to the theatre for the first time or going to the theatre independently from parents. It was not the show alone that was exciting for Sandra; her achievement in being there was what caused her excitement when she recalls: “To me it was just ‘I’m going to the theatre. At last, I’m going to the theatre.’”

Finally, a number of participants suggest that it was because the production was relevant to them that they experienced an epiphany. Examples from the reminiscences include: a teenager at a play about a pregnant teenager (*A Taste of Honey*), a young person relating to the dilemmas of another youth (*Hamlet*), the politics of home creating a bond with *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, a teenage girl with experience of a suicidal teenager responding to Terence Rattigan’s *The Deep Blue Sea*, and a child at a pantomime, relating her father’s own fairy tales to the pantomime. A few participants suggested other factors are important: group social activity, the fame or the iconic nature of the production, a feeling of superiority having attended the production, freedom and independence in attending theatre without parents or school, the shared experience with other audience members, the fact that the production stayed in the memory, being part of the experience, dressing up to attend the show, and the liveness of the show.

CONCLUSION

The reminiscences suggest that individuals who experience a theatrical epiphany play at drama when young, are receptive to theatrical magic, connect with religion, and take part in theatre-making. They are introduced to the theatre by a familiar. The experience of the epiphany helps to create the self-identity of a theatergoer, leading to a theatregoing trajectory which carries on throughout the life course. Many of the participants in the reminiscence workshops in later life adopted the role of familiar to their own children, grandchildren or schoolchildren, as June relates in a workshop about current motivations for attendance: “I’ve got ten grandchildren and my whole ethos in life is to introduce these grandchildren to as many theatrical experiences as possible.” June, and many other participants’ current theatregoing suggest that they are passing on their cultural or educational capital, as Bourdieu (1984) theorises, but not for motivations of maintaining an elite position within society. The reminiscences suggest instead that it is the magic found in pantomimes and Christmas plays that theatregoers later seek. They find it in outdoor productions in parks or quads, especially when the drama of the production is set against the beauty of a sunset, or the backdrop of a ruined abbey. Similarly, participants suggest that religious themes introduced in Nativity plays are later sought in Mystery Plays performed at the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, York and Aldermaston. Finally, the enthusiasm displayed by participants in the reminiscence workshops, their desire to share stories, to

undertake individual research, to learn from each other, and to explore shared experiences indicates that the reminiscence workshop as a qualitative, interpretive method, is enjoyed by participants. For audience researchers this method enables theatregoers to cast a retrospective glance over their lives, and provides researchers with a wealth of rich, meaningful data with which they can begin to interpret theatregoing activity over previous decades.

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