

The Blue Glow from the Back Row:  
The Impact of New Technologies on the Adolescent Experience of Live Theatre  
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University of Ottawa, MA Thesis

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### **Abstract**

This article considers the impact of new technologies on the adolescent experience of live, literary theatre. Drawing together the work of theorists in literacies, new technologies and audience studies, together with brain research, and the results of a focus group of four secondary students who have seen four plays at Canada's National Arts Centre, it examines the consequences of young people's immersion in digital culture and the new mindset that often results. The expectation of instant access to data, inter-connectivity, stimulation and control can make it difficult for adolescents to decode the metaphorical aspects of a theatrical performance. The article concludes that language arts and dramatic arts educators have a key role in teaching students how to decode—and therefore enjoy and appreciate—a play.

*Keywords:* theatre, new technologies, new literacies, school audiences, youth audiences, discourse, space, audience studies

## The Blue Glow from the Back Row:

### New Technologies and the Changing Discourse of Theatre in Education

Every year, I have the pleasure of attending a series of four plays with three teaching colleagues and approximately eighty grade twelve students. We choose plays from the English Theatre series of Ottawa's National Arts Centre (NAC) that we hope are varied, significant, and appealing to 17 year-olds. On the designated evenings, students make their own way to the theatre, sign in with me in the lobby, pick up their tickets, and enter the theatre. Once the students are safely dispersed in the gloom of the auditorium, my colleagues and I find our own seats and prepare to enjoy the show.

At the end of last year's series, I led a discussion with my soon-to-graduate students on the plays we had seen together. They asked me if I had noticed the blue glow emanating from the back row. I had not. The students laughed. All through the play, they said, they were texting each other. So many smartphones were in use, the entire row glowed. I was surprised: the thought had never occurred to me that one would do anything in a theatre but watch the play, whisper to a neighbour or, perhaps on a bad night, catch a few minutes sleep. It struck me that the experience of "watching a play" was quite different for these adolescents than it was for me, and that another ICT (information and communication technology) paradigm shift may have taken place. In speaking with students and colleagues and reading about theories of literacies, new technologies, audience studies, as well as recent brain research, a number of questions began to form from that initial discovery. They led to this ethnographic study that includes a focus group of four grade twelve students who have seen a four plays at the NAC with me. How do today's adolescents experience traditional, literary, proscenium theatre of the sort that often features in a

school trip to the theatre? In what ways has the emergence of new technologies caused its re-conceptualization? What future is there for literary theatre in a “flat world” (Friedman, 2007) of high speed, interactive communication? Do language arts and theatre teachers who accompany students on a trip to the theatre have a particular role? These and many other questions emanate from the theatre, a newly hybridized and contested zone where young audience members with what Lankshear and Knobel term “the new mindset” (2003) confront a very old artistic tradition.

### **Problem**

Canada has a proud history of literary theatre. The Shaw and Stratford Festivals, for example, are known for their high quality productions, and most cities feature at least one traditional theatre, such as the Neptune Theatre in Halifax, Canadian Stage in Toronto, the Grand Theatre in London, and the Vancouver Playhouse. But theatre producers across North America are faced with an aging arts demographic and, in particular, smaller audiences for plays. An extensive report on arts attendance by the National Endowment of the Arts in the US shows that from 1982 to 2008, the age of performing arts audiences in the US jumped from an average of 39 to 47 years, while the percentage of adults attending plays fell by 21% (2008). Similar results are reported in Canada (Hill Strategies Research Inc., 2003). Participation in online gaming and communication, meanwhile, is booming. Canadians spent \$2.1 billion on video games and equipment in 2008, up 23% over 2007 (Lopes, 2010). Internet and social media use among adolescents is almost universal (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2008; Bell Canada, 2009), and researchers who concluded in 2005 that adolescent use of media devices could not possibly grow beyond 6.5 hours per day were “stunned” to discover in 2010 that the figure is now 7.5 hours per day, or 11 hours per day (Lewin, 2010) when taking into account multi-tasking. Some of that time is spent by teenagers sending an average of 2,272 text messages per month (The Economist, 2009) or

trading pictures and comments with friends on Facebook which, if it were a country, would be the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the world (Fisch, McLeod, & Brenman, 2008). The question of how adolescents experience live theatre is shaped, at least in part, by the sheer quantity of time spent on ICTs.

As theatre attendance figures decline and use of ICTs balloons, the Internet emerges as “a dominant place for social interaction and creative expression, particularly for youth and young adults (12-29)” (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2008). Users have at their fingertips an unparalleled range of activities, with freedom to do what they want, how and when they want to. This freedom extends into users’ creative lives. The *Canada Online!* survey suggests that the impact of the Internet “on consumption of cultural content is considerable, as the experience of using and sampling media rather than attending to specific content is increasingly becoming a part of the use patterns of Canadians online ... a majority are both producers and distributors of various forms of cultural expression” (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2008). Use of ICTs is therefore not only prevalent; it also provides users with a fundamentally different cultural experience. Literary theatre asks that people watch and listen—with some audience interaction—while new technologies invite participation. The question of how adolescents experience live literary theatre is complicated by the fact that norms of audience behaviour such as those found in the NAC may seem alien to people accustomed to creating culture on the Internet.

Web users can develop a wide range of literacies associated with technology, literacies that are quite different from, or even antithetical to, the literacies required to decode, appreciate and enjoy a literary play . Theatre literacy—the ability to decode, appreciate and enjoy a play—is further affected by the range of new literacies adolescents possess. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) describe the change in literacies as follows:

The more a literacy practice that is mediated by digital encoding privileges participation over publishing, distributed expertise over centralized expertise,

collective intelligence over individual possessive intelligence, collaboration over individuated authorship, dispersion over scarcity, sharing over ownership, experimentation over 'normalization', innovation and evolution over stability and fixity, creative-innovative rule breaking over generic purity and policing, relationship over information broadcast, do-it-yourself creative production over professional service delivery, and so on, the more sense we think it makes to regard it as a *new* literacy (p. 228).

In literary theatre there is limited participation: the theatre space, culture and rules communicate the dominant position of the theatre with regard to the audience. While a play is a collaborative enterprise, the reception of a play is largely personal. Ticket price reflects scarcity in a reflection of supply and demand. Audience behaviour is largely conformist. The structure of the theatre experience is based upon years of history, a "purity" of experience and strict policing by uniformed attendants. The relationship between performers and audiences is controlled, and the performance is professional. A new literacy mindset schooled in the openness of the Internet is liable to conflict with a theatre literacy more attuned to the behaviour of print text readers than gamers and surfers.

The New London Group writes that "Our view of the mind, society and learning is based upon the assumption that the human mind is embodied, situated and social" (Group, 1996). If the minds of many adolescent audience members are more at home in cyberspace than theatrical space, how might they react to live theatre? One change is the shift from individual to group consciousness: the adolescent audience member is often used to being connected to others, and even surfing the web with friends (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2008). Adolescent community and/or society is often defined through technology (McMillan & Morrison, 2008). And while the position of the audience member in front of a stage is designed to encourage focussed attention on the actors, the presumption that a person will work on one task at a time while learning or

being entertained can seem foreign to ICT-users, for whom multi-tasking is not only social but ubiquitous (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007).

Further differences between the pre- and post-ICT revolution mindset can be seen in how people perceive value (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). In the old economy, scarcity drove value. In the new economy, it is often familiarity that drives value. Knowledge is virtually infinite—what counts is getting noticed. Although street and avant-garde theatre can challenge capitalist modes of production, proscenium theatre falls into the more traditional model of capitalism: capital-owning theatre producers create a product that is sold to customers, the artifice of high culture helping to drive up prices. In the knowledge economy into which adolescents have been born, paying for any kind of entertainment can seem unusual when the Internet is awash in free resources. The new mindset is concerned with “maximizing relationships, conversations, networks and dispersal” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 60): high school students with 500 Facebook friends, membership in various networks, and participation in ongoing conversations, games, and relationships across cyberspace stand at odds with traditional theatre’s requirement that spectators sit alone in the dark in near silence. It is far from the “intensely participatory, collaborative and distributed nature” of youth culture (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 12). The “relationship revolution” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 12) engendered by the technological revolution can be odds with the reality of play-going.

In the broader world within which the arts function and students live, new technologies have wrought changes that complicate how the adolescent is likely to experience live theatre. New technologies have helped to drive a “flattening” of the world (Friedman, 2007) characterized by what Gee terms “fast capitalism (Group, 1996). Adolescents ICT users may be uncomfortable and unused to hierarchy, and find the model of traditional theatre unusual or

perhaps even off-putting; they can tend to view themselves as contributors to a collaborative society composed of equal players, not the hierarchical one they discover behind the heavy glass doors of the NAC. Gee asserts that the mind is “at root, a pattern recognizer and builder” (Gee, 2005, p. 68); in this case, the patterns that emerge from a flat world are different from those that shaped the culture and space of literary theatre.

The blurring of discourses and the break-down of distinctions between high and low culture are also the result of the flattening of the planet (Alvermann & Hagood, 2008). For adolescents, the lines between school life and private life can be blurred. School boards wrestle with the issue of how to maintain boundaries between teachers and students in the age of “friending” (Cobb & Quan, 2010). Hyperlinking students can be accustomed to appropriating images from the websites of the world’s temples of high culture one moment, while listening to playlists that can run the gamut from Beyoncé to Beethoven. Time itself folds out into a kind of flatness, music tracks disconnected from time, their digitally scrubbed sounds as fresh as when their parents lined up to buy the 45s at Sam the Record Man. While theatres such as the NAC can suggest “high culture,” the ICT mindset may react against them and question the traditions articulated by the posters from past productions, and the banners that snap in the breeze, signifiers of a national cultural tradition to which dwindling numbers pay attention.

Friedman’s notion of flattening extends to space as well as time. Leander describes how in “schooled productions of time” (Leander, 2007, p. 46) a single space is dominant and under surveillance. To the new technologies mindset, multiple spaces are the norm. Actions happen relationally, across spaces. A student can be chastised in the classroom for going “off task”, while in cyberspace it is often during the haphazard leap-frogging from site to site that the interesting discoveries are made. The traditional theatre is more like the classroom than the

virtual world, which can result in a tension between the single, dominant, watched space and the mindset shaped to think in terms of other dimensions altogether.

The heightened speed with which information is sought and absorbed is another characteristic of the ICT mindset that may contribute to the distancing of theatre from adolescent experience. People are consuming an average of three times as much information today than in 1960, computer users changing windows or checking email nearly 37 times per hour (Richtel, 2010). A play can seem slow and even monotonous in comparison. Time spent manipulating and absorbing data is also time spent on a screen, leading to what Kress (2009) describes as the dominance of the screen. It is no coincidence that in describing the iPad, Jony Ive, Apple's Senior Vice President, Design, said that the product is "pretty much defined by a multi-touch piece of glass ... and that's it!" The device represents the triumph of the screen; its inner workings are invisible so that the machine's operations can appear "magical" (Apple, 2010).

Writing in the New York Times, columnist David Brooks draws many of these themes together:

The Internet smashes hierarchy and is not marked by deference. Maybe it would be different if it had been invented in Victorian England, but Internet culture is set in contemporary America. Internet culture is egalitarian. The young are more accomplished than the old. The new media is supposedly savvier than the old media. The dominant activity is free-wheeling, disrespectful, antiauthoritarian disputation. (Brooks, 2010)

But perhaps something even more profound than changes in literacy, attitudes, mindset and culture has taken place to complicate the adolescent's experience of literary theatre. Perhaps the brain itself is changing. Neuroscientists suggest that deep changes in the brain can be caused by the rapid-fire stimulus of ICTs. The ability to focus is undermined by the bursts of dopamine released in response to stimulus; without stimulus, ordinary life, or theatre life, can feel boring. The technology is "rewiring" our brains (Richtel, 2010). Furthermore, the brain continues to change as people age, and connections between synapses—the architecture of the brain itself—

are enforced and maintained by experience (Greenfield, 2008). Brains shaped by ICTs develop in one way, those shaped by text-based reading and literary theatre develop in another. A growing body of literature suggests a link between high rates of ICT use and changes in mental attitudes (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). One recent study of 1,323 middle school and 210 late adolescent/early adult participants, for example, finds that “viewing television and playing video games is associated with increased subsequent attention problems in childhood”; kids who exceed the recommended two hours per day of screen time are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to have attention problems at school (Swing, Gentile, Anderson, & Walsh, 2010). Like reading the printed page, theatre requires quiet contemplation and deep thinking. On the Internet, “there’s little place for the fuzziness of contemplation. Ambiguity is not an opening for insight but a bug to be fixed” (Carr, 2008), while theatre demands the filling in of gaps between metaphors and meaning. What if brains are increasingly incapable of doing what theatre demands?

### **Literature Review**

A wealth of audience studies research has accumulated over the years, inspired in part by Roland Barthes insistence on ‘the death of the author,’ a belief that broadened the study of theatre to include the audience as well as the text (Bennett, *Theatre Audiences, Redux*, 2006). The assertion that “a performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product” (Bennett, 1990) lies at the heart of much of the work. Other texts examine the relationship of audience to performance, often with regard to mass media, but also in relation to theatre (Blau, 1990; Cremona, Eversmann, van Maanen, Sauter, & Tulloch, 2004; Freshwater, 2009).

This study builds upon several scholarly research traditions, one of which considers the effects of mass media, particularly over young people. Oswell (1999), for example, provides a comprehensive survey of the reports done in post-Second World War Britain regarding the effects of television on youth, and his observations regarding the fears expressed with regard to TV foreshadow many of the fears expressed with regard to the effect of ICTs. He quotes Monica Dickens (niece of Charles) posing the following question in a 1950 issue of *Woman's Own* in response to the growing numbers of television sets in homes across the country:

And what might our children become? They might become a generation who couldn't read a book, or play games out of doors, or amuse themselves with carpentry or trains or butterflies, or the hundreds of hobbies with which a child can potter so happily. (Oswell, 1999, p. 69)

Her concerns regarding the effects of television, and the rise of what an *Everywoman* correspondent called "TV fiends" (Oswell, 1999, p. 70) clearly foreshadow contemporary concerns regarding ICTs. One can also discern within Dickens' fear for the "hundreds of hobbies" the narrowing of options due to changes in interests or even abilities, the issue explored in this study with regard to how young people experience literary theatre. The recommendation of UK Government reports such as the Crowther Report (1959) and the Newsom Report (1963) that "teachers should teach children how to be discriminate and critical consumers of the mass media" (Oswell, 1999, p. 77) also suggests that the need for teachers to play an active role in mediating student consumption of electronic culture is an ongoing one with historical precedents. Another landmark study completed in this tradition is Morley (2003), who showed that the text is "structured in dominance by the preferred reading ... which the producers encoded and which they want the audience to receive." The audience, meanwhile "can resist, engage with and create their own meanings from the culture they receive from 'above'". The

study established that viewers are active—even combative—in their consumption of mass media, which is an important consideration underlying this study.

Another tradition built upon in this study is that of examining the effect of theatre on young people. Here the purposes of the studies are varied. Barker (2003), for example, compares the reception of audience members to both the film and stage versions of *Crash* and concludes that both film and theatre have value, and neither should be valued over the other. Gallagher and Rivière (2007) examine the fallout that results from a Toronto high school production of *Da Kink in my Hair* and show how drama can upset notions of authority. Harding et al. (1996) demonstrate the effectiveness of drama performances and workshops in educating youth on the dangers of drug use. In her exploration of the rise and fall of “Magpie,” an Australian youth theatre, Nursey-Bray (2005) suggests that theatre targeted at young audiences specifically can have a strong dramatic impact on them, particularly when it uses unconventional forms. Lee Brown (2002) points to the complex interplay between the audience, the text, the audience’s experiences, socio-political influences, and what is happening on stage.

A third and final scholarly tradition upon which this study is based concerns space and the response of adolescent audience members to it. Mackey and Whybrow (2007), for example, make a useful distinction between ‘place’, where specific locations are meant, such as the artist’s chosen site for a performance, and ‘space’, “referring to broader concepts of location as they relate to identity and difference, and a psychological or physiological response to one’s positioning,” therefore establishing the key definitions involved in the discussion of theatrical and virtual space. Dierking and

Falk (2000) explore the importance of space to experience and learning, pointing out that “the need to make sense of the environment, to find pattern and make order out of chaos, is an innate quality of all mammalian brains.” Students responses to the NAC space, while touched on briefly, are informed by this understanding.

Several studies look specifically at adolescent responses to live theatre, although ICTs are not often included as a complicating factor. In one study, for example, a group of high school students is taken to a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Cherry Orchard*, Tulloch (2000) noting that students “rarely come away from the formal performance of the play separate, as it were, from their ‘A-Level’ reading of it. Mainly it is a matter of actors ‘bringing to life’ the ‘flat’ and ‘stilted page, clarifying it” (p. 98). Here, the normalizing power of a theatre is shown to have a pretty grim effect, removing any real engagement with the play. Taking a group of Scottish school children to a production of *Othello*, Reason (2006) notes that the play was “equally about the social experience of being in an audience as it was about the production” (p. 240). Youngsters find the grandness of the theatre “glamorously attractive and at the same time rather alien, off-putting and stifling” (p. 229).

In a later study, Reason (2008) concludes that “theatrical competency ... depends upon the ability to translate theatrical signs into fully-fledged real world referents” (p. 12). This echoes the need for the “fuzzy thinking” referenced by Carr (2008). Researchers have also looked at how ICTs impact the relationship between audience and performer in alternative forms of theatre such as Second Life performances, street art and interactive movies (Oddey & White, 2009). Barker (2003), however, points to the relative paucity of work in areas other than TV or film audience research: “... a few studies apart, there has been almost no attention to date to rather crucial questions: what do audiences seek, and get from, the experience of going to the theatre,

and how do they go about the process of making sense of the productions they see?” (p. 22). Perhaps this study can contribute one small element to the ongoing exploration of that question, particularly with regard to the new and emerging impact of ICTs on the adolescent theatre experience.

### **Methodology**

This study is an ethnographic study, based upon the definition in the Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry that an ethnography includes realist authority, a documentary style, the use of cultural members’ points of view to generate results, and interpretive omnipotence (Schwandt). It stems from the belief that qualitative researchers “do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge. They can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about their world as they perceive it” (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, p. 961). I watched the plays with my students, and I acknowledge my own position as a theatre-goer, evoking the notion that “ethnographic texts are ... always dialogical—the site at which the voices of the other, alongside the voices of the author, come alive and interact with one another” (Denzin, 1997, p. xiii). It falls into the ethnographic tradition of including “the perspective of the interactive individual” (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994, p. 575). More specifically, it is situated within the autoethnographic tradition, which “refers to ethnographic research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political ... the life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied” (Ellis, 2008). Autoethnography falls somewhere along a scale of “self”, “culture” and “research”, and includes the following characteristics:

1. Use of first person.
2. Focus on a single case, in this case the theatre experience of four adolescents.

3. Borrows from the conventions of literary writing.
4. Accessible, readable, places the reader as a co-participant in the dialogue rather than a passive recipient.
5. Includes private details of emotional and bodily experience.
6. The text stresses the journey over the destination, thus “eclipsing the scientific illusion of control and mastery”.
7. Conveys the “motion of connected lives over the curve of time” instead of suggesting there is a snapshot frozen in time.
8. Offers an evocative story that activates subjectivity and compels emotional response. (Ellis C. , 2008)

The study involves Chris, Andrew, Caitlin and Ethan (all pseudonyms), grade 12 English (ENG 4U) students who saw four plays at the NAC during the 2009-10 season with me and volunteered to join a focus group. Privately-educated with ready access to ICTs as well as movies, books and family trips, the students will attend university, and have plans to study business, engineering and social work. Their parents are successful professionals, some at home, others working in the fields of finance, business, diplomacy, medicine and technology. The students are polite, respectful, sociable and full of ideas. Their live theatre experiences are limited, largely to a couple of Broadway productions, and a play or two organized by their elementary schools. Caitlin, who says that she sees “lots of musicals,” is the exception.

The first play we saw together was *The Drowsy Chaperone*, a frothy, crowd-pleasing, comedic Tony-award winning Canadian musical. The three plays that followed were all directed by the NAC’s Artistic Director, Peter Hinton: a new version of *A Christmas Carol* performed by the theatre’s new English language acting troupe, which was fluid and dramatic in its use of light, shadow and black Victorian-style costumes; a new version of Brecht’s *Mother Courage And Her Children* written by Hinton that was a disastrous preview performance in which lines were forgotten, entrances delayed, hecklers ejected and props forgotten; and a modern-day version of Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* designed to satirize differences in mentality

between Torontonians and Montrealers. At the beginning of the focus group, students were given sheets of paper and pencils and asked to create a drawing that communicated their experience of live theatre. After about ten minutes, the students interpreted their drawings, and then I began to work through a series of prepared questions in a semi-structured interview. The combination of art and conversation reflects the belief expressed by Maxine Greene (1991) and quoted in Morawski (Spring 2008) that “the arts offer opportunities for perspective, for perceiving alternate ways of transcending and being in the world” (p. 32), as well as Eisner’s belief that art is a way of knowing (Morawski & Palulis, 2009) and accessing dimensions of experience not readily expressed in words (Bagnoli, 2009). The use of artwork also follows within the tradition outlined by Harper (2005, p. 748), in which “visual documentation becomes a part of research triangulation, confirming theories using different forms of data”. The intentionally broad opening question reflects the methodology employed by Reason (2008), who describes how asking young people to talk about their art—the current trend in art therapy—engages with the talents they possess and avoids the danger of speaking down from what can be perceived as a superior adult position.

The artwork and the transcription of the focus group interview were analysed according to the classifying methods outlined in Creswell (2007). Working with images and text together is consistent with the approach taken by Bagnoli (2009) and Reason (2008). In looking at the artwork in particular, Feldman’s (1973) sequential model of art criticism was employed, in which the viewer works through description, to analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Through this process of analysis the student artworks became “visual narratives” (Harper, 1998, p. 35) that “stimulated and guided” discussion, in part because of all that is implicit in their creation: a point of view, symbolic patterns, artistic choices made within a limited time. Once the analysis

and classification of themes and data was complete, the write-up of the study was undertaken, again in keeping with Creswell's approach.

My own perspective in this study is that of what Lankshear and Knobel (2003) term the digital "outsider," one raised in the print-based environment and who finds it difficult if not impossible to perceive the world in the same way as an "insider" raised with instant access to the Internet. When growing up, the only screen in my house was the RCA television set tastefully concealed behind mahogany doors in the corner of the living room, with a Lladro porcelain goose and a framed family photograph on top. I approached the plays as a teacher, long-time theatre-goer, and concerned theatre-lover. I've written plays, studied drama, directed student productions, and every year I teach plays such as Fugard's *Master Harold ... and the boys*, Mamet's *Oleanna*, Shakespearean tragedies, and Hare's *Stuff Happens*. I have a visceral response to theatre, hard-wired into my psyche. A glimpse of a spotlight, the smell of drying paint backstage, and I can be transported to my own adolescence and the pulsing creative potential of a few square metres of black plywood. I also follow theatre in Toronto, London and New York, which gives me some context with which to evaluate the Ottawa scene. Although I have encountered moments and even nights of brilliance, directorial choices can seem broad or safe, and topics can lack in immediacy. I felt, however, that the plays in this series represented a good survey of literary theatre with something for just about everyone: a lively musical; a well-loved holiday classic told in an innovative manner; a hard-hitting, politically-motivated 20<sup>th</sup> century masterwork; and a Shakespearean classic played for laughs with a contemporary twist relevant to a young audience. Under the leadership of Peter Hinton, a celebrated director and companion of the Order of Canada (Castle, 2010), also ensured some interesting evenings.

## Findings

### Attitudes Towards Literary Theatre

The four student artworks, or visual narratives, share striking similarities that provide helpful insight into students' attitudes to live literary theatre, and point to their general sense of disassociation from it.

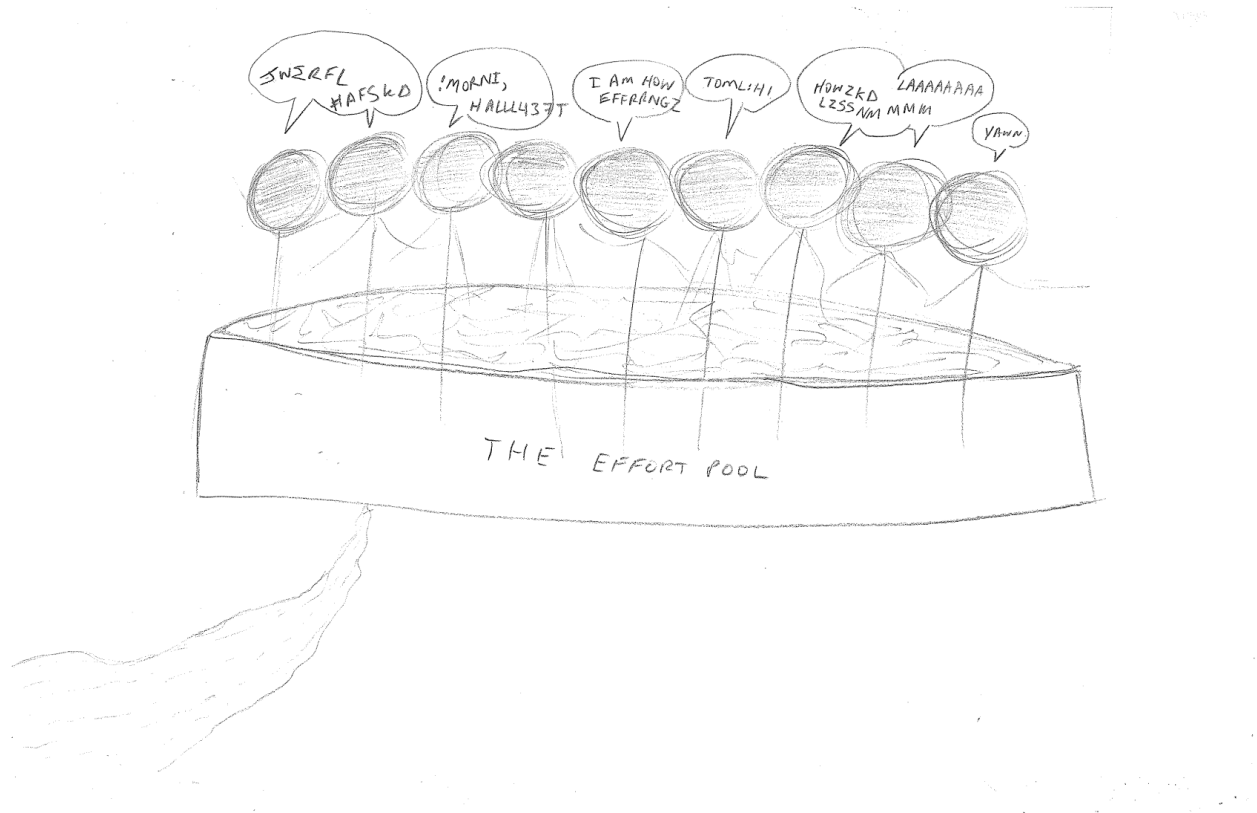


Figure 1

In Ethan's drawing (Figure 1), nine anonymous, identical, ghostly stick figures stand in a pool labelled "the effort pool". Speech bubbles suggest they are speaking gibberish, except one, who yawns, and another who sings a note. There is a leak in the pool. "What's in the effort pool is staying there," Ethan explains. "And whatever is leaking from it here is what we receive." The vision is of talented performers failing to connect with an audience. Caitlin's sketch (Figure 2)

shows a single performer lit by a spotlight, standing confidently and smiling calmly, with figures scattered around the front of the stage.

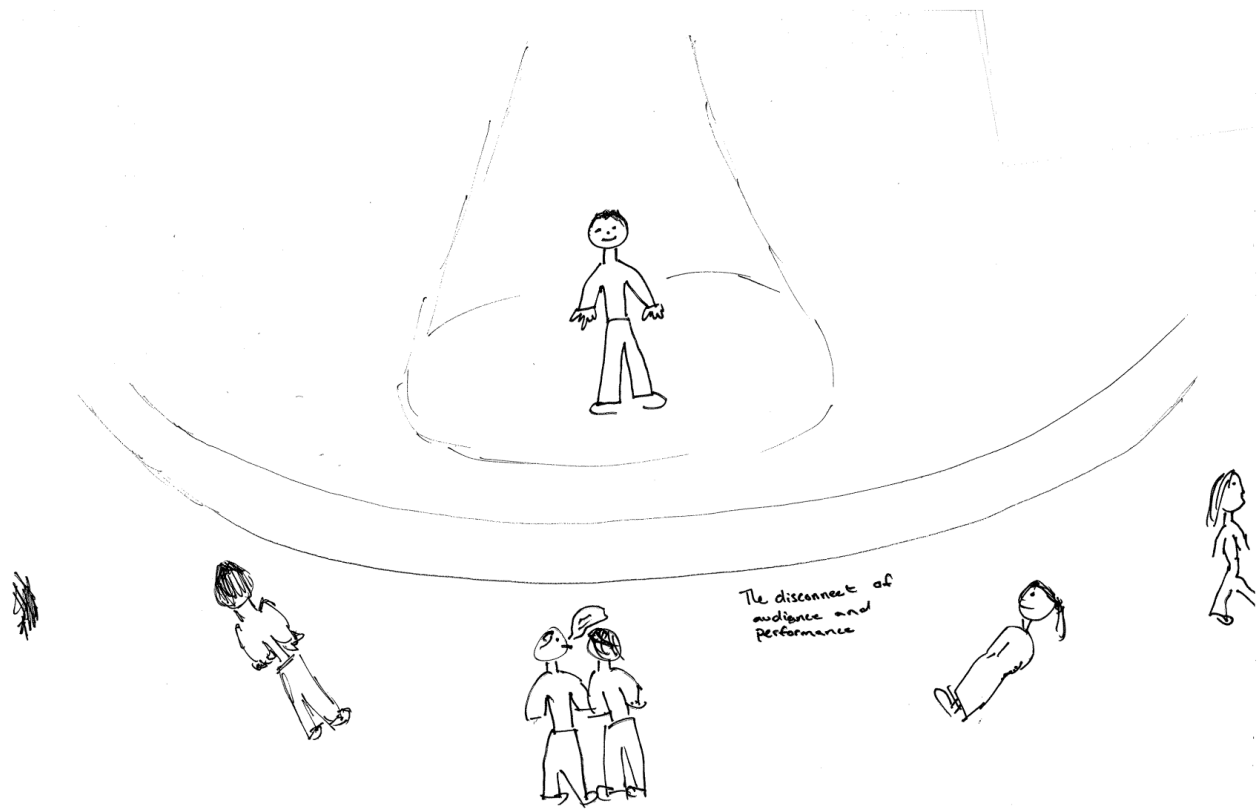


Figure 2

One looks away; two are speaking; the two who face toward the stage look in different directions. “My drawing shows, like, the disconnect I kind of feel,” she explains, pointing to the position of the figures and the varied body positions. Andrew’s artwork (Figure 3) also shows a stage, this one viewed directly from the front and balanced in size with rows of tomb-like seats, two figures and piano dominated by the scale of their surroundings.

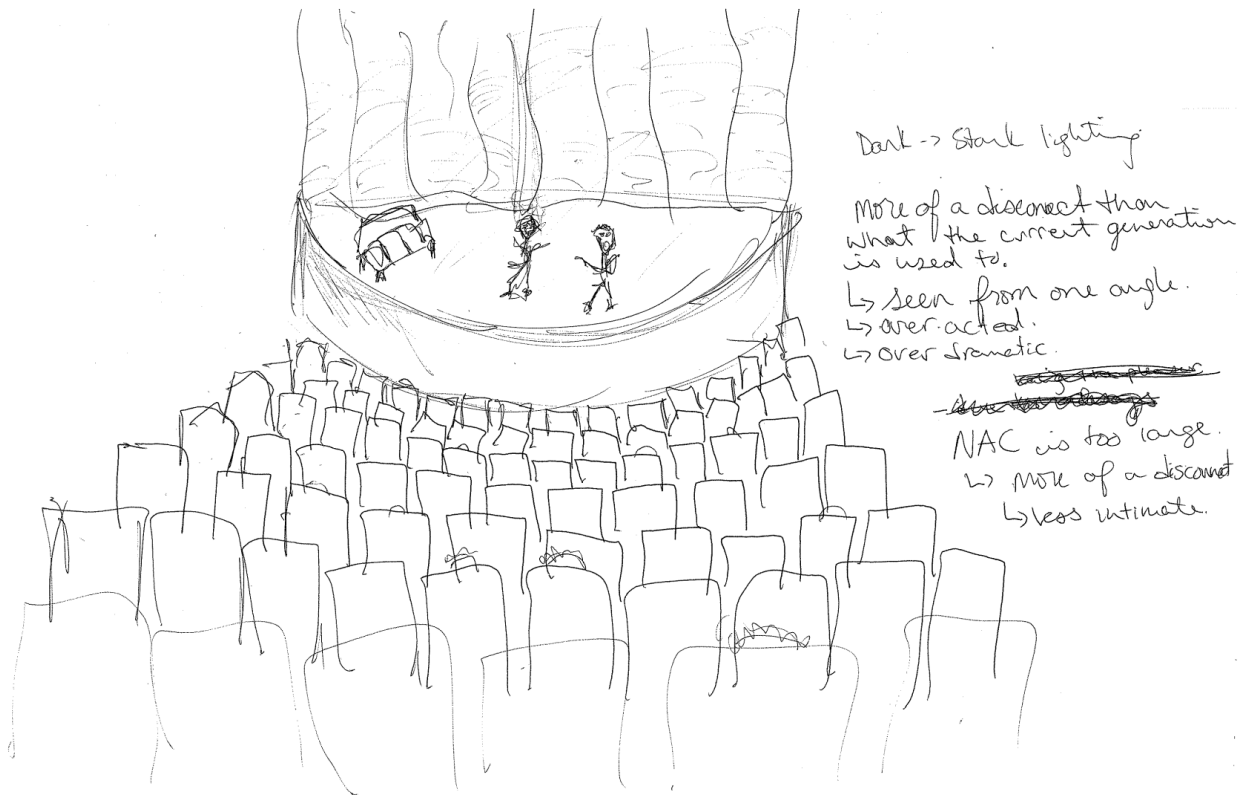


Figure 3

The seats are empty, but for of a couple with the tops of heads visible. Andrew has noted his intended meaning on the side of the page: “Dark—stark lighting. More of a disconnect than what the current generation is used to. Seen from one angle. Over-acted. Over-dramatic. NAC is too large. Less intimate.” His oral comments expand upon the notations, adding what will become a major theme of the discussion that follows: “I do find there’s a certain degree of disconnect when you’re going to the theatre, just because I think our generation is so used to seeing movies from all different angles, seeing, you know, zoom-in and slow-motion, while at the theatre there’s only one angle that you can see it from.”

Chris’s drawing (Figure 4) also includes a stage, set back with huge expanses of seats running down towards it. There are two figures in the seats. The one in the back row indicates a

lack of interest with the word “Bleh...” but then there are arrows pointing down towards the front row and a figure who says “This isn’t half bad!”.

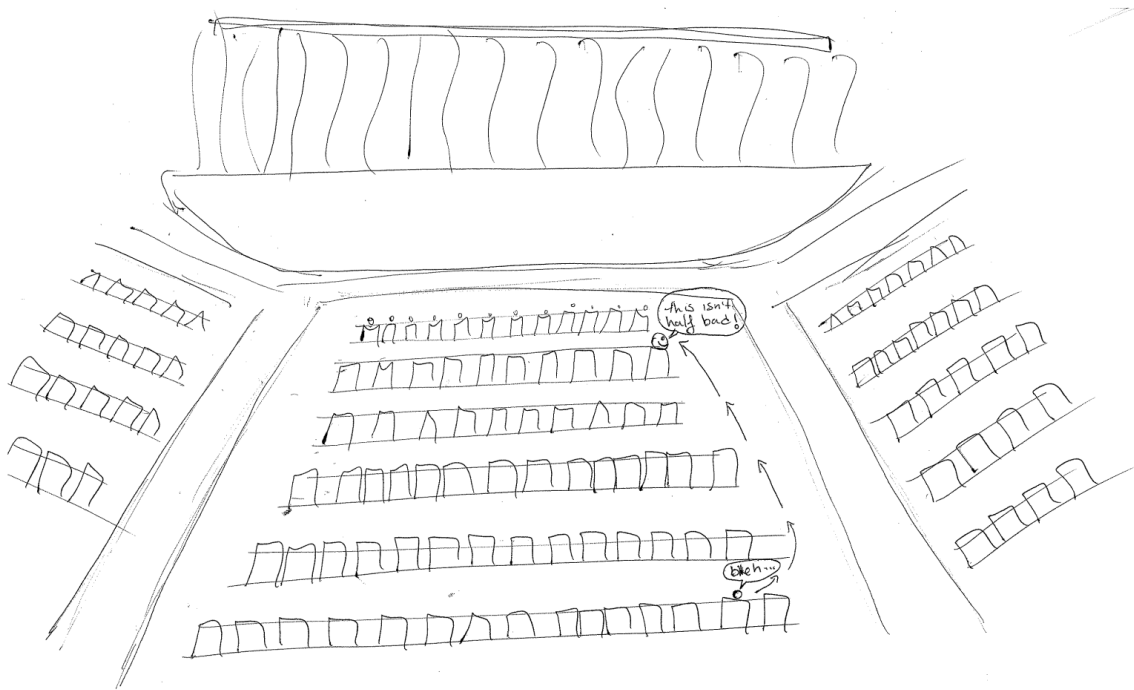


Figure 4

“It’s kind of what I experienced going to the theatre and not expecting too much, and then realizing that it actually was quite good,” he explains. He explains that he was surprised by how much he enjoyed the musical in particular; his expectations had been low, but the experience of seeing a play had struck more of a chord than he was expecting.

The students’ visual narratives and their verbal explorations of them establish a prevalent theme of disillusionment, although there are certainly differences between their attitudes. Ethan has the strongest views; he dismisses the idea of seeing a play in the future. “Even if I liked a play a lot,” he says, “I just wouldn’t want to go see it. I wouldn’t want to pay to go—even if it was free I wouldn’t want to go see it...I think you just want to see something more exciting.” Of

the four, he is the most adamant that theatre does not speak to or appeal to him. He is not sure what exactly causes him to reject theatre, even if he might like the show, and works hard to describe the root of his feelings. Even if the plays are as varied as this season's "they're still all plays and they're still really just like—the word "play" just strikes me as 'more simple.' Something that isn't really a desirable entertainment opportunity." Chris, Andrew and Caitlin are more open to seeing plays in the future, even if they can be derisive about the content of this season's offerings. They are, however, tentative in their openness to it. Going to the theatre, they say, would depend upon the play itself. They would never sign up for a series of plays, but might choose to attend an individual play if it seemed interesting. "I think I'm open to seeing what the play has to offer," says Caitlin, her tentativeness seen in the phrase "I think" and her choice of the word "open," which is neutral. Andrew's comments are similar: "I don't mind if somebody invites me," he says. "From experience I usually find that I'm not that happy with the outcome, but I'm open to seeing what it has to offer." The tone of guarded hesitation suggests that the door for live theatre is open, but barely.

Conversation with peers on the topic of live theatre is limited, although they did discuss at length the fiasco that was *Mother Courage*. "The only place I've talked about it is in English class," says Ethan. The idea of talking about theatre with other adolescents strikes them as strange. "Like, I don't think if you walked up to someone who's outside class and you said, 'Hey, do you want to hear about this play I saw last night?,' they would just kind of stare at you. Probably not respond," says Chris. Ethan draws one of several parallels between theatre and film: "You *would* say, 'Hey, I saw *Iron Man* the other night' 'Oh, I want to see that really badly.'" Film is part of the conversational lexicon of teens, a vital element of their culture; theatre is not. The students point out that plays are on for a limited time, that most people don't

know what's playing, and they laugh at the notion of a "theatreclock.com" or "theatre watch". The idea of theatre being part of the cultural mainstream strikes them as hilarious.

The students are "not in the habit of going to plays" and tend to see live literary theatre as an activity restricted to older people, or to school trips, or to an annual ritual with grandparents. Andrew, for example, spoke with his grandmother about the plays because she was the one person he knows who went to see them. Chris makes the point that his parents' generation may have been more likely to see plays when they were younger but "it seems a lot of things parents suggest their kids do either don't apply or they haven't really adapted themselves to what's more relevant today ... especially when it come to plays." Ethan takes the point further. "'To experience what the pioneers when through, go to Upper Canada Village!,'" he intones with mock seriousness. "To experience what your grandparents did for entertainment, go see a play!" Caitlin speaks up in defence of musical but not literary theatre. She enjoys the authenticity of the experience: "That's really who they are and especially in musicals it's like, 'Oh, that's really their voice.' I enjoy that," and believes that "theatre is still relevant because it's something that everyone should experience." She is unable to articulate why. Overall, then, literary theatre appears to the teens as a niche activity, confined to the cultural habits of older people, far removed from the world they inhabit. "I think it depends on the play," says Andrew, still seeking to maintain an open mind, "but I think it's becoming less and less relevant."

### **The Theatrical Space**

The students' responses to the theatrical space are mixed, ranging from dismissive and even mocking to quiet enchantment. Chris opens this portion of the interview by saying that when he enters the theatre lobby he feels "important." The group agrees that the feeling is quite different from that of a movie theatre. Ethan adds, "It feels posh. More expensive. At the same

time, a little big—personally, I don't really like it very much ... it's just so overrated." Caitlin says that "it's very elegant. I actually really like it" and later she mentions how much she enjoys dressing up, in part because it reminds her of childhood excursions to the theatre with family. The boys acknowledge the "nicer vibe" of the NAC, but are sceptical of its value or purpose. Ethan questions why a "giant chandelier" is needed, why people are "dressed in suits," why there is live music, food and brochures. "You have a sort of hyped-up area and then you go into this dark room and sit in it and just watch." Chris is aware of the special characteristics of the theatre space, and is able to ascribe the feel to the space itself rather than the event: "I went to the NAC to watch a Warren Miller movie, which was this skiing showcase thing. Even though when you walk in there's a bunch of ski bums in hats and snow pants, it still feels kind of important." Both are aware that the feeling inspired by the NAC is due to the particularities of its space and the culture it engenders. I ask what about the space signals that it is different or special. Caitlin mentions the location near Parliament; Chris points to the scale of the place and the "huge iron doors at the back"; Ethan has read in US publications that Canada values the arts and "pours a lot of money into them," which he feels must be reflected by the NAC's prime location in the middle of the capital. The "red carpet" is mentioned by Chris, his image of celebrities on the red carpet cultivated by TV and movies: "You say, 'Oh, all the important people do this, so therefore I feel important because I'm on the same-coloured carpet'. So you're conditioned by what you've seen in the movies." The sense that the students' experience of live theatre is influenced by their immersion in film is repeated at other points in the conversation, and becomes a dominant motif.

While Caitlin sees value in what she perceives as the liveness of theatre, comparisons between film and theatre repeat throughout the discussion. Andrew sees his preference for film

as a “generational thing.” He says that he and his peers were brought up watching movies, and that film is best because of its heightened realism: “My imagination takes over more when it’s a film because you can go anywhere. With a play you’re on the stage and, yes, there’s backgrounds and backdrops, but I just find that the realness goes down.” Chris draws the distinction between the two as plays “tell you a story,” whereas “movies are trying to bring you into the story.” Ethan refers to the millions of dollars spent on films, the various locations, the advanced technology, whereas “a play is just on a stage in a building.” The students point out that, if they are to see a play, it has to be something “new, fresh, and exciting.” A classic like *A Christmas Carol*, “Shakespeare or something old” is not enough. Again, film appears to define their expectations of theatre. “I don’t like having to go to a play just so I can sit there and put effort into something,” Ethan says. “I like to be entertained, either laugh or be stunned.” The transition from people watching plays to watching movies makes perfect sense to the students, and is seen as part of a general technological progression. Plays are seen as “more simple,” whereas in film “they can make blue aliens on the screen and we can be amazed by the 3D-ness of what’s going on. You have these giant wars going on in these weird planets that are really amazing.” In the future, they surmise, entertainment might involve going to the moon and “jumping around in low gravity—who knows?” But with the excitement afforded by film, theatre fails to garner their attention. Above all, film is more “realistic,” to the point that it not only represents their world but defines it for them as well. They may never see someone’s “head blowing up,” or someone losing a hand like in *Band of Brothers*, “but things that you’ll never see you just accept as real. That’s the way somebody else told you it is,” says Chris. Ethan agrees: “And that makes it pretty exciting. In a play, everything that they’ve done, you’ve already seen.”

The ability of film to surpass or even define reality, in shiny, 3-D, CGI-generated wonder, sets their standard for excellence, one that theatre, with its demands on the imagination, cannot.

### **Technology and Theatre**

The inability of theatre to replicate the verisimilitude of film is one aspect of how technology shapes the students' experience of plays. Used to seeing computer-generated special effects, they find it difficult to watch plays on their own terms and they laugh at the idea of theatrical conceits. Why would anyone be captivated by fake blood and stage fights? The idea that film is itself "fake" is not mentioned as though the film illusion is complete. What happens on the big screen is seen as real. While technology in film complicates the ways in which the students experience live theatre, technology in their own lives is another factor.

The ease with which technological diversions are available is a major impediment to stepping out the door to go the theatre. A computer is seen as providing multiple opportunities for entertainment that are immediate and, for the most part, free. "You're connected to just about everybody you know if they have Facebook," says Ethan. "With a play, you have to actually go somewhere." The pleasures of the web are right at hand, and they can be enjoyed for a short time, whereas "theatre, it's like a block of time, and you have to block off your whole evening." For busy, academically-oriented kids with lessons and activities outside of an already full school day, this is an important consideration. The ready availability of movies on the Internet is another factor: "You're sitting on your couch and you say, 'Well, I want to watch a movie.' You just flip open your laptop and you click it. It's instantly there." They can also hit pause, or stop it if they don't like it – "Unlike that guy in *Mother Courage*, the guy who yelled, 'Speak up!' They laugh at the memory of the heckler who attempted to assert some control over the sagging preview show and was escorted out by the Artistic Director. The idea that an audience member

might try to exert some control over a performance is seen as ridiculous; the idea that they might not have total control over their free time on the web is equally so. Ethan sketches out a comparison of a night at the NAC versus a typical evening with a laptop: “You’re all dressed up and going to the NAC and you stop off at the café to get a coffee and a biscuit. And then you go to the play.” He stops suddenly, his definitive tone of voice suggesting the end of something rather than the beginning. “Instead, you can go to the café and sit there on your laptop with the wireless Internet for an hour and a half, researching what you had to do in school and then chatting with friends ... All we like to do is surf the Internet and watch movies on the Internet.”

While part of the students’ mindset is that “we have something else we can do ... so many other possibilities,” the students are also aware that their Internet lives may have changed the way they experience a play “attention-span wise.” “Yeah,” says Andrew, “we’re so used to everything being so fast-paced.” Caitlin agrees: “Some plays are slower and I think that’s why most of us didn’t enjoy the slower plays. Like *A Christmas Carol* I found not as exciting as *The Drowsy Chaperone*. I think we’re used to really fast-paced and always being able to change if we find it boring.” The technological revolution consumes even itself, older productions seen as antiquated in light of the latest special effects. Even the latest productions, however, are often insufficient to command the full attention of their young viewers. Andrew plays bubble shooter in one window while watching a movie in another. Chris watches episodes of *Two and a Half Men* while Skyping. Ethan has “tons of windows, like 15 tabs in Firefox. Different chats and Skype going on.” Even when a textbook is at hand, the students agree that they would “feel compelled to look it up on Wikipedia anyway.” They find it “faster and easier” or “well, sometimes ... not even faster because the page is already there, but you’ll flip it open anyway.” The constant activity draws Ethan back to the challenges of sitting in a theatre watching a play:

If you have to sit at a play or watch the play, you're really concentrating, or you should be concentrating, focused on what's going on in the play and watching and analyzing what's going on, trying to think about just the play. But I think we've—like, if I was to generalize on us, we've pretty much lost a lot of appreciation for that since we have this—like watching a movie at the same time as doing all this stuff and we lose most of the concentration we have on the movie and spread it out. That's why, I guess, we don't—that could be why we don't like plays much any more. Or appreciate them. Or want to go see them. Because I know I personally, like I said earlier, I don't really like want to go see a play right now. I won't tonight. I won't tomorrow night.

The need for the stimulation provided by technology may explain why the students used their iPhones or other devices throughout the production. Not using a PDA, particularly when waiting for the show to be begin, seems ludicrous. “What else are you going to do?” asks Ethan. “Stare at the ceiling?” During particularly poor performances, such as *Mother Courage*, Ethan says “I just zoned out and started to—I hate to say it, but I was like texting with two people the whole time.” How many people were using PDAs? “I think the majority at one point or another.”

## Discussion

The findings of this study suggest a profound challenge to theatre and language arts educators, theatre producers, and those who wish to see a thriving literary theatre scene in Canada. Chris, Andrew, Ethan and Caitlin should be natural theatre-goers. They have the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), education, family income (Upright, 2004) and school support to suggest that they might or even should be receptive to literary theatre. They have been exposed to four varied plays at a prestigious and often-acclaimed performing arts centre, but they are decidedly ambivalent. Caitlin is a committed musical lover, Chris indicates that he has surprised himself by how much he enjoyed some of the program, Andrew will go to the theatre, most likely if he is given a ticket or wants to spend time with his grandmother, and Ethan is adamant that literary theatre will play no part in his future. Their reviews of the four plays in the series slant toward the negative, and they are vocal in outlining how much more accessible, immediate, and enjoyable Internet culture is to them while being aware that their experience of literary theatre has most likely been effected by the frenetic pace of laptop multi-tasking and hyperlinking as well as the increased realism of movies. If they are to attend plays, it will on an individual basis, like downloading individual tracks. Buying a season ticket is as incongruous an idea as downloading an entire album.

Part of the reason for the students' apathy toward literary theatre is that they have difficulty deciphering the codes that constitute a live performance. The Ghost of Christmas Present in *A Christmas Carol* was attired in a fabulously colourful costume festooned with leaves and fruit. I thought it worked marvellously in contrast to the 19<sup>th</sup> century funereal black costumes of the other characters. But Chris is thrown by the mixture of 19<sup>th</sup> century and modern, and comments:

I didn't understand why they had—the Ghost of Christmas Present was a big, huge guy in a big, leafy, green suit. It looked like he had just walked out of the jungle or something and nobody really understood where that came from. There's no context to it whatsoever. He just comes in and starts yelling. So it kind of throws you off what the play is about.

To a boy raised on realism, the theatricality of the costume seems random, funny, even threatening. Similarly, the darkness of the play—the evocative use of light and shadow, to me, representing the darkness of Dickens' vision—was to Caitlin “kind of sleepy just because it was so black.” The opening of *The Comedy of Errors* featured some creatively-inspired movement of chairs, to me an arresting directorial choice that pointed towards Hinton's interpretation of the play. Andrew, “was just confused. Like why are you bringing out all these chairs and putting them back? It just didn't get me in the right mood to watch the rest of the play.” The Brechtian theatrical techniques were misunderstood. A TV rolled onto the stage “completely throws you off.” When the performers stood on a row of pianos, “they stepped on the keys ... all you hear is ‘clink, clink, clink.’ It kind of threw everybody off.” To Ethan the mixture of war scenes and music “makes no sense”. For Andrew, “like sure, the woman, you know, she's courageous and she brings people in, whatever. But it was just—no-one knew, I don't know, just the references didn't catch.” The lack of understanding is similar to the confusion surrounding the NAC architecture and the codes of behaviour that shape how audience members dress and act. If the term “metaphor” is understood as a literary device used to assist in experiencing one thing in terms of another (through comparison), then the student responses suggest that the “fuzziness” of metaphor is not generally grasped, and with that many of the unique behaviours associated with theatre. A metaphorical representation of “plenty” is just a guy in a weird green suit.

Bennett (1990) describes how when a ticket for a play is purchased an implicit social contract is established between the audience member and the theatre: the spectator will be

“passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical performance, but ... active in their decoding of the sign systems made available” (p. 179). Being active in decoding the signs, however, relies upon an understanding of how theatre functions. And even that cannot be depended upon entirely: “Theatre audiences bring to any performance a horizon of cultural and ideological expectations. That horizon of expectation is never fixed and is always tested by, among other things, the range of theatre available, the play, and the particular production” (p. 107) Understanding a play is a complex business; “audiences are at best ‘fascinated’ with performances that do not fall into their cultural experience, performances that resist or deny the usual channels of decoding” (p. 103). Aspects of the theatre that ICT “outsiders” might take for granted, can seem alien to the “digital insiders” more accustomed to a flat world than a hierarchical one of metaphor and traditions. The challenge for educators is to provide students with the means to decode productions before they set foot in the lobby. One means of doing that may be through metaphor work that explores the meaning of the term and how and to what end it is employed on the stage. This work falls within the tradition of teachers working to facilitate student understanding of unfamiliar texts by “teaching children directly about alternative genres and literary conventions” (Robertson & Karagiozis, 2004, p. 415). The children in the Robertson and Karagiozis study of how Greek-as-a-second-language-learners approach traditional Greek fairy tales are, like my own, “active, audible receptors; passionate and artists and wordsmiths—sometimes bored but most often excited by their own scathing or idealized pronouncements” (p. 415). They are seen to require direct instruction on symbols, similar to my own students’ need to explore metaphor. Robertson’s essay on how educators might approach teaching an event such as the Holodomor, or Ukraine Famine (Robertson J. , 1998), similarly points to ways in which direct instruction around literary devices—in this case figurative language and the relationship

between language and power—can be used to allow students to access and understand unfamiliar and perhaps challenging or even threatening subjects.

But perhaps none of this really matters. Perhaps literary theatre is inherently elitist, its high cultures associations underpinned by a history of favouring the work of the white, male, Western-European hegemony. Perhaps the arts have always reflected the state of technology—from the Ancient Greek theatre, to Impressionist painters, to the advent of film and now the rapid development of multi-media spaces. Perhaps the live experience is already shaped and controlled by technology anyway (Auslander, 1999). Perhaps literary theatre should wither, replaced by new forms of theatre such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Such Tweet Sorrow*, a Twitter-based production of *Romeo and Juliet* (Reporter, 2010), interactive theatre (Logan, 2010; Zellner, 2009), or Second Life avatar-performances (Oddey & White, 2009). Perhaps to make an argument in favour of live, literary theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is inherently old-fashioned, elitist, and reactionary. Or perhaps not. Philip Pullman (2004) makes the following argument as a counterpoint to the rise of the pixel:

The experience of being in the audience when a play or an opera is being performed is not simply passive. It's not like watching TV; it's not even like going to the cinema. Everyone in that big space is alive, and everyone is focussed on one central activity. And everyone contributes. The actors and singers and musicians contribute their performance; the audience contributes their attention, their silence, their laughter, their applause, their respect.

And they contribute their imagination, too. The theatre can't do what cinema does, and make everything seem to happen literally. There are no pixels on stage; what happens is caused by physical bodies moving about in real space, not by computer-generated imagery on a screen.

So it has limitations ... but the limitations leave room for the audience to fill in the gaps. We pretend these things are real, so the story can happen. The very limitations of theatre allow the audience to share in the acting. In fact, they require the audience to pretend. It won't work if they don't.

When we're adults, and if we're lucky enough to have developed the habit, we can find our own way to plays and operas, but children can't do it on their own. They need to be helped into the experience by people who've been there before, and who can excite their curiosity.

Whatever one may believe about literary theatre and the role it should play in the nation's cultural life, for it to continue within a culture dominated by ICT-mediated experiences, the role of educators is of critical importance.

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