

SITTING IN THE DARK:
ETHNOGRAPHY OF PATRONS OF PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

by
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ABSTRACT

There has been very little study on the experience of live theatre audience members. In order to better understand the audience experience in contemporary western theatre, ethnography was conducted with patrons of professional theatre in the Berkshires, MA. During five weeks in the field, dedicated theatre-goers were interviewed and theatre performances were attended as a participant-observer, following standard iterative-inductive ethnographic methodology, while attempting to answer the question “What does attending theatre mean to audience members?” It was identified that there are many different models that can be applied to understand aspects of the meaning of the audience experience. The models include escapism, “edutainment,” social experience, communal experience, ritual significance, social class identification, social critique, and religious significance. It is argued that, while each of these models illuminates a subset of the meaning of theatre attendance, none of them provide a holistic understanding by themselves. Instead, it was determined that a perspective which synthesizes these meanings is most appropriate. Cross-cultural comparisons to *ludruk* in Java and the *Ramlila* in India are included in the analysis. The theatre event is a structure which allows its audience members to enter the psychological state of *flow*, in which narratives are dissected and reassembled into meanings more rapidly. The central meaning of attending theatre in the Berkshires, an area with a substantial retired population, is that it affirms one’s active participation in the world through this highly involved meaning-making process in response to a wide variety of stories.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Consider for a moment a performance of a play. It is a seemingly normal social event of which we frequently hear examples. It may be a school play or a Broadway production; either portrayed in fiction, recounted from a friend, or experienced oneself. We hear of it frequently enough that whenever we attend a play we automatically know what is expected of us. One files into the audience, finds one's seat, and proceeds to listen attentively for the duration of the performance. One applauds sometimes, but sometimes not. When the crowd of strangers that assembles in an auditorium sees the lights above start to dim and hear the doors through which they entered close – trapping them in this soon-to-be dark room – they do not panic. When all that remains lighted is a raised platform in front of their seats, the crowd gives its attention without question. When an unfamiliar group of people walk upon the stage and starts speaking, the audience listens. And no one finds it peculiar that these strangers are all sitting facing the same direction, practically ignoring each other.

Even briefly considering the structure of a theatre performance from an outside perspective, it can seem downright strange. It is a group of strangers sitting in silence, in a dark room, for hours at a time, meanwhile another totally separate group of people exhibits behavior which would normally be called insane. Yet we accept the experience without question. What's perhaps even odder than just considering the structure of a live performance is that within this highly manufactured environment, things happen that are incredibly meaningful to those involved. I myself have sought

out these meaningful experiences by performing. I acted in plays in high school, have continued to do so in college, and I intend to develop this interest into a professional acting career.

I remember one particularly interesting moment from a performance in my senior year of high school. I was performing in a play called *Boys Next Door*. The character I played, Barry, is a schizophrenic man living in a supported apartment for mentally challenged adult men. In one scene nearing the climax of the play, his abusive father – a trigger for his delusions – has just come to visit him for the first time in years, and Barry is desperate to please him. But in a near-catatonic state at the impending arrival of his father whom he both loves and fears, all that he has been able to do was make a grade-school-quality cardboard sign with ‘Welcome Dad’ scrawled in crayon and tape it up to the bathroom door. The father, on his way to the ‘pisser’ (he’s not a gentle man), takes the flimsy piece of cardboard off the door and discards it onto the floor, leaving the room. Barry, having watched his father’s callous dismissal, slowly turns back toward the audience and, facing them, they see him draw another step into himself, and into his illness.

At this moment during one particular performance, I heard something remarkable: the audience audibly sighed. It was a distinct sound that seemed to express unity among the people who were right in front of me watching this show. It seemed that all of these strangers had shared, for a moment, the same empathy, the same sorrow for this character who was just trying to impress his father. Be it at the dramatic irony of the father’s rejection of his son’s small plea for approval, or the identification of humanity in mental illness, I don’t know precisely why, but there

was, as I said, a fleeting moment of unity where it felt like there was a very special energy in the air, far beyond that of daily life.

I have had a few prized moments such as this one in my experience acting; it is these moments that drive me to pursue it. But they also mystify me. They mystify me because I have felt that I don't understand what is really happening. What is that special feeling that seems to condense for a fleeting moment? How does theatre create those moments? By far the most mystifying, *why do the people who are watching come?* I could explain part of my own interest in attending theatre as a natural result of my passion for creating it, but then most of the people who go see plays are not involved in creating them. For the people who choose to be just audience members, why do they come? What drives them? What satisfies them?

These questions don't just apply to our western theatre practices. The same queries are relevant anywhere there is a similar audience/performers distinction. Many manifestations of theatre have developed cross-culturally and trans-historically in some form or another, each with a different philosophy and aesthetic. How do all of those other traditions independently develop these strange structures? What is shared about theatre around the world?

This research began as an attempt to answer the question "Why do people attend theatre?" To answer this question I chose to conduct ethnography of dedicated patrons of professional theatre, which is what you are currently reading. However, while in the process of attempting to organize this thesis around that exact question, I have since abandoned it as the central question of this project. Before even starting to think, it assumes a functionalist answer by implying that theatre does something to its attendees and that people attend theatre as a means to an end. Instead, I have found

that attending theatre is not so simple, and I will argue that no functionalist analysis adequately encompasses all the various meanings that an audience member makes out of his or her experience in the theatre. I have found a functionalist analysis to be reductive instead of informative for the case of contemporary western theatre practices, so instead of asking “Why do people attend theatre?” I have instead asked “What does attending theatre *mean* for an audience?” By “meaning” I mean also the significance, or the value of attending theatre, both to the individual and to the collective audience. The difference is subtle, yes, but it does provide a less biased analytical framework. Instead of looking for outcomes, my goal is to examine meanings, the values that audience members derive from the experience of seeing theatre. I have found that the latter question makes it much easier to arrive at a holistic understanding of theatre going. More than that, the shape of the former question completely mismatches the shape of the answer: it imposes a pragmatic intention onto the theatre event which is not its fundamental quality. The purpose of the construct of theatre is not just to entertain, or to educate, or to critique society. There is no unifying intention for theatre-makers; ask any subset and you will find significant variation. In my experience there is some shared value for fostering humanistic empathy, but this sentiment is far from a unifying intended outcome of the construct of theatre. Despite this mismatch, most existing scholarly theories of theatre-going are too functional, as will be discussed later. My main argument of this thesis is that a functionalist analysis is inappropriate for understanding theatre goes of the contemporary world. Instead, an analysis that synthesizes multiple models of meaning-making provides a fuller understanding.

I have already acknowledged that my main interest in audiences comes from my interest in being a theatre-maker. I believe that successful theatre listens intently to its audience, and without understanding what people are doing there, I don't feel like I can fully listen. However I am equally excited about this project as a student of anthropology. Theatre performances are incredibly particular social events in which two distinct social groups come together and mediate their interaction through an elaborate game of pretend. It is dense in meaning both from the content of the performance¹ and from the structure of the event, so it is a fruitful topic of anthropological study. Most of the anthropological work on theatre has been focused on the content of performances: the play, the actors, the conventions, but very little has been focused on the wider structure, and in particular the existence of a set-apart audience. The independent development of this convention in cultures worldwide is reason enough to merit anthropological interest. My goal has been to turn the lens away from the performance and onto the audience. Both scholars of anthropology and scholars of theatre studies should be interested in this topic.

In order to investigate the aforementioned questions, I chose to conduct ethnography of patrons of professional theatre at the Berkshire Theatre Group (BTG). BTG is a professional theatre company in Stockbridge, MA which caters to the arts-saturated reputation of the Berkshires in western Massachusetts. I spent six weeks in the summer of 2013 interviewing patrons and seeing plays for the purpose of gathering ethnographic data.

¹ Anthropological analysis of cultural meanings revealed through storytelling has been very successful: see Baumann (1986), an ethnography of Texas folk tales, and many others.

In the course of this paper I will move from discussing the big questions, such as what an audience is and why theatre exists while highlighting several functionalist answers to these questions, to then refining my questions and applying them to this particular case study. It will be demonstrated that none of these paradigms completely encompass what it means to attend professional theatre in the Berkshires to the people that do so (and perhaps in the modernized western world in general). Attending theatre is a complex experience which reflects a myriad of personal, social, and cultural meanings and it cannot be completely understood in any single functionalist model. Moving from large questions to small in this way makes it clearer that the easy functional answers applied on the large scale don't necessarily provide insight into individualized experiences.

After outlining my methodology and the limitations of previous literature, I will first explore the contemporary western theatre experience in general, as a ritual (Chapter 2) and as a vehicle for expressing social power (Chapter 3). I will then discuss two cross-cultural examples as opportunities to see what audiences are in other contexts, and to develop other functionalist models that will be considered (Chapter 4). Finally, I will consider each of these models in the context of the Berkshires while presenting my own ethnographic data (Chapter 5). Due to the length of my stay in the Berkshires and the scope of a senior thesis, this project is ultimately a case study. It is an investigation of audience-ship in a particular place at a particular time.

The purpose of this thesis is, as I said, to investigate what attending theatre means to audience members by talking to a group of people who themselves attend theatre (a group I felt like I didn't understand). They are, metaphorically and literally,

in the dark to me. It is my hope that this project will shed some light on the experiences of those people who are sitting in the dark.

Existing Literature

There has been relatively little formal study into the meaning of theatre attendance. What work has been done is primarily for the purpose of theatre marketing and audience services. The existing literature on audiences can be divided into two primary focuses: motivations to attend (what the audience thinks/wants beforehand) and impacts/benefits of the performance event (what the audience is left with afterward). Thus, a functionalist perspective pervades the literature. Studies have sought to find a social purpose for theatre, a tangible outcome that can be used to demonstrate to potential investors the value of theatre. In reference to my argument that such functionalist analyses are inappropriate, I do not mean to undermine the intention of this previous work. Demonstrating the benefit of theatre to society is very important, especially when it may be the difference between getting funding or not. Rather, I mean to say that any one outcome-based explanatory theory explains only one part of the full meaning of the theatre event to its audience. In this section I intend to present the literature that has been written on theatre audiences to later demonstrate that each of them describes only a piece of the audience experience.

Due to the aforementioned interest in justifying the intrinsic value of theatre to arts policy makers and financial donors, most research has focused on demonstrating the beneficial outcomes – described as intrinsic and instrumental impacts – of the performance event (McCarthy et al., 2004; Brown & Novak, 2007; Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; NEF, 2010; Radbourne et. al 2013; Walmsey 2013). The potential impact of live performance is seen as multi-dimensional. McCarthy et al. divides the

benefits of live performance into two categories: instrumental benefits, which include health, educational, economic and social benefits; and intrinsic benefits which include captivation, pleasure, increased empathy, and enhanced social understanding (2004). Most of the recent literature of audience studies discusses intrinsic impacts of performance. Unless otherwise stated, I will be discussing impacts as a whole, including both of these categories, although the distinction is useful for identifying the different types of benefits that have been studied. Most studies evaluate some variation of the following four types of impacts: captivation, intellectual stimulation (“edutainment”), emotional response (including catharsis²), and collective experience (or social bonding). These categories are treated as potential kinds of outcomes from the performance event. In other words, they are potential functions of the performance: to captivate the audience and allow them to escape daily life, to educate the audience, to make the audience feel something, to create a profound communal experience. Brown & Novak investigate another impact, spiritual value, indicating that another potential function of the performance event can be to provide spiritual meaning (2007). These outcomes, which are usually identified within each study through focus groups, are then quantified through surveys distributed to the audience. These studies, while very useful for market research and supporting theatre as an industry, overlook the rich, personal meanings created by individuals engaged in the experience as well as the complex nuances of how a person is impacted by a

² Catharsis, originating from Aristotle’s dramatic theories, is most generally understood to be the purging of pity and fear through dramatic representation, but has also been interpreted as a process of moral purification. See Walmsley (2013: 75) for a nice summary of the various theoretical understandings of catharsis.

performance. In my interviews, I had an informant describe a very meaningful theatre experience where he said: “I don’t know exactly how it changed me, but it changed me.” The full meaning of the audience experience cannot be understood through checking a box on a survey (especially when those checking the box don’t fully understand it themselves).

Beyond the limitations of quantitative methodology when attempting to understand complex meanings, the study of intrinsic and instrumental impacts of the theatre event is also reductive because it is functionalist and seeks particular outcomes of the theatre event. While, most of these studies do attempt to synthesize multiple potential outcomes into a fuller understanding instead of trying to identify a single one, they are still limited by this exclusively functionalist perspective. They also primarily study the effects on the individual level rather than the societal level.

Other studies investigate motivations to attend theatre, attempting to answer “Why do people attend theatre?” in the most direct way possible (Brown & Ratzkin, 2012; Walmsley, 2011). Brown & Ratzkin (2012) conducted a large-scale quantitative survey-based study of 18 theatres across the country with over 19,000 responses. This study found that the top three reported motivations were “to relax and escape,” “to be emotionally moved,” and “to discover something new.” Walmsley (2011) conducted a qualitative study of theatre-goers at Melbourne Theatre Company and West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2010, utilizing participant-observation and in-depth interviews (published in the *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, the author follows an anthropological methodology although the purpose of the study was for market research).³ He applies

³ Walmsley has two major publications on theatre attendance that are referenced in this paper, one published in 2011, and the other in 2013. His 2011 publication (“Why do people go to the theater: A qualitative study of audience motivation”) focuses on

and extends a model of audience motivations developed from a study on art gallery attendees (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2007). Walmsley's model identifies five drivers of theatre audiences. These drivers are: social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and sensual ("sensual" was his addition from McIntyre; apparently informants from the studies on art gallery attendance did not report any "tingle-down-the-spine moments" like his theatre-attending informants did). In his model, these motivations are treated as ways satisfy various "needs" that audience members have. Walmsley concludes that the key motivating factor for these audience members is the pursuit of emotional experiences and impact. However, this was only the *most* prevalent motivating factor, and others were certainly present in his interviews. He acknowledges that motivation is "a construct determined by a complex combination of individually varying drivers" (2011: 348). Why audience members come to the theatre cannot be reduced to a single desire. Identifying primary motivators can certainly be useful for marketing and development concerns, but the question is fundamentally multifaceted for each individual. In this vein, Walmsley proposes individual mapping of audience members' motivation charts by theatre companies for the most successful advertisement targeting.

Thus, previous research has endeavored to answer the question "Why do people go to the theatre?" from different angles. Some studies investigate the results that keep people coming back, while others investigate how people justify their

the motivations of theatre-goers, while his 2013 publication ("A big part of my life:" A Qualitative study on the impact of theatre") focuses on deeper impacts and meanings of attending theatre. He makes different observations in each article and they both contribute significantly to the discussion of theatre attendance. Both will be referenced separately throughout this paper.

attendance beforehand. The literature is aware that these questions have complex multi-dimensional answers, but remarkably few studies seek a fuller understanding of the experience of an audience member. In a later publication, Walmsley attempts to bridge the gap between “impact” and “meaning” for audience members, reporting the effect theatre has had on audience members in their own words (2013). He asks his informants to describe what their life would be like without theatre, which sparked meaningful reflection on the meaning theatre has in their lives. His study illustrates that “impact” and “meaning” do overlap. Meaning made out of the audience experience can take the form of an impact on one’s life. They are not mutually exclusive theoretical categories, but I have found that pursuing “meaning” instead of “impact” allows for a more holistic understanding of a theatre audience.

None of the literature compares the contemporary western theatre event to cross-cultural examples, as I have attempted to do. I have found that cross-cultural comparisons illuminate certain aspects of the contemporary western theatre event which are not apparent in internal studies.

Methodology

In order to seek a holistic understanding of theatre audience members, I chose to follow standard ethnographic methodology: participant-observation and depth interviews among a group of actual audience members. Instead of hypothesis testing, the iterative-inductive nature of this method was appropriate in this case, allowing unanticipated meanings and themes to arise in interviews.

My field work took place in the Berkshires in Massachusetts, an area with a reputation for “high culture” in the form of a wide variety of professional arts organizations, including music (Tanglewood), dance (Jacob’s Pillow), and theatre. I

chose to focus my study around the audience of the Berkshire Theatre Group, one of the oldest theatre organizations in the area. This region and company were chosen because of prior familiarity which I acquired as a participant in BTG's Acting Apprenticeship program during the summer of 2012. The Berkshires have a substantial reputation as an arts Mecca which draws many tourists and dedicated audience members to engage in the high-quality art in the area. The prevalence of dedicated audience members and reputation of high-quality theatre makes the Berkshire audience a useful case study.

Most informants were acquired through personal recommendations made by the BTG organizational staff (these individuals were part of BTG's most dedicated audience community). Other informants were met while attending shows or were referred by individuals I had previously interviewed. While the Berkshire Theatre Group was chosen out of convenience, the audiences of different companies in the Berkshires tend to overlap significantly, and most of my informants attended performances of many different theatre companies in the area (including Williamstown, Shakespeare & Co., and Barrington Stage just to name a few). While BTG was the organization around which I centered myself, my field work largely reflects the Berkshire theatre audience as a whole as well as BTG's specific audience.

Over the course of six weeks spent living in the Berkshires, I interviewed a total of 15 audience members and attended/observed 16 performances (15 at BTG, one at Berkshire Fringe). I also interviewed two theatre-makers in BTG, the artistic director and the director of one of the productions that season in order to gain some limited insight into the company's understanding of its audience.

All of my audience member informants were more than forty years old, most much older and already retired. There was not a great diversity in my informant pool, but this lack of diversity reflects the composition of the Berkshire audience, which is relatively homogenous both age-wise and ethnically. Rarely were any audience members less than thirty years old observed at a performance.

Informant interviews lasted anywhere from an hour to two hours and were heavily focused on the meaning of theatre to their lives. After asking for a brief description of their daily lives, about 90% of the interview time was then spent discussing theatre or other performance-related topics. These topics ranged from specific experiences they had had to thoughts about theatre's place in society.

The following questions were asked in every interview:

- How often do you attend theatre?
- What does a typical day look like when you are attending a play?
What do you do before a show? After a show?
- Do you often attend a show alone or with another person?
- What factors do you think influence your theatre-going practices?
- What do you like about attending theatre?
- Why do you think people don't attend theatre?
- Do you have an ideal audience? Would you prefer to watch a play alone if you could?
- How would you describe the experience of being in the audience?
What happens during a performance?
- Do you have any particularly impactful memories of a performance you have seen?

While they were originally designed to explore the original question of why my informants attend theatre, these questions ended up serving as a jumping-off point for informants to discuss the meanings they make out of their theatre experiences. I would usually ask a single question that would inspire my informants to talk for quite a while (with the assistance of some probes and follow ups to acquire the necessary depth) , branching off into stories and other topics they wanted to discuss. The most informative interview data came not from direct answers to these questions, but from anecdotes and stories that came to light well into the depth of the conversation. While theatre is a very specific topic to discuss in extensive interviews, my informants could talk for hours about this part of their lives (which is a testament to its significance). In addition to these questions, I asked informants what drew them to see specific productions that would come up in conversation.

All interviews were audio recorded with informant consent to be revisited later alongside transcription notes that were taken by hand. Interviews were analyzed through interpretive analysis to come to an understanding of the meanings relating to being audience members and the audience experience in general for this case study of the Berkshires.

Social Identity in the Theater: Theatre-Makers and Theatre-Consumers

The group of people who I spent the summer talking with is structurally distant from the group of people with whom I identify.

A theatre performance is a social circumstance in which two self-defining groups interact with each other: *theatre-makers* and *theatre-consumers*. Theatre-makers are those responsible for creating the performance side of the theatre event. This category includes actors, directors, stage managers, designers, and anyone else

who contributes to developing a performance with the intention of presenting it to an audience. In the context of my field work these individuals are usually theatre professionals who are unionized or want to be unionized (in other theatre traditions, I propose that theatre-makers would include anyone who has been identified by their society to be “good” at creating performances and is has chosen to somehow develop and practice that specialized skill; theatre-consumers may identify themselves as such because they perceive themselves to be “bad” at theatre-making, or simply are not interested in doing so). Theatre-consumers, inversely, are those individuals responsible for creating the spectator side of the theatre event. This group is the intended audience for the theatre-maker’s product. They could be members of the community surrounding theatre companies. I am defining these terms because this ethnography is focused on theatre-consumers.

It is important to note that within this distinction, placement during the theatre event is not the defining characteristic. That is, theatre-makers can still be theatre-makers *in the audience*. They have a particular lens through which they view a performance which theatre-consumers do not (even connoisseurs, who may be critical observers, but do not have the experience of creating theatre themselves). Likewise, theatre-consumers can still be theatre-consumers on the stage.

Instead of physical location (on stage or in the audience), the quality which fundamentally distinguishes theatre-makers and theatre-consumers lies is their divergent experiences of being in the audience of a theatre event. Theatre-makers in the audience have a fundamentally different experience than theatre-consumers. It has been documented for classical music that playing experience affects the way audiences listen to concerts (Pitts 2013). The same can be said for theatre-makers. Theatre-

makers may be evaluating the technical quality of the performance, have a personal relationship to one of the theatre-makers on stage, or experience a nagging desire to be the one performing the material they are watching (anecdotal evidence from actors, directors, designers, etc. will likely demonstrate this point). These behaviors sometimes remove theatre-makers from the fundamental experience of being an audience member. True theatre-consumers, as I define them, do not experience these distractions in the audience. Ultimately, theatre-consumers are those individuals who are satisfied being audience members, while theatre-makers are those who seek further fulfillment in the theatre event. It is important to remember that the term “theatre-maker” does not necessarily refer to a person on stage. Similarly, theatre-consumers have a different experience on stage than theatre-makers.

I make this distinction because I find it important recognize that these two groups are structurally distinct. It is clear to see how the symbolic elements of the theatre event create two isolated groups – the audience members in the darkened house and the performers on the lit stage. However, in professional theatre these symbolically created divisions extend beyond the theater. The majority of theatre-consumers rarely interact with professional theatre-makers. Before shows, actors and staff members either arrive before the majority of audience members or have separate entrances to the space (ex. a stage door). The only time audiences do interact directly with theatre-makers in the theater is during talkbacks following performances, and even then the groups are symbolically demarcated by where they sit (actors onstage, audience in the house). Thus, there is little intermingling between audience members and theatre-makers at the theatre event itself. Even outside the event, connections between theatre-makers and audience members are rare, and when they do occur, they

are usually infrequent or relatively shallow. There was only one informant who had consistent contact with some of the actors who were regulars in BTG's productions. After having been subscribing for several years, she began writing letters to some of the actors showing appreciation for the work they do. She would "make herself known" in this way. And though she would occasionally make arrangements to see these actors in shows in other places and meet up with them for a drink or a conversation, she recognizes that she remains fundamentally apart from them: "I've come to realize over the years that I'm not in their inner circle of family and friends, I'm only in their inner circle here in the theater."

One couple I interviewed expressed annoyance at the non-inclusive laughing of some staff members and apprentices in the audience, an annoyance which demonstrates other structural separations between these two groups. Theatre-makers in a company spend a huge amount of time working together in a professional context, during which time personal relationships form. This kind of "inappropriate" laughing at a show between friends immediately identifies the theatre-makers to these audience members, but it is more generally expressive of the personal relationships that result from the structure of a time-intensive professional working environment. The resulting network of personal relationships between theatre-makers is not shared with theatre-consumers who are not in those structures, and is another distinguisher between these two groups.

Thus, individuals implicitly identify themselves as theatre-makers or theatre-consumers. While this distinction does help to justify the merit of this ethnography (theatre patrons are, in fact, a distinct culture spot), it more importantly describes the nature of the theatre event as a mediating structure. A theatre performance – a play –

mediates interaction between these two structurally isolated social groups. The interaction is highly regular, as will be illustrated in the following ethnographic description of the process of attending a show. For now, it suffices to observe that theatre-makers and theatre-consumers are structurally distinct groups, affirming that an ethnographic approach to this inquiry is valid, and defining our terms for this write-up.

Chapter 2

THE RITUAL OF THEATRE

Surveying existing literature has given us several outcome-driven models for understanding the significance of theatre-going: to escape, to learn, to feel, to experience community. These models operate and produce meaning on the individual level. These next two chapters will outline two higher-level models (operating on the level of society) for understanding the significance of theatre-going. This chapter will examine the ritual aspects of western theatre and the next will explore the significance of contemporary theatre in maintaining social class.

Ethnographic Description of the Theatre Event

In an interview, the artistic director of BTG described theatre as “human life in front of you carrying out this ritual about the human experience.” “Ritual” is a term that is used regularly by theatre-makers. However “ritual” has many different precise definitions and it must be justified that theatre fits into an appropriate one in order to accurately use the term. Analyzing contemporary western theatre as ritual is one model for understanding why theatre exists and what meaning its audiences make. We will begin with an ethnographic description of what happens during a theatre event, what we will shortly see could be called the theatre ritual.

Alice Reich wrote: “See the familiar as if it were strange.” I find it appropriate to include in this ethnography an ethnographic treatment of the theatre event. This description (while it will be mundane to read for anyone familiar with attending

theatre) will provide a foundation upon which we will determine the ways in which theatre can be considered ritual.

In the following section, I hope to describe the ritual of a theatre experience from the perspective of a first-time audience member. It is my intent that analyzing modern theatre practices as ritual (using a cross-cultural definition of ritual) will provide insight into the nature of this cultural practice, insight which is obscured by its familiarity. In other words, I am attempting an *etic*⁴ description of a ritual within my own culture. Before it is possible to understand the cross-cultural significance of theatre practices worldwide, and the potential similarities and striking differences between them, we must first see indeed how “strange” it is to have over a hundred strangers quietly sitting in the dark.

I will now describe what I intend to be a standard example of the experience of attending a live theatre performance, the standard “ritual of theatre” from the perspective of an audience member. Some of the following details will be particular to BTG’s specific theatres, but they will be acknowledged as such. The details specific to BTG are based on my own experience as a participant-observer augmented with experiences described by informants.

⁴ In anthropological analysis, *etic* refers to the analytical perspective of an outside observer (i.e. the anthropologist), whereas *emic* refers to the perspective of the “native” being considered (i.e. the audience member). An *etic* perspective attempts to be objective and focuses on discrete, observable behavior and analytical explanations, while an *emic* perspective provides individual meanings and understandings individuals have of themselves. An *etic* perspective acknowledges that sometimes individuals are too involved in their own culture to analyze it fully. This argument attempts a synthesis between *etic* and *emic* perspectives, where most appropriate.

Contemporary western theatre performances occur at two times: in the evening and during the afternoon (matinees). Evening performances in BTG's proscenium theatres occur at 8:00pm six days out of the week, and matinee performances at 2:00pm two days out of the week (usually Saturday/Sunday to accommodate patrons with a standard work week). At both times the same sequence of events occur and the performance is expected to be of the same quality. Thus, ideally only the natural environment varies between the performances (in the Berkshire summer, this means mostly the intensity of the mosquito activity). I will continue by describing the sequence of a standard evening performance.

The experience of attending a play begins far before arriving at the theater. The first step in attending a performance is to purchase (or make plans to procure) a ticket. Purchasing a ticket can be done online, over the phone, or by going to the box office (which is in the theater itself) in person. My informants all subscribed to receive the summer season announcement months in advance, so they could plan and coordinate which performances they would go to see when. Planning ahead in this way means that theatre patrons get an opportunity to solidify their participation in the experience far in advance, and indeed are participating months before the actual performances just by planning their attendance. For most patrons, if they purchase over the phone or in person, this is the most interaction they have with someone directly related to the company. Alternatively, individuals can "rush" tickets, buying them at a discounted rate less than an hour before the show. Not everyone necessarily buys their tickets months in advance, but all of my informants did so.

After purchasing a ticket, whether it's half a year early or the day before, some informants reported special preparations to be taken the day of the performance. These

pre-performance events include outfit choice, depending on the reputations of the theater company. Some theatres have an implicit expectation of business casual wear, but one informant told me he loved going to theatre in the Berkshires because “I get to wear sandals and shorts.” This element of preparation is generally de-emphasized in the Berkshires. Other than outfit selection, preparations can include eating a special dinner, or meeting acquaintances. One informant said about the day of attending a play: “I’m making sure I don’t do too much. It’s like getting ready for a date... It’s like I’m having a date with the actors onstage.” The time before the show can consist of non-ordinary practices. Alternatively, some patrons don’t engage in any special practices except for travelling to the theater on an evening when they would otherwise be elsewhere. The theatre is not a normal destination for most patrons, so the travel to get there is inherently non-ordinary. The travel time of my informants ranged from less than ten minutes to over an hour. Patrons may choose to arrive anywhere from half an hour to a few minutes before curtain, however most patrons in the Berkshires arrive in the half hour before the show.

For those that do arrive with time before the show, the audience seating area (the “house”) usually does not open until about twenty minutes before the show begins, so most theaters have an open lobby space for patrons to wait, usually with a concessions stand of some sort. At the Unicorn Theater, a proscenium/thrust space at BTG, there is an outdoor patio where patrons are encouraged to congregate before the show and during intermission. In this patio there is a stand to sell concessions, eight simple wire-mesh black metal tables each with four chairs to sit at, and a shin-height stone wall to demarcate the space. Either in here or under the covered awning in front of the lobby entrance, patrons may wait for other patrons in their group, purchase pre-

show snacks, or chat with other patrons. These lobby areas serve as a sort of preparation zone, a mediating space between the outside world and the performance they will soon be experiencing.

Once the patron has arrived at the theater, picked up/taken out their tickets, and is ready to enter the seating area, the more formalized ritual begins, when the theater-makers are now in direct control of the audience's experience.

The first event in this portion of the experience is entering the house. Entrance to the house is allowed only after an usher has checked the patron's ticket. At BTG, ushers are members of the community that volunteer to work for the evening and, in exchange, are allowed to see the show for free (thus, because most individuals will volunteer for only one performance in a run of a show, the ushering staff is not consistent and a regular patron will likely not know his or her usher). Most volunteers are elderly retirees. After these relatively unofficial sentinels have verified the patron's ticket, they are granted access into the seating space. Simultaneously, an usher hands the patron a program about the performance and accompanying information about BTG's season. Some patrons choose to read this information before or after the performance or not at all, but all patrons are offered one.

The house is normally consistent between shows in these proscenium theaters. These are non-flexible spaces, meaning the layout of the audience seating is always the same and the stage is always in the same place, and so the audience can expect where the boundaries of the imagined play-world are.

It is worth noting that this space is entered only when watching a play – at no other time does a theatre-consumer enter this space, which makes it a special experience. It is not like a personal living room, which can be experienced at any time

of the day under many different circumstances. The audience house is a space with only one circumstance for theatre-consumers: containing the group of individuals experiencing a performance. This space has different expected behaviors than ordinary social spaces.

After having entered the house, patrons are directed to their assigned seats in the audience and will usually wait there until the performance begins, perhaps reading over their program, speaking with an acquaintance next to them, or simply waiting. Walmsley reports that this time immediately before the performance is used by some to actively “zone-in” to the impending performance, citing one informant of his who meditated for several minutes before the show (2003). Moving into the house for many audience members reflects a giving up of the ordinary world at the door, preparing themselves to enter into the world of the play they are about to experience. During this time audience members might chat with the people they came with, but will rarely talk to other people in the audience. In general, audiences I observed do not engage in social experiences except with the people they came with. Audiences do not make long-lasting relationships with other audience members.⁵

The beginning of the performance is signaled by a dimming of the lights in the house, which have been left on while patrons have been finding their seats. Before the play begins, a staff member of the company (for BTG, usually either the artistic director or one of the acting apprentices) will come to the front of the house (in the space between the audience and the stage) and give a curtain speech, outside the world of the play. This curtain speech primarily serves as a reminder of the expected

⁵ This point will be expanded upon and fully discussed in Chapter 5.

behavior in the audience (turning off cell phones, unwrapping candy to avoid distracting noises, information on assisted listening devices) but is also usually used to encourage patrons to attend other productions in the season. These requests are made and added to the list of rules under which the performance will operate. These rules serve to achieve the intended purpose of the theatre event, which will be discussed later.

After the curtain speech, the performance begins. This is the centerpiece of the theatre ritual: the time when the rehearsed play is presented. Usually the lights will be completely darkened for a moment, such that the patrons cannot see anything, including the stage. This momentary darkness serves practically to conceal the setting of any props or actors on the stage, but also operates as a sort of “palette cleanser,” allowing the audience to transition more fully into the imagined world of the play.

During the performance, there will be one or more actors on a lit stage, a space demarcated from the audience by its lights and absence of audience seats. Audience members, sitting in the darkened portion of the room, are expected to remain as quiet as possible during the performance (indicated by the requests to turn off cell phones and unwrap wrappers). Ideally, the only noise in the theatre should be coming from a theatre-maker source (either the actors, speakers, or some other intentional noise-making device). It is generally expected that the only source of action will be on the stage, that there will not be noises or movement in the audience that is not designed by theatre-makers. If the performance is successful, audience members will become fully immersed in the experience, losing track of time and entering into *flow*. TO briefly introduce the concept, *flow* is the experience of losing track of time and being “lost” in

watching the performance (or any activity). I will fully define *flow* and discuss its significance in the next section.

That's what's happening in the audience. It may at first seem difficult to generalize what happens on the stage, given the immense variety of style and genre in western theatre. In its simplest terms, on the stage, theatre-makers (actors) move and speak in rehearsed patterns that go in a predetermined sequence in order to tell a story. This action continues until all the rehearsed material is enacted, and then the performance is complete.

Depending on the show, an intermission may occur halfway or a third of the way through the material. This is a period of time during which the performance ceases and audience members have ten or so minutes to use the restroom and move freely about the theater. This time serves a practical purpose of allowing audience members to attend to physical needs (such as using the restroom), which would otherwise distract them from being invested in the performance. Audiences know a performance has stopped for an intermission instead of having finished because there is no curtain call for an intermission, and likely the story will not have been resolved.

During the intermission, patrons can also return to the lobby area and are usually invited to purchase concessions. For the Unicorn theatre, this is the outdoor patio area. It is now dark, the sun having set, and mosquito candles and torches have been lit along the stone wall to (somewhat futilely) keep the mosquitoes at bay. The patio is lit from an overhead light and is used as a socializing space by patrons during the ten- to fifteen-minute intermission before returning to the second half of the performance.

The final event which completes the theatre event is the curtain call, where the actors step out of their roles and bow for the audience, acknowledging the transformation that has just taken place, and giving the audience an opportunity to see the actor outside of the play. It is important to note that actors are not seen outside of their roles before the show begins. Generally, actors enter the theater from separate entrances or simply arrive early enough that patrons do not see them. Thus, audiences don't see the actors in their ordinary identity until *after* the performance has taken place. This structural isolation of the performers allows the audience to more easily imagine them being the characters they are presenting, allowing audiences to "suspend disbelief" and be immersed in the story (entering into *flow*). As each actor bows, the audience claps for them to show appreciation for the event. Louder clapping is usually an indication of vigorous approval of the performance event, indicating greater levels satisfaction in the audience. This event completes the performance event, and mediates the world of the play by returning audience members to the everyday world before leaving the theater.

After the curtain call is completed, the lights in the house will come back up, and audience members are left to disperse, the social structure which was keeping them together having now dissolved. There are no longer concessions for sale in the lobby area, and patrons tend to leave very quickly. The performance is over, the ritual is complete, and individuals return to their homes and their beds.

With this outline of a standard theatre event complete, I will continue by analyzing the theatre event and asserting that this repeated series of behaviors can indeed be defined as a ritual.

Contemporary Western Theatre as Ritual

In the following analysis, I outline a working definition of ritual in order to demonstrate the ways in which the contemporary western theatre event can be considered a ritual. This evaluation is strictly from the perspective of the audience, as there is already significant scholarship from the perspective of theatre-makers and the ritual of performing theatre. This definition will provide us with a model for understanding the meaning of theatre on the level of society.

In *Forest of Symbols*, anthropologist Victor Turner defines ritual as “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical powers or beings” (1967:19). It is a very classical definition, consistent with a period of anthropological study which focused almost exclusively on foreign small-scale societies which were highly “other-ized” by westerners. Turner’s definition is useful in that it identifies a group of behaviors across cultures that have similar functions, meanings, and internal experiences (that is, the people who engage in these kinds of events feel similar things). However, the criteria of “having reference to beliefs in mystical powers or beings” immediately excludes any behavior not explicitly related to cosmological belief. This definition works within the context of classical ethnography, but from the perspective of contemporary self-reflexive anthropological perspectives, it excludes entire categories of related ritual-like behavior. For instance, if a contemporary wedding were to be conducted without any symbolic reference to God or another “mystical power or being,” it would not be classified as ritual, and yet it would still accomplish all of the very same functions of a ritual of social redefinition.⁶ Contemporary rituals can exist without referencing higher

⁶ Which is also a rite of passage; for this analysis I am taking “ritual” to refer to a wider set of ceremonies which include rites of passage. Other examples are rites of

powers or mystical beings. Of course, without its latter half, Turner's definition would merely be "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine," which only serves to distinguish ritual from habit and does not provide any other useful distinctions.

John Honigmann provides a much more fundamental definition of ritual in *The World of Man*. He defines ritual as "the symbolic expression of the sentiments which are attached to a given situation," (1959:509). This definition includes all major distinguished types of rituals (rites of passage, rites of intensification, rites of deference, etc.) as well as including contemporary behaviors without explicit religious meaning.

Beyond this "key feature of ritual" (the symbolic expression) he elaborates:

Basically a ritual consists of one of a combination of the following components: 1) technical manipulations of the physical environment, including the human body, 2) socially standardized interactions between, or isolation from, people 3) avoidances, 4) material objects which possess symbolic meaning of, at least, strong emotional significance, and 5) collective representations. It is possible to extend this list to include music, dramatization, relatively special forms of speech, and even personality dissociation (trance) as elements of ritual (ibid.:508).

Honigmann's description gives a workable foundation from which contemporary behavior can be included in our cross-cultural understanding of ritual. For this work on contemporary theatre practices, I have found Honigmann's definition

deference, rites of intensification, etc. There are many different definitions of ritual. For example, Merce Eliade uses alternate definitions of ritual and rite of passage in studies of religious history. My intention here is to develop a definition of ritual that is useful for the purpose of understanding the significance of theatre on the social level.

useful and appropriate. He himself includes “dramatization” as a kind of ritual. But there are additional reasons why this definition is useful for this case.

Beyond excluding a significant range of behavior that could be considered ritual, the classical definition of ritual (and classical treatment of ritual in general) errs in another way. It is focused primarily on the external structures and social functions of rituals. Turner’s definition considers “prescribed formal behavior,” an implication that the participants of a ritual are just going through the motions, so to speak, and not acting out of internal desires or emotional significance. Sociologist Emile Durkheim shared this primary focus on external behaviors: “... It may be that in certain particular cases, the chagrin expressed is really felt. But it is more generally the case that there is no connection between the sentiments felt and the gestures made by the actors in the rite” (quoted in Honigmann, *ibid.*: 510).

This perspective does provide useful and relevant insights into social functions which may not be immediately apparent. Consider the following discussion of “life-crisis” ceremonies in which Turner demonstrates that coming of age ceremonies have a wide-ranging social impact beyond the central players in the event, and serve to redefine the relationships between the people attending the ritual and the person(s) participating in the ritual. Turner writes:

These ‘crisis’ ceremonies not only concern the individuals on whom they are centered, but also mark changes in the relationships of all the people connected with them by ties of blood, marriage, cash, political control, and in many other ways. When a Ndembu woman bears her first child, a boy, let us say, she may be presenting her brother, a village headman, with an heir, while husband becomes a father and her mother a grandmother, with all the changes in behavior and status involved in these new relationships (Turner 1967: 7).

It is not difficult to see how these functional insights are still relevant in a contemporary context such as a wedding, even though Turner's definition of ritual does not include them: the bride and groom are being redefined as "off-limits" to potential mates, and each are integrated into the other's family, where they change from "fiancé" to "*brother/sister-in-law*." While classical definitions of ritual emphasize the structure and the social function of those structures, it completely dismisses the significance of the ritual to the actors. A classical definition sees only the changing relationships in a wedding, not the fulfillment of a life-long desire in the newly married couple. It is a somewhat pessimistic assertion that most individuals enact ritual without a strong emotional experience. The classical definition of ritual does not effectively explain why individuals are driven to enact rituals and what happens internally during those rituals.

Building on Honigmann, I find that a more contemporary understanding of ritual is useful for this case. Kutsche rephrases Honigmann's definition as "the symbolic expression of appropriate sentiments" (1998: 51). He also emphasizes the implication that ritual is a form or structure that contains the "appropriate sentiments" Honigmann refers to. This definition includes both the external symbolic structures of ritual and the visceral meaning to individuals engaging in them. For example, a funeral rite is a form that contains and gives culturally-appropriate expression to the sentiments of grief, woe, anger, etc. This definition acknowledges both elements and integrates a structure-oriented and meaning-oriented understanding of ritual. Kutsche uses a metaphor to help describe this definition: it's like saying that ritual is a chalice (the form) which holds wine (the culturally-appropriate sentiments or emotion) (ibid.:

51). This chalice/wine metaphor illustrates how Kutsche's definition synthesizes the two perspectives.⁷

Again, I like this definition because it is broad enough to unify ritual behavior in a variety of contexts while still providing a useful definitive boundary. It distinguishes ritual from habit by looking for symbolic expression. Kutsche writes:

Ritual and habit are completely different, although the performance of a familiar ritual can become habitual. One ties shoelaces the same way each time, cooks, perhaps even gets up and goes to work in the same sequence every morning, simply because repetition saves time and saves the energy of rethinking familiar tasks. No particular sentiments, no symbolic expression. If you are in doubt whether the event you want to describe is ritual or mere habit, return to the definition and ask whether sentiments are being symbolically expressed (ibid.: 55).

As Kutsche also points out, this definition provides a kind of litmus test to distinguish ritual from habitual behavior. It is the question: What sentiment does this behavior symbolically affirm? If there is no meaningful answer, then the behavior is habitual. If the behavior does convey some meaningful sentiment, then it can be defined as ritual.

⁷ We have not yet applied our definition, but one of the outcomes we have discussed, Aristotle's catharsis, also synthesizes a structure-oriented and meaning-oriented analysis of theatre. Catharsis is most often understood to be the purging of pity and fear through dramatic representation such that society can function more efficiently. While it operates through the significance to individuals in the audience (arousing pity and fear in audience members) its goal is a functional one: to allow society to function. The theory includes both structural and individual aspects. However, an understanding of catharsis in contemporary theatre would likely deemphasize the societal-level element of the theory, since such a small minority of individuals in our society attends theatre. Instead, catharsis in the present day (and for the scope of this project) can be understood as the purging of unpleasant emotions for *individual* functioning, the aspect relevant to the individual.

Thus, Kutsche's interpretation gives insight into the individually meaningful experience of ritual, filling out a piece missing from a primarily functional analysis: to experience ritual is to experience (sometimes vast) emotional sentiments being translated into appropriate sentiments by a form (perhaps a metaphor equally as useful as a chalice and wine would be a play-dough mould: emotional sentiments are shaped by the form and thus expiated by being experienced in a culturally-appropriate way). However, the ultimate usefulness of Kutsche's understanding of Honigmann's definition is its unique way to deal with how rituals change over time. The "ethnographic present" is standard in classical ethnography. For example, E.E. Pritchard's *The Nuer* does not discuss the impacts European colonialism had on the Nuer and surrounding peoples, Boas' rescue ethnography sought to preserve culture strictly as they were before being influenced by western society, etc. While this technique was useful at the time for preserving rich cultural heritage that would soon be lost to globalization, in the contemporary world it is abundantly clear that cultures do not exist in a static "ethnographic present." Even Turner begins to identify this issue in his early work (1967:44). Anthropology's relatively recent interest in the concept of *modernization* further illustrates this point.⁸ With technology and culture changing increasingly quickly due to globalization and modernization, there is a clear need for theoretical definitions which can address the way rituals change.

Kutsche's wine/chalice metaphor helps describe this change. Outdated and dysfunctional rituals are ones in which the cup remains intact but the wine evaporates:

⁸ Peacock's *Rites of Modernization* is an example of an anthropological work analyzing the process of modernization, and will also serve as one of our cross-cultural examples of theatre.

the emotional meaning has steadily vanished but the structure which existed around it remained. A father escorting his daughter down the aisle is a good example. Said to be a symbolic passing of authority over a woman from the father to the groom, the practice is becoming less and less popular in contemporary weddings, though it is still practiced - it's the chalice which remains where the wine has evaporated, because the emotions that the form originally codified do not fit within a culture with growing interest in gender equality. Presently we are seeing the form itself change as more brides are choosing not to follow this tradition, instead expressing independence and other celebrated sentiments. Thus, the forms of rituals change to contain the changing culturally appropriate sentiments, but not as fast as the appropriate sentiments do.⁹

One additional important element of ritual that Honigmann's definition does not necessarily include but does help to distinguish ritual from habit is the presence of *play*. As John Huizinga outlines in *Homo Ludens*, the play-concept describes a fundamental quality of many human activities, ranging from the imaginations of a child to professional sports. Behaviors that fall within the play-concept can be described as:

⁹ This understanding of change applies equally well to modernization of small-scale societies. The documentary *Guardian of the Flutes* echoes a common concern of such societies, that their youngest, most modernized generation is losing interest in maintaining the traditions of the past. In other words, the appropriate sentiments related to localized traditional values are no longer seen as appropriate in the context of modern technologies and globalized values, and thus the chalice (a coming-of-age ceremony in the case of this particular culture) that was formerly containing meaningful emotional experiences is discarded.

1. Having rules (ranging from the rules of a board game to rules that one can't talk during a performance)
2. An "imagination" of outer world
3. Not just "fun" – can include "serious" experiences, such as rituals of mourning
4. Having limits of time & space
5. Including elements of repetition and reenactment
6. "A well-defined quality that is different from 'ordinary life'" (1950: 28)

All rituals can be considered "play" by the play-concept. They have distinct rules, have limits of time and space, include reenactment (rites of passage are repeated with every new group of adolescents coming of age), and certainly have a quality of being "different from 'ordinary life.'" Habit, however, includes few of these defining characteristics, at least including repetitive behavior and at most having limits of time and space. All ritual is play, and if it is not play, then it is not ritual. However, an activity that is play is not necessarily a ritual. Being play is a necessary but insufficient quality to be ritual. Behaviors which fit the above qualities do not necessarily also symbolically express appropriate sentiments.

How do contemporary theatre practices fit into all of this discussion? First, participating in the theatre event fits the criteria for play, both for the performers and the audience. It is clear to see how the performers are playing: they have rules, are existing in an imagined other world, have time and space constraints (the duration of the performance and the space of stage), include elements of reenactment¹⁰, and clearly are not acting in everyday life. More importantly, audience members *also*

¹⁰ See Schechner's theories on *restored behavior* (Schechner 1985).

engage in play by being in the audience. Audiences have rules (audience etiquette - no noisemaking!), engage in an imagined world (being lost in the story they are watching), have time and space constraints (the duration of the performance and the space of the stage, being the only place they are giving their focus), experience elements of reenactment (they sit in a chair and watch every time), and experience a quality different from ordinary life. On the last criteria of being different from ordinary life, every behavior related to being an audience member, such as sitting quietly in a dark room with a group of strangers, or even just travelling to the theater itself, is certainly different from everyday life. One theatre-maker I interviewed gives further evidence supporting the specialness of being in the audience. While explaining why he feels so strongly about creating theatre professionally, he was reflecting on one of his first times ever seeing a play and said to me:

It [attending theatre] still has the vestiges of 'I bought this special ticket, I'm going with this special person to this event that I hope I remember for the rest of my life.' That's the goal, I think, to create something people carry with them.

This sentiment was echoed by my audience member informants as well. One woman compared the significance of going to a play to her memories of school assemblies: "It was something special."

Thus, it is absolutely appropriate to say that seeing a play is playing itself. It satisfies this necessary condition to be considered ritual. Now, in order to precisely distinguish the theatre event as a ritual, we must satisfy our working definition of contemporary ritual and identify what appropriate sentiment the theatre event symbolically expresses. In order to investigate what that sentiment may be, let us consider the following ways my informants described the experience of watching successful theatre:

- “You’re transported to a different era, space, time.”
- “I think it opens up a whole new world.”
- “If I like a play, I’m totally into it... I mean, everything else is gone.”
- “If it’s a good play, you become as if you were there in a scene you would not normally be... Just as when you read a book.”
- “When you lose the fact that this is an actor doing it... you’re sort of not in your own world at that point, you’re really witnessing what they’re doing. Which is fun.”

These audience members are describing the same phenomenon that Csikszentmihalyi coined as *flow*. Observing the fever with which artists would work on their paintings, Csikszentmihalyi sought a way to describe this kind of behavior which is intrinsically rewarding in and of itself. After extensive interviews of amateur athletes, chess masters, rock climbers, dancers, and other groups of people observed to engage in this kind of behavior, what resulted was the concept of *flow*. *Flow* describes a subjective experience which arises when there is complete “order in the consciousness” (Csikszentmyhalyi 1988: 26). Its formal qualities include: 1) focused attention, 2) distorted sense of time, 3) loss of awareness of self (the consciousness is not exerting psychic energy on being aware of itself), and 4) forgetting everyday concerns. In simplest terms, it is state of being “in the zone.” It is when one is focused on an activity and loses track of time and self-consciousness. It could be while playing a team sport, or a video game, or anything else that requires focused attention. Csikszentmyhalyi describes *flow* as the optimal experience, a state of being which the self tries to replicate, and has reported many areas with practical applications for its autotelic (rewarding in and of itself) nature, including education, work efficiency, and therapy.

These qualities of flow have all been described by theatre attendees, both in my own field work and other studies. *Flow* has been identified to be a quintessential element of the theatre audience experience by much of the literature, often described as “captivation” or “immersion.” Belfiore and Bennett argue that “commitment and absorption” lie at the heart of the audience experience (2008: 97). Every major study on the audience experience either includes survey questions quantifying captivation or have respondents talk about “getting lost in the show” or “being somewhere else,” like the examples from my informants above. Most studies explicitly discuss Csikszentmihalyi’s flow concept (see particularly Walmsley 2013). Most significantly, Brown and Novak find that captivation correlates most highly with audience satisfaction, itself indicating the fundamental importance of *flow* to a successful theatre event (2007: 11).

Being the factor most related to the success of a theatre event and being universally described by audience members as important, I argue that *flow* is the fundamental experience that the contemporary western theatre event cultivates. Regardless of the genre or style of the play being performed, *flow* is the unifying experience.¹¹ It is the experience of being immersed in a story that unifies contemporary theatre practices, the same experience when one is engrossed in a novel or a film. While the experience is not unique to theatre, the structure of western theatre capitalizes on it.

The symbolic elements of the theatre event do indeed operate to support the experience of *flow*. Standard performances take place indoors, in a special place which

¹¹ With the exception of certain artistic schools, such as Epic Theatre; see the next section for discussion of these kinds of theatre that reject *flow*.

is designed to eliminate all external light and sound. The house lights are darkened for the duration of the performance, encouraging the audience to look not at each other, but at the only lighted portion of the room: the stage. They are encouraged to forget themselves and others around them. There are both explicit and implicit rules against making noise, which would distract attention from the stage and pull audience members out of *flow*. Finally, there is a curtain call, which signifies a return to the ordinary, non-story world, by allowing the audience to see the performers outside of their characters. Instead of assisting the immersion into another reality, this element indicates its presence by symbolically taking the audience out of that *flow* experience and returning them to the real world.

These symbolic elements, considered together and individually, express the expectation of a focused, immersive experience of a story. In other words, the symbolic elements facilitate the audience's entrance into *flow*. From this symbolic analysis, the standard contemporary western theatre event is a structure which creates an immersive storytelling experience by engaging its audience in *flow*.

Consider the opposite, the absence of these symbolic elements, or the absence of the theatre event as a whole. One informant said:

I love live performance. I love going to the opera. I could sit home and listen to it, but then I could get distracted by, you know, something that's happening in the other room or something; it'll go 'click' and then I have to go find out what clicked.

There is an implication that one cannot get the desired experience out of theatre if one is able to be distracted. The basic symbolic elements of the theatre ritual create the focus and atmosphere that is necessary to enter into *flow*.

The contemporary western theatre event is a ritual whose symbolic elements express the appropriate sentiment of *flow*. Note that *flow* is not appropriate in all social

contexts, and the theatre event provides one structure in which it is. Thus, it could be argued that theatre satisfies a social desire that is unsatisfied in other parts of our contemporary lives – the desire to experience the specialness of ritual – and it is this specialness, this unique opportunity to engage in *flow* in a social way which, alongside a universal human desire to engage in meaningful ritual experiences, drives people to come to the theatre. Defining theatre as ritual in this way provides us with our first societal-level model for why theatre exists: it satisfies a universal desire for creating meaning through ritual structure. It is a cultural force which drives people to attend theatre and create meaning out of it. This discussion also provides a separate individual model in the form of pursuing *flow* experiences.

Again, the purpose of developing these models is to later demonstrate that they are not adequate for understanding the full meaning of theatre to audiences in the Berkshires. This model does not completely fit for contemporary western theatre practices. I will elaborate on those discrepancies in Chapter 5, as well as discuss further the importance of *flow* to the audience experience. For now, this model suffices as one potential way to understanding what attending theatre means to audience members.

Significance to the Study of Ritual

As a tangent to the main course of this paper, I'd like to briefly discuss the significance of this distinction of theatre as ritual to the anthropological study of ritual. In short, by defining theatre as ritual – a culturally familiar structure in which we observe change – we can understand one mechanism by which rituals change by seeing a ritual as a tangible structure which is shaped over time by individual intentions.

In defining the theatre event as ritual, I am implying that it shares a fundamental similarity with other rituals across culture and history which justifies their shared definition. Thus, insights into the aspects of the theatre event which are shared with all ritual behavior should also provide insight into ritual behavior in general. Allow us to consider one of these shared aspects: the fact that there is a structure (remember that Honigmann's definition implies that all ritual has a form).

One aspect of contemporary theatre practices that betrays a classical understanding of ritual is the relative ease at which the component pieces (and therefore the structure of the ritual) may be altered. At BTG, the director of one of the shows that played while I was there, *Cat and the Canary* intentionally altered structural elements of the theatre event.

The Cat & the Canary was a bit of a wild card in the BTG season. It is a very old play, having been written in 1922, and is rarely produced (though there are two old movies versions). It is a stereotypical murder mystery/thriller plot: the last six remaining family members of an eccentric-but-wealthy deceased old man are gathered at his former house, Glencliff Manor, in accordance with his will. It is twenty years to the day after his death, and the potential heirs have been summoned to announce who receives his inheritance. It is a creepy old house, perhaps haunted, with many rooms and secret passages. One by one, the potential inheritors are welcomed by Mrs. Underwood, the mysterious caretaker who has looked after the house – all alone – for the past two decades. After one of the gathered parties is named heir to the fortune and the house, the old man's lawyer is found dead. The play becomes a race to discover who killed the lawyer where each family member is trying to keep from falling into

the same fate. Meanwhile, the killer is in the house with them, a storm is brewing outside, and there are no trains until the next morning...

This production was so unique not because of how old the play was, but instead because of how contemporary it felt. It is a very old script with a familiar genre, and so had substantial potential for reinterpretation. This show was directed and performed by current MFA students, most of them from Yale. They saw an opportunity to breathe young life into a creaky, old script. The director made some minor textual changes, and added some unique elements to the production. Most noticeably, he added a “ghost chorus” of previous caretakers of the house. These were acting apprentices in BTG’s company who would roam the lobby of the theatre before the show began, slowly cleaning surfaces or welcoming patrons in a monotone, otherworldly voice. They used the normally unutilized time before the show to set the ambience of the world the patrons would soon be entering. This ghost chorus would then gather to give the pre-show curtain speech which would again contribute to the ambience of the haunted house. The set was also designed to contribute to this immersive feeling: elements of the set continued past the stage, such as lighting fixtures which were hung above the audience seats and appropriately old furniture placed in the lobby. The show opened with an audience-aware musical number – composed for this production – which introduced the characters while Mrs. Underwood, the creepy caretaker, acknowledges the audience by looking at them before reestablishing the fourth wall and settling into the story.

Overall, this production was an experimental play in the BTG season. It altered standard structural elements of the theatre event for its own artistic intention, and added elements which emphasized the unique qualities of theatre. Manipulating these

elements to include this experience allowed the performance to bleed into the audience, with the intention to make the audience feel more immersed in the experience of the play as a result.

Similarly, I once attended a production of *Hamlet* which encouraged patrons to arrive half an hour early for a “pre-show experience.” The production was set in an insane asylum (it was the 2012 production in London’s Old Vic with Martin Sheen) and this “experience” consisted of a guided walk through a series of hallways designed to look like the interior of an asylum, much like walking through a haunted house. The tour ended in the house of the theatre, where audience members could then take their seats and wait for the performance to begin, having traversed the floor plan of the imaginary world we would be entering. However, what I failed to notice when I walked in was that we passed through the threshold of a large, industrial containment door, the kind of impenetrable metal barrier that you imagine only in maximum-security prisons and, well, asylums. When it came time for the performance to begin, the very first action of the play was for this massive metal door to slowly close right in front of the entrance we were all led through (and the only exit I knew of at the time). I was immediately stricken with an instinctual discomfort and sense of claustrophobia – I truly felt that something was wrong in the state of Denmark – and thus the pre-show experience, an alteration of the standard ritual experience of the theatre event, was successful.

One additional example of the theatre event being manipulated was an elimination of one of its most consistent symbolic elements. I once saw a production of *Our Town* in which the house lights did not darken. As discussed, the house lights are darkened in order to allow audience members to more easily become immersed in

the world of the play, indeed to forget that they are even in an audience among strangers. *Our Town* is a play that is thematically about the connectedness of human beings and our willingness to overlook those connections, even with strangers. The theatre-makers of this particular production sought to express that theme by keeping the house lights up as a continual reminder that one is part of a community with others around oneself. The theatre-makers chose to eliminate one of the most consistent symbolic elements of the theatre event in order to achieve a specific artistic effect in the audience.

There are a plethora of other examples of theatre-makers changing the very structure that they work within, some fundamentally rejecting the ritual's sentiments as a whole. Brecht's alienation concept, for example, completely rejects the potential for *flow* or immersion in a performance event, choosing instead to make the audience aware of themselves as an audience, to "alienate" them from the performance. But again, this choice has a specific artistic intention: to allow the audience to think critically about the material they are seeing and to encourage them to actually take action towards fixing the problems of the world. Postmodernist drama, such as the work *Offending the Audience*, presents similar critiques of the fundamental structures of the contemporary theatre ritual.

Why do I bring up these examples of theatre productions and theories which manipulate the "standard" formula for a theatre event? Because I want to point out that these intentional adjustments of the component pieces of a theatre event – which we have defined as having a shared quality with rituals across the world – were made with the intention of having a specific *effect*. In the case of *Cat and the Canary*, the intention was to foster the immersive experience; *Hamlet*, to evoke an emotional

response in the audience similar to that of the characters in the story; *Our Town*, to demonstrate one theme of the play. Whatever the specific effect, manipulations such as these made by theatre-makers with a specific intended outcome.

These changes made with a specific outcome in mind also change the ritual itself. Theatre is dictated by practical necessities and desired outcomes, and it changes based on those necessities and desires. Perhaps seeing other (even classically defined) rituals in the same way will provide insight into how these rituals change over time.

I hypothesize that the direct but unintentional manipulation of ritual is a fundamental mechanic of how rituals change. In the pursuit of extending our understanding of ritual to include how ritual changes, it is important to recognize that individuals change ritual without specifically intending to change the ritual. In other words, “ritual” is an external distinction, and individuals do not alter rituals for the sake of altering ritual; changes in ritual result as unintended consequences of individuals pursuing specific outcomes.

It is a simple insight, but it is not trivial. Anthropological analysis can very easily gloss over an individual’s experience of and influence on cultural structures in favor for understanding larger cultural forms, but it is important to remember that these forms originated from individuals or a group of individuals, and change only because of the continued interaction between these individuals or groups of individuals and those forms. Margaret Mead wrote: “Never underestimate the ability of a small group of committed individuals to change the world. Indeed, they are the only ones who ever have.” The contemporary theatrical experience is dictated by practical necessities and designed outcomes, as are other rituals and every behavior humans engage in, even if it is a deep expression of one’s culture.

Individuals are not simply slaves to their culture and practices. They are active agents in changing those practices in subtle ways which can accumulate over time eventually resulting in substantial differences. One of the mechanics of change in ritual may be the accumulated alterations resulting from specific intentions. Similarly, ritual is preserved when the intended outcomes of individuals are still accomplished by the form of the ritual. In this way, Kutsche's chalice is malleable. We have seen in the world around us that the form of ritual does and must change in response to the emotional and sentimental lives of its participants. Ritual has a two-way interaction with its participants. It both symbolically shapes the appropriate sentiments of its participants and is shaped by the sentiments which its participants deem appropriate.

In this chapter we have considered an ethnographic description of the theatre event, analyzed that description to understand the ways in which contemporary western theatre event can be considered a ritual by developing and applying Kutsche's definition of ritual, and finally speculated on the significance of this designation to the wider study of ritual. To return to the argument of this paper, we have created a model for examining the significance of attending theatre which looks for ritual significance and any meaning that results from the repetition of this social structure. Most significantly, I have proposed that the essence of the contemporary western theatre event is *flow*, and I will later argue that this state is inextricably tied to the central meaning of attending theatre in the Berkshires. For now, we have our first societal-level model for understanding the meaning of attending theatre. We will now move on to develop our second societal-level model.

Chapter 3

MONEY, SOCIAL CLASS, AND POWER

During one of my interviews I asked an informant, who was both a volunteer and financial donor, to describe his relationship with the company. He said two things: “Expensive” and “It’s worth it.” These comments highlight one of the major elements of the theatre event which has not yet been discussed: market exchange. Contemporary western theatre exists in an economic paradigm that necessitates market exchange for its very existence. This dependence on market exchange, in addition to other qualities, gives it relevance in the social realm of class distinctions. No analysis of contemporary theatre – ethnographic or otherwise – can be complete without addressing the theater’s relationship to money and social class.

In professional theatre, a theatre performance is the object in a market exchange. Patrons give money in exchange for the experience of watching a performance. In contemporary America, the price can be incredibly expensive, reaching up to several hundred dollars for the most expensive seats on Broadway. Money is a strong determinant of social class in contemporary society. Thus, theatre has the potential to operate in defining social class by including a market exchange of substance. An exchange of money means theatre has potential to exchange power.

By simply purchasing one of these expensive tickets and attending a theatre performance, we are implicitly expressing our financial power, which places us in a certain social class. It can be seen as a form of conspicuous consumption, where the public display of financial power validates that power. However, the significance of

this action is more likely to operate on the individual rather than their community. In other words, unlike true conspicuous consumption, the display of financial power is more likely to be an affirmation of identity to the individual than it is to be a demonstration to the surrounding community. I say this because most people do not see other people they know in theatre audiences. As described in the ethnographic description in the previous chapter, attending theatre is not a social experience. Audiences are groups of strangers who do not form lasting relationships or have significant interactions outside of the theater. Professional theatre is not an area where an expression of social power would have an impact. Additionally, every other audience member is also expressing belonging to that same social class. If there is a piece of attending theatre that is about displaying to others, it is a display of mutual identity.

There are, however, many examples of theatre attendance being a conspicuous display of power. The most common example is that of Elizabethan theatre. When Shakespeare was writing at the Globe, London theatre had a much more diverse audience than we see with contemporary theatre. This diversity is reflected in the construction of the Globe Theatre. It included an open area for the groundlings, the largest portion and poorest members of the audience, who were members of the working class seeking entertainment. Above the groundlings were rows of actual seats that were only affordable to the higher classes. Finally, there were the box seats reserved for royalty. The way these box seats were oriented actually made it very difficult to see the entirety of the performance because the entire purpose of the box seats were for the royalty to be visible to the rest of the audience. This seating orientation is an example of conspicuous consumption because it displays power

differences directly to lower classes. Notably, in theatre of that time, there was as much as a 40-fold difference between the cheapest and most expensive tickets, meaning that there was actually a great diversity in the social classes represented. Compared to Elizabethan theatre, it is very clear that contemporary theatre has significantly less diversity. One must already have a certain amount of financial power to attend contemporary theatre at all. In this way, contemporary theatre can be seen as a force which maintains a simple social class distinction which becomes associated with other distinctions: those that can afford to attend plays and those that cannot.

Theatre being a market exchange also brings up questions of worth that must be considered. Does feeling like he got his money's worth become part of the meaning of an individual attending theatre? With the substantial cost of tickets, the audience's feeling of satisfaction will likely be an important aspect of the audience experience.

Contemporary professional theatre's inextricable connection to money is only one way in which it is connected to social class. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that art consumption is predisposed "to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences," (1984: 7). In other words, art happens to be particularly effective at defining social classes. Art appreciation is a decoding process which requires cultural competence – especially in the case of "high art." If the specific cultural competence is only acquired through education in a certain strata of society, then art which depends on that competence is inherently a class identifier. Anyone who can't "get it" can immediately be identified as falling below the work's social class.

Bourdieu demonstrates through a series of studies that art preference is heavily tied to social class. One study finds drastically different patterns of consumption of three different musical compositions. One composition is vastly more popular among

the lower working class (*Blue Danube*), one is relatively evenly spread but most popular in the middle classes (*Rhapsody in Blue*), and one is almost exclusively consumed by the highest-level educators (*Well-Tempered Clavier*) (ibid.: 17). Another study finds that members of different social classes tend to react to different levels of meaning in the same photograph. When shown a photograph of an old woman's hand, the "culturally most deprived" expressed a conventional emotional reaction, the lower middle class emphasized ethical values, while at the higher levels remarks became increasingly abstract (ibid.: 44). To spare describing them all, it will suffice to say that Bourdieu presents many other examples of social class effecting art preference. A similar pattern of art consumption may be observable in contemporary theatre audiences, particularly in the Berkshires.

Bourdieu's observations about arts consumption in France have been confirmed in American theatre attendance practices. The NEA National Survey for Participation in the Arts demonstrates in the contemporary US what Bourdieu observed in France, that individuals of higher social class – measured by their highest education instead of financial power – are increasingly more likely to attend theatre (both musical and non-musical) (2012: 16). Tables 1 and 2 report data from the NEA 2012 report on rates of theatre attendance broken down by education level. The report does not include absolute quantities, but the increasing percentages demonstrate that the higher your education, the more likely you are to attend theatre in the US.

Table 1 Percent of U.S. Adults Who Attended a Non-Musical Play, by Selected Demographic Variables: 2008 and 2012 (NEA 2012: 16)

NON-MUSICAL THEATRE		
	2008	2012
All Adults	9.4%	8.3%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	8.2%	7.2%
Female	10.6%	9.2%
<i>Highest Level of Education Attainment</i>		
Grade School	0.7%	0.3%
Some High School	2.8%	1.8%
High School Graduate	4.0%	3.9%
Some College	9.0%	7.7%
College Graduate	17.5%	14.6%
Graduate School	24.3%	20.0%

Table 2 Percent of U.S. Adults Who Attended a Musical Play, by Selected Demographic Variables: 2008 and 2012 (NEA 2012: 16)

MUSICAL THEATRE		
	2008	2012
All Adults	16.7%	15.2%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	14.4%	12.9%
Female	18.9%	17.3%
<i>Highest Level of Education Attainment</i>		
Grade School	1.7%	1.6%
Some High School	5.2%	2.9%
High School Graduate	8.1%	8.3%
Some College	17.1%	14.6%
College Graduate	30.1%	26.6%
Graduate School	37.9%	32.1%

Between the omnipresence of market exchange, the designation of high culture, and indications of social class disparities in professional theatre, it is necessary to consider the meanings of theatre attendance which relate to money and social class distinctions. The Berkshires are an especially appropriate place to consider these elements of theatre going. It is a very expensive and rarefied region in which to live, and Bourdieu would see it as a perfect example of the correlation between high art and high class.

The model here is that attending theatre in the Berkshires confirms a class identity among its audience members. It tells them who they are and where they belong in society by providing an opportunity to express those belongings. A potential meaning of attending theatre in the Berkshires is that it confirms the social class identity of its audiences. It confirms a lifetime of acculturated desires to be wealthy and to achieve success by having the freedom to spend a great amount of leisure time consuming art. This model suggests that the content of this art would not challenge the identity being affirmed. In other words, theatre that creates this meaning would not be social critiques and would instead be told through the voice of the class it is maintaining.

Put simply, by examining the social climate of contemporary American theatre as a whole and the Berkshires in particular, one potential model for illuminating the significance of attending theatre is that theatre is part of a wider set of class distinguishers, and that it operates to maintain social class boundaries. To the individual audience member, it provides an affirmation of their identity and place in society. Like the other models we are developing, this is but one possibility for understanding the experience of theatre-consumers. It will be argued later that, beyond

a simple class affirmation, social class has little to do with individual experiences of attending theatre in the Berkshires. This chapter has been very brief, but it will suffice to introduce this potential meaning of theatre attendance.

Chapter 4

CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly consider two theatrical traditions from other cultures in order to develop two additional models to explain the meaning of attending theatre for contemporary western audiences. This discussion will also serve as a cross-cultural comparison of theatre practices with an emphasis on the audience, a topic which has not been addressed in recent audience studies literature. I will be discussing both *ludruk*, Javanese proletarian drama (a useful comparison to the elite Berkshire audience) and the *Ramlila* of Ramnagar, a religiously meaningful Indian performance festival. Again, it will be demonstrated that the models being developed here do not hold for contemporary western theatre in the Berkshires.

Rites of Modernization and *ludruk*: A Tool for Social Change

James Peacock spent the year from September 1962 to September 1963 living in Surabaya, Indonesia conducting anthropological research on the Javanese theatrical tradition *ludruk*. This was a time of technological modernization within Java and many other parts of the world, as well as a time when anthropology as a discipline was deeply focused on understanding the social modernization which occurs alongside technological development. In his book, *Rites of Modernization* (one of the few true ethnographies of a theatrical tradition), Peacock analyzes *ludruk* primarily for its social impacts as it related to the modernization of the Javanese proletarian workers. Peacock's work is a valuable comparison to the present analysis because of the

richness of his description and analysis, the historical context of his time studying ludruk, and the particular elements of ludruk which provide interesting comparisons to the structure of western theatre. He also provides a clear model for explaining the significance of ludruk to its audiences.

As Peacock reports in his introductory chapters, ludruk is a theatrical tradition that may have existed in Java as far back at the thirteenth century, but the earliest written account comes from 1822, and ludruk has evolved significantly since that time. There was rapid development in the form of ludruk in the early 1900s, but the form of ludruk at the time Peacock observed was structured into four parts:

Every ludruk performance is a collection of examples of the following genre: ngremo, dagelan, selingan, tjerita. Every ludruk performance opens with a dance called a “ngremo” that is performed by a man dressed in bizarre black men’s or women’s clothes... After the ngremo, the dagelan begins; a single clown sings, soliloquizes, then engages in a dialogue with a second clown, all of which leads into a comic skit. After the dagelan a female impersonator sings and dances. This is the selingan. After the selingan the tjerita begins. That is usually a melodramatic story with many comic episodes. Selingan (interludes) by female impersonators are presented between scenes of the melodrama. In commercial performances the ngremo lasts about half-an-hour, dagelan about an hour, melodrama about two hours, and all the selingan together consume another hour; so the total performance lasts about four and a half hours (1968: 62).

A ludruk troupe prepares several different routines for each of these sections that could be used in any particular performance. Each show consists of only one routine for each of the four genres, and which specific routine gets performed varies from show to show, independently of the other segments. It could be compared to an episode of *Saturday Night Live*, where there is always an opening monologue, a set of live sketches, a Weekend Update, and a digital short. Let’s say, hypothetically, there were only six different opening monologues, four different live sketches, five different

weekend updates, and three digital shorts in the repertoire of SNL. If, every week, an SNL show consisted of picking one of each of these segments at random and performing them together, the show would be analogous in structure to a ludruk performance.

Thus, the performance material of ludruk is very different from that of contemporary western theatre, where an evening consists of only one complete entity within a single genre. The four segments of ludruk are all radically different styles and do not directly relate to one another. It is however, presented in the same basic structure as western theatre: audiences of commercial ludruk travel to a theater outside their daily lives where they pay for a ticket, sit in a darkened audience space alongside strangers, and watch performers onstage. There is also a *gamelan*, a percussion orchestra, which accompanies ludruk performances.

Essential to Peacock's research, ludruk was a drama created exclusively by and for the proletarian class. Peacock's Surabaya during the early 60's experienced visible dichotomies between the elite and the proletariat. Ludruk audience members and participants alike reside in *kampung*, shanty towns within Surabaya which resemble rural Javanese villages. These villages reside on the fringes of the city, near graveyards and "within hollowed-out areas that grow inside downtown city blocks like cavities in teeth" (ibid.: 18).¹² Most of the audience members and performers are uneducated and illiterate. Almost none of the performers have gone further than elementary school and this lack of education keeps them restricted to their status as lower class. Elite members of society neither attend nor create ludruk, and Peacock

¹² Peacock emphasizes heavily the marginalization of the proletarian class within Surabaya.

reports never meeting a ludruk actor or regular attendee that did not live in a kampung (ibid.: 21). What's more, they identify themselves as proletarian and share a class consciousness.

Most ludruk audience members are of family-raising age. The vast majority are between twenty and fifty years old. Kampung dwellers of different ages were said to prefer other entertainments, such as movies for adolescents and more religious theatrical traditions for the elderly (commercial ludruk is explicitly seen as a secular event) (ibid.: 21).

Importantly, ludruk is not an intellectual pursuit. These audience members did not take school field trips as children to see ludruk performances, like children growing up in the US might, to experience "high culture." Ludruk, moreover, is not contextualized as high culture. Where western theatre is identified as "high culture" and sometimes an intellectual endeavor, the individuals attending ludruk clearly do not attend to stroke their intellectual egos. Instead, the narratives of ludruk bypass the celebration of education and present stories of miraculous social ascension. Intellectual validation is not part of the value audience members derive from the ludruk experience.

The ludruk Peacock studied is commercial, and entirely dependent on entertaining its audience well enough that they will return and buy another ticket. This is similar to professional western theatre, especially without government funding, but instead of relying on wealthy donations from the elite, ludruk actually relies on ticket sales from the proletarian audience itself. Budgets for a ludruk performance would clearly pale in comparison to that of a professional US theatre company, but these are professionals nonetheless. Just like commercial western theatre, ludruk attracts an

audience of strangers. Ludruk audience members rarely know each other and have “few dealings with each other outside the theater” (ibid.: 225). Thus, there is not a strong community-based meaning within ludruk; it does not forge communities, instead it operates on ones that already exist. We will see later that this is also true of the Berkshire audience.

Finally, the experience in the audience is entirely different from western theatre. While the symbolic elements of western theatre (darkened house, rules against noisemaking) function to create a quiet, focused atmosphere which allows for the entrance into *flow*¹³, ludruk is perhaps the complete opposite. Ludruk has a bawdy, loud atmosphere. The audience section is darkened, but there are no expectations of quiet, orderly behavior. Audience members are crowded together “to a degree a westerner would find oppressive” (ibid.: 37). Audiences clap for romantic scenes, severely heckle the clowns, and eat whole meals with beer and coffee during the performance. Compare this atmosphere to western theatre, where the most acceptable outspoken reaction is to quietly walk out.

As a result, audiences don’t have a sustained focus during the performance. Peacock writes: “Spectators and actors have their eyes on the action one instant and stare blankly away the next. Spectators are looking at the stage then suddenly they are talking with their neighbors” (ibid.: 67). While there is a formal climax structure written into the ludruk program that mirrors western dramatic structure (Peacock identifies that the musical climax structure is most apparent), there are other elements

¹³ Again, at its core – we must acknowledge that there are western theatrical traditions which intentionally oppose this symbolic intent such as Brecht’s Epic Theatre, but they have developed directly in opposition to the base theatrical tradition.

of the performance that actively sabotage any sense of dramatic build. The clown will regularly interrupt the *tjerita* (the melodrama, the final segment of the performance) with jokes, and whenever he appears the orchestra stops playing the “story-climax” music. Other actors complain that the clown undermines the dramatic structure by interrupting the build (“bursting the balloon,” Peacock quotes) with jokes. In this way, the very structure of the performance undermines any potential for sustained focus by the audience. Between the ruckus of the crowd and fragmented structure of the performance itself, it is clear that sustained *flow* – while quintessential to the western theatre event – is totally absent from ludruk.

With a basic introduction to ludruk, we can now consider Peacock’s model for understanding the meaning of ludruk in Javanese society.

Peacock’s primary focus is on the social impact of ludruk on Javanese society. As stated, the early 1960’s were a period of modernization in Java and much of the world, and the main thesis of *Rites of Modernization* is that ludruk is a rite (a symbolic action) which simultaneously *demonstrates* and *causes* the modernization of Java’s proletarian class. He focuses his assertion of causation on the performers of ludruk (“It is the experience of participating in ludruk that actively *molds* the values, ideas and emotion of participants in a way that they are likely to act, think, and feel ‘modern’ in daily life,” [ibid.: 238]), but it is also arguable that ludruk impacts audiences in this way as well. Ludruk presents stories of upward mobility, which are often the favorite stories of audiences. These stories encourage and express a universalist ethic, which encourages the valuation of people based on what they can do, not on factors they cannot influence such as the social class one is born into. Ludruk, by presenting stories of upward mobility, simultaneously creates and validates a desire for that mobility.

While ludruk audiences are not educated and are therefore unable to experience social mobility themselves, they can have hopes for their children to do so. As Peacock writes, “it may be that the best way ludruk can encourage proletarian mobility is by inciting ludruk participants [and audiences] to stimulate the efforts of the younger proletarians to get ahead by their own efforts” (ibid.: 148).

Peacock’s thesis ties the meaning of ludruk to the social modernization of Java during this time. His model is that ludruk is a force of social change. It is a functional analysis in that it identifies an outcome with benefits at the societal level: bringing a group of Javanese people into the modernized world. Thus, ludruk is a vehicle of social change and critique. In ludruk, we see theatre operating on and changing its society. To foreshadow applying to the Berkshires this model of theatre operating on society, we will see that theatre of the Berkshires instead maintains social class, more closely aligned with the model from the previous chapter. However this model of social change is relevant to discuss because of the many western theatre artists who have historically been interested in using theatre as a vehicle for such change, such as Bertolt Brecht.

Part of this model operates through catharsis. Peacock describes a cathartic experience for audiences participating in ludruk, that “ludruk portrays these people’s daily conflicts in such a way that it “cures” or relieves tensions which they develop as a result of [being engaged in modernization]” (ibid.: 238). There is a considerable amount of ludruk material that responds to the problems in its audience’s daily life and retells them onstage, a kind of immediate relevancy that isn’t pervasive in the performance material of western theatre (partly because the audience does not share a single identity as strongly as the ludruk audience does). I believe that this cathartic

experience is a result of the shared social and class identity of ludruk's audience. Catharsis is achieved by having your emotions presented to you onstage. The presence of a shared cathartic experience indicates a shared emotional experience, in this case one that is particular to the struggles of social class for proletariats at this time in Java.

Thus, our model derived from this comparison with ludruk is that theatre can be a force of social change by operating on the society around it. It should already be relatively clear that this model will be particularly inadequate for describing theatre in the Berkshires, but again, it has been included as a cross-cultural comparison and as an acknowledgement to a historic intention of western theatre-makers.¹⁴

Ramlila of Ramnagar: A Meaningful Religious Ritual

In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner deconstructs various theatre practices and describes theories of a unified understanding of performance cross-culturally (1985). While the bulk of his book consists of his theories of restored behavior and transformative/transportive performances, he also includes an ethnographic chapter on the Ramlila of Ramnagar, a month-long performance ritual which occurs yearly in Benares, India. It is a relatively brief discussion, and the model we will derive from is relatively specific. It will be useful for describing a large portion of theatrical traditions which are structurally similar but different in meaning to professional western theatre. These traditions are ones which hold primarily religious significance. Similar to the model derived from ludruk, it will

¹⁴ There are many other examples of theatre operating in such a way, but they will not be discussed here. Cruz and Shutzman (2006) and Case and Reinelt (1991) contain many other relevant case studies on the structure of theatre being used to enact social change.

be quickly apparent that religious meaning does not go very far in describing the Berkshire audience experience, but I find the present consideration to be relevant as a cross-cultural comparison. Religiously significant performance is far from the professional western theatre we are attempting to understand, but it does constitute a significant amount of theatrical tradition that is performed worldwide.¹⁵ These traditions are a large part of theatre as a whole and I find it appropriate to acknowledge them in this project that seeks to understand the experience of a specific theatre audience.

The Ramlila (*lila* translates to “play” in terms of the play-concept) is a multi-day Hindu performance event which reenacts the life of Lord Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, based on the *Ramcharitmanas* (“The Holy Lakes of the Acts of Rama”), a text written by the religious scholar Tulsidas in the 16th century. The event performs the story of Rama’s life, which culminates with the vanquishing of the demon king Ravana and with Rama’s subsequent coronation. The tale is analogous to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, being an epic story with many sub-plots and characters. The performance tradition has developed several regional varieties and it occurs in multiple areas throughout India. Schechner studied the Ramlila in Ramnagar, where it is a month-long reading of the *Ramcharitmanas* accompanied by multi-layered enactments of the story.

This is not merely a month-long play, however. It is a complex, multifaceted event. It takes place on a palace grounds which is the size of a small village and spectators return day after day to experience more of the event. There are

¹⁵ *Noh*, one form of traditional Japanese theatre is one such example where substantial religious meaning is present.

simultaneous performances in different areas of the grounds which follow different characters in the story of Rama. At certain points audiences move alongside the performers in the course of the performance, physically following Rama along in his journey (1985: 174). There are giant effigies, call-and-response, audience participatory acts (at one point the performance relies on spectators to pull a wagon carrying Rama to the next location [ibid.: 184]), and a maharaja riding an elephant. The richness, complexity, and impossibility of seeing every element of this event is illustrated in the following passage from Schechner (it is not necessary for this analysis to know any of these characters, merely to get a sense of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the performance event):

... too many things happen simultaneously, scattered across Ramnagar. While Rama is in Chitrakut, Bharat sits in Nangigram; while the army of monkeys and bears moves toward Rameshwaram in pursuit of Ravana, Sita with a band of devoted spectators is already awaiting them in the Ashoka Garden of Lanka where Ravana holds her prisoner; when Lakshman is wounded by Meghnad's shakti and Rama pitifully mourns his fallen brother, Hanuman is more than a mile away chasing after the herb that will revive Lakshman... (ibid.: 153)

Depending on the day, spectators of up to a hundred thousand gather in crowds to "see more than they hear" (ibid.: 153). The audience is a mix of casual attendees, daily attendees called *nemis*, and holy men called *sadus* who travel to the Ramlila as a pilgrimage. All of the spectators accumulate into definite crowds (where food and other vendors also accumulate) which can react quite strongly to the performance:

The crowd surges to see his death, the surrender, this acceptance of Ravana by Rama. The crowd, like Brahma and Shiva in the *Ramcharitmanas*, is glad. "The universe was filled with cries of triumph." Ramnagar cops wave great staves, threatening the roaring, surging, seething crowd (ibid.: 171).

The nature of the performance in part resembles a western fringe festival and in part an amusement park (a comparison Schechner himself makes in the chapter) where there are multiple performances occurring simultaneously and it is simply impossible to see everything. Any single individual's experience is incomplete, as Schechner acknowledges about his own ethnographic data (ibid.: 152). This is an event which individuals attend year after year, continually drawn back by the meaning of the event even though the performance itself is unchanged.

Even from this preliminary description of the Ramlila, it is clear that there are many differences between it and western theatre. Most of the similar symbolic elements are gone (the performance is outdoors, so there is no control of light; it is not a quiet audience). What remains in common between the Ramlila, contemporary western theatre, and all other theatrical traditions is the enactment of a story while distinguishing between audience and performers. There is a story, there is a stage, and there are spectators. There is also the shared social experience of having to interact with other audience members (even if that interaction is to actively ignore). Because it draws strangers into the same event, it has a sphere of significance that is wider than an individual community. These are things all theatre traditions share. These shared fundamental qualities make the Ramlila a relevant comparison to western theatre.

Finally, by telling a story they both satisfy an internal human need to create meaning in one's life through the way stories are told. They allow audiences to externalize themselves, either by seeing themselves represented on stage, or by making meaning in opposition to what is represented onstage. These are things that all theatre traditions share. These are things that all audiences share. I will elaborate on the meaning making from storytelling in my own ethnographic case study.

Ultimately, the Ramlila's meaning comes from its religious value. It tells an important story in Hindu religion and recreates the significance of that story for its spectators. People attend year after year, some, as mentioned, even making it the destination of a pilgrimage (the sadus). The story and significance of Rama are pervasive in the lives of these people. Schechner writes that any person who grows up in a North Indian village knows by the age of five everything they need to know to understand the Ramlila (ibid.: 144). Like classical Greek theatre, these are stories the audience already know intimately. It is not novelty which brings them to experience the Ramlila, it is familiarity. Each year, the experience deepens as the religious story becomes more meaningful, in the same way that rereading a religious text elucidates deeper meaning.

Beyond the repeated opportunity to deconstruct this religiously significant story, the performance itself is given a transformative power. Throughout the event, the performers are seen as becoming the gods themselves, and the area is treated as a microcosm of all of India.¹⁶ Describing one of the final events in the month-long performance:

Once Rama enters Ayodhya to be crowned, a marvelous conflation of time and space takes place. All the Ramlila places become part of Rama's kingdom, and the whole of Ramnagar becomes Ayodhya. Thus Rama goes to his Rambagh to preach, he travels throughout the streets of his Anyodhya-Ramnagar on his elephant as a king would proceed through his own capital, and finally he is welcomed by the maharaja at the Fort: one king receiving another (ibid.: 183).

¹⁶ With varying degrees of belief: Schechner also reports on a several former spectators who do not see the performance this way, but they also no longer attend the Ramlila themselves (ibid.: 189).

It is important to note that the performers of these god characters are not themselves royalty and are not directly connected to kingship or to godliness, so there is a significant transformation required to see these performers as kings and gods. But even with this gap, certain performers must be carried back to their barracks at the end of the each day such that their sacred feet do not touch the ground. Even without the symbolic elements observed in western theaters which facilitate *flow*, audiences are transported to another time a place. The end of every performance day is marked by an *arati*, a ceremony which completes the day's *lila* (play) and facilitates the return to the ordinary world. To use a western term, suspension of disbelief is achieved and the spectators are immersed in an imagined world of religious substance. Thus, the religious significance of the Ramlila is apparent.

The Ramlila recreates important religious meaning for its attendees, and it is this model that we will isolate as another way to understand the significance of theatre attendance. Again, it should already be apparent that this model is not a good match for the secular Berkshire theatre, but my intention in isolating as many different possible meanings for theatre attendance has been fulfilled. Because of the pervasiveness of religious performance worldwide, religious meaning is an aspect that must be included in this discussion, and the Ramlila has provided a convenient opportunity to do so while providing another comparative example.¹⁷

¹⁷ While my main comparison will be to the secular professional western theatre, Schechner does compare the Ramlila to a similarly meaningful Christian religious performance event, the Oberammergau Passion Play as it has been performed in Union City, New Jersey since 1916. The Oberammergau Passion Play originates as a tradition in Bavaria, Germany, where it is performed every ten years to total audiences of up to 500,000 (unlike Ramlila it is a single play and is performed once a day in an extended run). This tradition was adapted to a yearly performance in a German part of Union City and was the subject of a master's thesis on which Schechner bases his

While the main purpose of discussing the Ramlila has been to identify a religious meaning model for understanding theatre, there is one more aspect I would like to discuss. The Ramlila of Ramnagar has one particular political meaning which is highly integrated into the event: it is simultaneously the source and enactment of the maharaja's social influence. After India's independence, the power of the maharaja essentially became defunct (ibid.: 183) but the maharaja of Benares has maintained his religious and social influence by continuing to sponsor the Ramlila and by participating in it as one of the principal figures. During the festival he is transformed into a larger cosmic power just like the players he has organized. The Ramlila he sponsors validates his maharajadom, even though it is not validated elsewhere. There is a ceremony on the final day of the performance in which each of the principal performers receive a one rupee coin from the maharaja. The act is simultaneously a welcoming of the royal characters within the story *and* a symbolic payment to the actors for their work. Analogous to a curtain call, this ceremony begins the process of returning to the ordinary world (the final portion of the *Ramcharitmanas* remains to be chanted) and displays the order of the ordinary world: it reminds everyone who is king (even though there is no secular kingdom over which he rules). Through the socio-political significance of the maharaja's involvement, we again see (as with ludruk) that multiple levels of meaning are at play. While the primary model for understanding the Ramlila of Ramnagar is through its religious significance, there is political meaning to

comparison. He finds similar religious intentions in both the Ramlila and the German adaptation, but with less success in the younger Union City tradition. See Schechner's essay in Turner (1982b) (*Celebration, studies in festivity and ritual*) for this discussion.

be found, as well. Just like theatre in the Berkshires, one kind of meaning is not sufficient to understand the full scope of this performance event.¹⁸

I will continue from here by applying each of the various models we have isolated. It will be systematically demonstrated that none of these models independently encompass all the meanings of attending theatre in the Berkshires, just like we have already begun to see for ludruk and the Ramlila.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that along with the limiting of the maharaja's influence to this particular event, there have also been financial restrictions. Schechner reports that the maharaja is concerned for the future of his Ramlila without the "limitless treasury of a great maharaja" which used to support it (ibid.: 189). In other words, money is a problem for theatre, wherever you go. It seems that in many places where theatre has become an institution it has done so as a result of aligning itself with the wealthiest classes (though not all, as ludruk presents a counterexample).

Chapter 5

THE CASE STUDY: THE BERKSHIRES

At this point we have developed many different potential models for understanding the meaning of attending theatre for a particular audience. We have several outcome-oriented models drawn from impacts identified by previous literature: to escape, to learn, to feel, and to achieve a communal experience. These are potential answers to the functional question “Why do people attend theatre?” and, I find, are commonly the first answers that theatre-makers give when confronted with this question. We have two models that operate of the societal level, where meaning is derived from the experience of ritual, or from the affirmation of social class identity. These models attempt to explain how theatre functions in society and the resulting meaning to audience members. We have two models from cross-cultural examples which illuminate two aspects that are underemphasized in professional western theatre: being an agent of social change, or being a source of religious significance. Finally, we also have the concept of *flow* floating around in the discussion, the significance of which has not been fully elaborated.

The next task is to systematically apply these various models to a case study: the summer audience of the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts. As a reminder, the goal of this project is to come to some understanding of the people who attend theatre. By applying these hypothetical models, we will see that none of them individually fully describes the meaning of theatre-going, but applying a synthesis of these

perspectives may lead to a holistic awareness. It is a multi-dimensional significance which ultimately requires us to consider an audience in its cultural specificity.

“Setting the Stage:” Cultural Environment of the Berkshires

My first reaction to the Berkshires was an appreciation for its natural beauty. Berkshire County is composed mostly of small sprawling towns separated from each other by 15-30 minute drives through the picturesque countryside. Indeed, the area is quite beautiful for those that have an inborn appreciation for being surrounded by trees and the feeling of being away from “the city.” Trees and grasses are rich and green throughout the summer, filling the area with vibrancy. This natural beauty is highly celebrated by individuals and organization alike within the Berkshires. In many cases, it is part of an organization’s image to be fundamentally integrated into the natural beauty of the Berkshires (see Figure 1, a photograph of one of BTG’s theaters). Many people live in spacious neighborhoods with at least a half acre of land to themselves. The sense of being close to nature pervades the daily experience in the Berkshires, as illustrated by an anecdote from one of my informants about the animals with whom she shares her backyard:

I feed the birds in the winter all the time. I have a fox, and a couple of, uh, I think they’re possums. They’re pretty horrible but they visit my yard. I have a bear, who comes quite frequently! To steal the birdseed. I know when it’s time to take the birdseed down ‘cause the bear comes the day before I’m planning to take it down, and wrecks the whole contraption!

Amusingly, having a bear-related experience is a mark of belonging in the Berkshires. Where most tourists come from Boston or from New York City, the presence of bears is distinctive to the Berkshire area. When I first came to the area as an Acting Apprentice with BTG in the summer of 2012, one of the first things I was

warned about was the presence of bears (it's such an uncommon experience in most areas that the company finds it prudent to warn all of their incoming artists about the danger of getting between a mother bear and her cubs). It was my impression that most people in the Berkshires, artists or tourists, don't think about crossing paths with a bear except for when they are in this area. Bear awareness is an experience particular to the Berkshires for most people, and expresses the atmosphere of the area: it has the feeling of being "away from it all," a respite surrounded by nature.



Figure 1 Photograph of the Unicorn Theater from the side. This barn is the building with which BTG was founded in 1927. It has a quality of being very integrated with the natural surroundings which is true of two of BTG's theaters, this one and the Fitzpatrick Mainstage, which is on the same campus. BTG's third theater, the Colonial, is located in Pittsfield.

Within this context of being a natural respite, the Berkshires have a high density of arts organizations in the area. Tanglewood music festival, Jacob's Pillow dance organization, and the many theatre companies (Berkshire Theatre group, Williamstown, Barrington Stage, etc.) are just some of the rich and diverse arts organizations found within roughly an hour's drive of each other. These events draw a large audience from surrounding areas into a centralized arts locale. I found that Tanglewood was a "gateway event" for most of my informants, meaning that they first starting coming to the Berkshires for Tanglewood, and became involved in other Berkshire arts institutions after becoming more familiar with the area, which demonstrates the heavy overlap arts organization see in the area, as well as the value of cross-organizational advertizing for Berkshire arts institutions.

This density of arts and cultural organizations are a definitive quality of being in the Berkshires for most people (especially those who vacation or spend part of the year there). One of my informants, very excitedly, described what it is like for him to live in this arts-saturated community:

Now, we live in this community, the Berkshires, which is as far as we're concerned is the culture capitol of the eastern seaboard, or the United States, really! There are eighteen – I'll give 'em to you if you want - *eighteen* summerstock theaters... We went to a show, and on our way home I said: You know, we could have gone to *seventeen* other theaters if we hadn't gone to this theater that night.



Figure 2 Audience members congregating outside the Unicorn theatre before an evening performance. The space outside the Unicorn has a particularly breathtaking view of the surrounding mountains, some of which you can see in this picture.

Because of its natural beauty and “high culture,” the Berkshires are treated as a kind of pilgrimage destination for both artists and audiences. Artists see the appeal of coming to work in a quiet, calm atmosphere, of being closer to nature and farther away from the distractions and pressures of city life, while audiences are encouraged to make it a vacation destination, escaping from the everyday to experience high-quality art. The Berkshires could be described as an arts Mecca of the Northeastern US.

The Berkshires are also a popular retirement location. Most of my informants were retired, about half splitting the year between properties in Florida and the Berkshires and half spending the entire year in the Berkshires. Outside of major cities (the only true city in the area is Pittsfield, which holds one of BTG's theaters) it is also a predominantly white area. The majority of my informants were Jewish, and according to the artistic director, plays about the "Jewish experience" are among the most frequently requested shows of the company. While I cannot accurately extrapolate the wider demographics of the Berkshires from my observations which centered around a theatre company, it is at least apparent from my observations as a participant-observer that the population which engages in theatre in the Berkshires is predominantly white.

There is also substantial wealth among the arts attendees in the Berkshires. The retired informants I spoke to had enough wealth to have a choice as to where they would like to spend their retirement, and they all chose the Berkshires. However, the Berkshires are not uniformly wealthy. As one of my informants said, "Everybody thinks that the Berkshires, you know, are kind of upscale. And really, you know, they're not. Some houses are bigger, but some houses are very small. It's like any other community." From my observations, small towns in the Berkshires are not exactly "like any other community." There is an on-average wealthier population than most other places among arts attendees, though there certainly is variation within that range. Even with this internal variation, the racial makeup and necessary wealth indicate that theatre of the Berkshires is an institution whose audience is the urban elite.

This reputation of natural beauty, culture, age, and wealth is the social and physical backdrop of theatre-going in this area. This context has both influenced and been influenced by the theatre and other arts practices in the area, and so it is important to acknowledge. Further discussion unfolds within the context of a wealthy, arts-saturated community with many individuals who – as a result of either being retired or of being on vacation – have actively chosen to spend their substantial free time in this area. Of course, these generalizations are not true of all individuals in the Berkshires (they are just generalizations) but they do set a contextual perception of the Berkshires which should inform the reading of the following data.

Within this context, the people I interviewed were the most dedicated audience members. My informants attend a substantial number of plays during the summer, most around forty or fifty, some twice a day. These are people who either retire in the area, or, whether they are retired elsewhere or have a flexible job, spend two to three months “summering” in the Berkshires. My informant pool is a group of audience members for whom theatre is a significant part of their lives. This group is a small subset of theatergoers nationwide, and even a subset of theatergoers in the Berkshires. However, there is a rich population of these kinds of audience members in this area, mostly because of the density of arts opportunities. My culture spot is this group of most dedicated audience members, the ones which derive the most meaning from the theatre experience.

As mentioned, my field work was centered around one theatre company in the area: the Berkshire Theatre Group. BTG was founded in 1928 as the Berkshire Playhouse and was one of two theatre companies in the Berkshires at that time, the other being Williamstown over an hour away. The company has maintained yearly

production cycles since then with the exception of two dark years during World War II. Even until about thirty years ago, these two companies were the exclusive professional theatre outlets in this area. Some of my informants began attending BTG during this time and have seen the development of these other companies, including Shakespeare & Co (founded 1978), Barrington Stage (founded 1995) and the Berkshire Fringe (founded 2004). BTG is undoubtedly one of the most historic theatre companies in the area, being part of defining the Berkshires as a cultural hub.

BTG has three main theatre spaces, the Unicorn Theater and the Fitzpatrick Main stage, both on a campus in Stockbridge, and the Colonial Theatre, an old movie house located in Pittsfield. The Unicorn Theatre, pictured above, was the first performance space for the company and was a casino before being renovated in 1927 and has since undergone significant changes in the past 85 years. This space is the smallest space the company has, seating 120. It is a partial thrust stage and has a very intimate feeling. This intimate nature allows the company presents more “edgy” works in this space, whereas the Fitzpatrick Main stage is a larger full-proscenium space seating 420, which is utilized for more established plays. Finally, the Colonial theatre is a significantly larger space than the Main stage, seating 760 over three levels. The Colonial feels very large and is by far the least intimate space.

Again, while my field work was primarily centered around BTG, the Berkshire audience has a heavy overlap. I have included this basic background of BTG as a context for the experience of most of my informants, but I do not mean to imply that my informants are defined at theatre goers by their relationship to this company. Several informants were very heavily involved in the audience social community of BTG, but there were about as many who were not, and saw BTG productions as

frequently as any other theatre company in the area. BTG is an example of the kind of theatre organizations there are in the Berkshires, and is intended to provide a more concrete context within which my ethnographic data will unfold.

Outcome-Based Meaning

The various models we have discussed have established some hypothesized meanings that we can expect to see among audience members.

This first set of models derives from the literature on audience motivations and intrinsic impacts. The most substantial of these models are to escape, to learn, to feel, to have a communal experience, and to have a social experience. Literature has cited audience motivations to escape everyday life, as well as the impacts of education and emotional experience. Theatre-makers emphasize the meaning of a communal experience shared between all audience members present (the kind of experience I describe in the introduction). They also champion the social interaction supposedly fostered by theatre events.

I would like to begin our discussion of each of these potential answers to “why people go to the theatre” by acknowledging that different audience members have radically different stylistic tastes when selecting shows. Here are just a few quotes illustrating the diversity among my small informant pool:

- “A play is a play, I like to see everything.”
- “Does it end happily? I want to be entertained.”
- “We’re less enamored with comedy.”
- “Usually because a friend says: ‘You should see this!’”
- “We love musicals.”

- “A new musical with rock and a lot of noise just would not appeal to us.”
- “Violence is not our cup of tea.”
- “We know people that only go to Shakespeare, and we feel that they’re missing out!”

Even within the relatively consistent audience of the Berkshires, there is substantial variation in preference. What unified most informants was their willingness to explore outside of their primary interests by being annual subscribers to the BTG season. Usually, my informants would see most if not all of the shows in BTG’s seasons regardless of style or genre. The company had clearly “won them over” and they expressed primary allegiance by being subscribers to BTG while picking and choosing productions at other companies.

As far as these models which relate to potential motivations which drive audience members to attend (to escape, to learn, to feel), they provide the most basic meaning for audience members. They provide insight as to why people consciously choose to attend, but they do not always illuminate the deeper meaning of the event. Also, the specific drives that motivate people vary both between audiences and within audiences. Thinking of theatre attendance in terms of satisfying a desire – like scratching an itch – dismisses the rich, more subtle meanings which occur within the event. However, examining the drivers behind these motivations does help illuminate what my informants find important about attending theatre.

Entertainment and escapism was always acknowledged as part of the experience but never emphasized. Informants stated that they wanted to be entertained (i.e. not bored), but that if that were all they wanted they could go to a more convenient, less expensive alternative. It is clear the primary meaning for attending

theatre was *not* purely entertainment. All of my informants explained it in some other way. The sentiment was that entertainment was usually a necessary part of a successful play, but was not the ultimate intended impact. Thus, attending theatre to escape or to be entertained was only the first layer of meaning.

More than any other motivation, the desire to have new life experiences was most emphasized in interviews. The driver is described as “edutainment” in the literature. Almost every informant, in one way or another, expressed a desire to broaden his or her horizons through attending theatre. The desire for “edutainment” held the most meaning for my informants of these outcome-based models. One informant said she goes to theatre because it “enlarges [her] life.” Another informant said he goes because it satisfies a desire for “exploration that permeates all parts of [his] life.”

There was one show in the BTG season that satisfied this motivation particularly well. The play is called *Extremities*. It was written and takes place in the 1980s and was partly a critique of the legal rights of rape victims at that time. It begins with an attempted rape on-stage. The audience sees a man, who appears to be a kind stranger, enter a woman’s home and attempt to rape her in her own living room. She eventually manages to fight him off using a fortuitously placed can of Raid, but not before the rapist narrates what he plans on doing to her, all while the audience watches her struggle. This scene is long; it feels as though it takes at least five minutes. After she fights him off, the woman ties up her assailant and restrains him in the fireplace until her roommates come home so she can call the police. But without any physical evidence and no assurance that the man would be brought to justice without witnesses, the play then revolves around her conflict with her roommates as to what to do with

this violent man in their house, whose health is rapidly deteriorating. The play ends (*to avoid spoilers, skip now to the next paragraph*) with the rapist confessing in front of the roommates and very bleakly describing his life and desires. The play, which is a commentary on the experience of women who have survived rape, includes a complete portrait of a rapist.

This production took place in the smaller, more intimate performance space at BTG: the Unicorn Theater. This space is a partial-thrust proscenium stage and has a very intimate feel. Several informants described feeling very close to the stage and felt that the actors were more aware of them in this space. As a consequence, the attempted rape scene had great impact. Some informants found this play to be somewhat difficult to watch, but were appreciative of the experience.

One informant who had extensive psychiatric experience with rapists described his experience in the audience which demonstrated a satisfied desire for “edutainment:”

I’ve spoken with, I dunno how many – a lot – of rapists... In training, I might meet eight rapists in one day... and that’s its own kind of trip, that’s its own kind of theatre... And I had certainly never seen a rape, and I had certainly never seen a rape done the way that rape was done, or near-rape... It was amazing. Absolutely amazing. Seeing it, identifying with both sides, with both parties. It was just astounding. It was brilliant. As a psychiatrist when you sit with someone like that, part of the work is being able to feel what they feel. Get inside of the way that they live and feel, literally feel it. I mean I don’t have to be an actor and enact it, but I need to be able to feel it pretty fully to be able to go to where the patient is. And what that guy did in that rape... what he did in that rape was just... you know, I was never at that moment even sitting with a rapist, imagining, or hearing the rapist talk about what they did. Cause, you know, even with shrinks they don’t want to expose themselves in that way... But he somehow –I don’t know how he did that – but he really got to a place where, even with my own experience in its own kind of way with rape, it just gave me a different part of life that I had never felt.

In the same vein, almost every informant referenced one particular show, *Southern Comfort*, as a prime example of this kind of experience. *Southern Comfort* was produced by Barrington Stage, another theatre company in the Berkshires, originating from the company's musical theatre lab. It is a new musical about a transsexual couple navigating life in rural Georgia. I did not get to see the production myself, but, as stated, it was commonly cited in my interviews. I was somewhat surprised at how excited my informants were at this production which covered the controversial topic of gender identity and reassignment. They echoed each other's comments about it being a part of life they wouldn't have otherwise experienced. One informant said, comparing her experience watching *Southern Comfort* with *Extremities*:

Certainly *Extremities* introduced us to things we hadn't dealt with. You know, a different way of thinking and looking at things... And that was good, because it opened up - I do have prejudices I didn't realize... I hadn't really thought about transsexuals. And I don't know a lot about transsexuals. And that was good. Because that was a way to see them as human beings and it makes you see that you were being ignorant, and I don't like being that way.

Southern Comfort was by far the most frequently discussed show in my interviews. This is because it expresses a primary motivation for my informants to attend theatre: to expand their life experiences. The above quote emphasizes the intellectual element of this experience, but it is just as much a desire for emotional stimulation as intellectual. It is beyond "knowing" about other ways of life and into "feeling" those experiences. The experiences that challenge them are the ones that move them, and so in there is both intellectual and emotional meaning in these experiences. My informants derived the most meaning from these "edutainment" experiences. It is a synthesis of educational drive and emotional drive, and yet is also

based in a fundamental desire to be entertained. Each of these motivations are inextricably connected to each other.

Additionally, the primary motivation of an audience seems to vary by group. Where the almost entirely retired audience of the Berkshires seems to primarily seek new life experiences (a survey-based approach would be necessary to directly compare it to other studies of motivations), one informant explicitly chooses to only attend shows with happy endings, regardless of the “edutainment” opportunity. Walmsley finds even more variation in primary motivation between groups in his more age-diverse informant pool (2011). As a whole, his informants primarily sought high-impact emotional experiences. He quotes a “young” Australian describing her show preference: “I’m a fan of shows you have to work hard at... deep, dark stuff that challenges the audience.” This was a sentiment that was absent from all of my older informants, most of whom said they avoid violent performances. Beyond variance based on age, Walmsley notes that “wives and mothers, in particular, spoke of escaping into a place where they had nothing or no-one else to worry about,” suggesting further variation in emphasized motivations between other groups (ibid.: 344). In short, different people are motivated by different sets of outcomes, which in turn can be effected by any number of variables. Age, occupation, and aesthetic interest are just a few factors that could influence how an individual values different outcomes.

It is clear that there is not one primary motivation for all theatre-goers. Different groups of people experience different primary motivations, and even individuals within those groups vary. These primary motivations have certainly also changed over time with the cultural environment. The primary motivator for my

audience is fundamentally related to the fact that they are in the arts-saturated, “high-culture” Berkshires at this particular point in time. Thus, analyzing motivations in this way provides only highly contextual understanding for a regional audience, relevant primarily for qualitative marketing research.

For the purpose of qualitative marketing research, my ethnographic data indicates that Berkshire audiences are significantly motivated to seek new life experiences through the theatre. This conclusion roughly corroborates the results of Walmsley, in that these new experiences were often delivered through “high-impact emotional experiences.” These motivations are fundamentally tied. Walmsley advises theatre companies to “capitalize on emotion-based marketing.” My data suggests that theatre companies in the Berkshires should also attend to expansion-based marketing, the possibility of experiencing something new and exciting that can expand one’s life experience.¹⁹

As part as the purpose of this project, which is to achieve an understanding of audience going in the Berkshires, these motivation-based models do not describe the entirety of the theatre-going experience by themselves. It is clear that not everyone primarily goes to escape, or to be entertained, or to learn, or to feel. There is variation between individuals, and there is variation between groups. Instead, each of these outcomes are a part of what meaning theatre holds for its attendees, and taking a perspective which synthesizes these different outcomes comes closer to accurately describing that meaning. Walmsley suggests individualized mapping of audience members’ motivational profiles for marketing purposes (*ibid.*). I suggest this multi-

¹⁹ In fact, Walmsley finds that “edutainment” was the second-most significant driver for his informants (*ibid.*).

dimensional view is necessary to more accurately understand the meaning of theatre attendance. However, even a view which synthesizes these many motivation-based models does not holistically describe the meaning of the experience. There are aspects which are missing. Let us consider other outcome-based models.

Some informants indicated experiencing classical Aristotelian catharsis (i.e. “to feel”). One individual said: “[some shows] get rid of all my anger through their [the characters’] anger,” but this indication was infrequent. Catharsis was far from being a primary impact of the western theatre event. I will not discuss the absence of explicit catharsis extensively, but I suspect that it was not emphasized because of a lack of unified social identity in most western theatre audiences.²⁰ For the immediate purpose, it is adequate to acknowledge that while catharsis was acknowledged by informants it was not a primary meaning-making impact of the Berkshire theatre attendance. It was present, but not emphasized. But the extent to which it is present is not included in the aforementioned motivation-based models.

It is important to acknowledge *flow* as a meaningful impact of theatre attendance. The experience of being caught up in the action of a show was widely discussed as an ideal outcome. To cite again some of the many quotes describing this experience:

- “You’re transported to a different era, space, time.”
- “I think it opens up a whole new world.”
- “If I like a play, I’m totally into it... I mean, everything else is gone.”

²⁰ Contrasting with ludruk audiences, where Peacock observes meaningful cathartic experiences among an audience with shared social class identity.

- “If it’s a good play, you become as if you were there in a scene you would not normally be... Just as when you read a book.”
- “When you lose the fact that this is an actor doing it... you’re sort of not in your own world at that point, you’re really witnessing what they’re doing. Which is fun.”

My informants regularly described being “swept up” in the action of a show, being in *flow* in the audience. It was a fundamental impact of the theatre event whose full significance I will discuss later.

Finally, one of the impacts of theatre most frequently described by theatre-makers is that of a communal experience. These experiences are described as tangible moments of unity within the audience, where one has the sense that everyone in the room is “on the same page,” unified in empathy with the utter humanity of an event onstage. I describe one such moment in the introduction to this paper. Speaking as a theatre-maker, it is a very moving experience to witness and very fulfilling to feel that one has helped create. There were some very interesting data related to the audience’s understanding of these supposed collective experiences.

The “collective experience” was markedly absent from my informants’ experience. My informants discussed their theatre experiences in terms of only themselves. While some informants did state that they felt being in an audience was important, for the most part theatre was regarded as an intimate, personal experience between the individual and the performance, not a shared experience: “I am more inclined to see a show from my own space, not as a collaborative experience with other people.” In fact, most informants were relatively antagonistic in their descriptions of fellow audience members, citing them as distractions which caused them to lose focus, especially when etiquette was broken (“They announce you, know,

shut off your phone, unwrap your candy, and one night I'm sitting next to a guy eating M&M's out of the bag.... ").

None of the stories my informants told of their most impactful audience experiences ever included a reference to other audience members. The entirety of the meaning of these stories related only to themselves, and was not enhanced by there being other people there. I did have a few informants mention that it made a difference to have other people there, but there was no place where I directly saw meaning derived from a shared experience.

Walmsley shares this observation in his study, hypothesizing that one-on-one interviews emphasize the individual experience in the audience. Focus groups in other studies tended to develop discussions of a collective experience, but it could have been an artificial emphasis resulting from the group nature of the interview. Individual interviews may give a more accurate representation of the audience experience. Also, the symbolic elements of the theatre event which facilitate *flow* tend to also promote an egocentric perspective. The house lights are darkened and there is etiquette which stifles sound to prevent distractions, but it just so happens that those distractions are also the only reminders that one is sitting with a group of other people. The reminders of a communal experience and the distractions from *flow* are the same forces, which helps explain why audience members tend to note other audience members only as distractions. Even though one of the qualities of *flow* is losing awareness of the self, the experience in the audience of professional theatre is an isolated experience where meaning is made primarily for the individual, not in the context of others.

Additionally to this collective experience, theatre-makers also emphasize the social nature of theatre. "Theatre creates communities" is a sentiment I have heard on

many occasions working with other theatre-makers. There is a view that the structure of theatre combined with these unified communal experiences forges a strong community out of disparate audience members over time. It is frequently discussed in the literature as a fundamental impact of theatre.

However, a desire for social experiences in the theater was rare; only one of my informants described enjoying the social experience of attending a play, and even then she does not go to shows with anyone else because she doesn't want her individual audience experience to be imposed upon. As far as enriching already existing social bonds, most informants attended with a partner, but not with other friends. Primarily, when going to the theater they neither anticipate seeing/meeting people nor do they seek to create social experiences by bringing others. Some informants described occasionally attending with a friend, but it was more a consequence of theatre being something they wanted to show their friends than being a fundamental part of their theatre experience. More illuminating, audience members don't meet new people. Every informant said that they rarely, if ever, make any new connections in the audience. There were two couples who I met and recruited as informants while attending a show, and even they said they rarely meet anyone new while attending theatre – “we never meet people at shows.”

Some informants did say they felt “at home” in BTG audiences because they are heavily involved in the BTG community (they did not feel this way in other audiences). However, the informants who were not heavily involved in the audience community deemphasized the social experience even more (“rarely a community experience,” one said of theatre-going).

Instead of the formation of new social bonds, I observed that it was much more common for audience members to run into people they already knew. I usually saw at least one or two chance run-ins at each performance. These were much more common in the smaller performance space, the Unicorn Theater, than they were in the larger space, the Colonial. This reduction may be simply because it is much harder to observe the whole Colonial audience than the whole Unicorn audience (remember that the Colonial is an old movie house which seats 760 while the Unicorn only 120), or it may be because the Colonial, located in the larger city of Pittsfield, pulls from a much larger community, within which there may be fewer interconnections. Regardless, it was overwhelmingly clear after sitting in the audience night after night that those seats are not a place where new or lasting relationships – and therefore new communities – are formed.

For example: in the one opportunity I got to see a show from a company other than BTG (*Dead Letter Office* at Berkshire Fringe), I had a brief conversation with a middle-aged woman sitting next to me, curious about what had brought her to the show. We never exchanged names, despite spending the two hours sitting next to each other and having short conversations before the play and during intermission. We parted ways without ceremony at the end of the performance, having no further structure to encourage interaction, and I will likely never see her again (which at the time, I had reprimanded myself for not taking the opportunity to enlist another informant). This anecdote illustrates exactly the kind of “single-serving” relationships that professional theatre tends to create among its audiences. These are not long-term relationships; they are polite, quick, anonymous interactions, much like those shared between passengers on an airplane.

The experience I had observing a non-professional community production provides a useful juxtaposition. Every year, BTG produces a non-professional show which uses exclusively members of the surrounding community. In the summer 2013 season, this show was *Peter Pan*. The community show is always markedly different from the professional shows in the season. For one, the audience is composed almost exclusively of individuals who have some personal connection to one of the performers. Season subscriptions do not include this community production, so patrons of the professional shows are not encouraged to attend. Personally, I felt much more out of place in the lobby of this performance than I did at the professional shows. I felt as though I was a suspicious intruder with a notebook peeking into a complex web of community relationships. While every other audience member seemed to have another family they knew, I felt as if I was the only disconnected stranger. At the professional shows, I felt comfortable remaining anonymous like the other patrons, but before the performance of *Peter Pan*, I felt acutely aware that I was alone, adrift while observing a sea of interconnected families. Additionally, quality is not the primary concern of community theatre performance events. *Peter Pan* did not have a preview period, as the success of the event does not depend on critical reviews.

Before the show began, I overheard one of the ushers tell the director that his son, who was in the lost boys ensemble, knew one of the boys playing violin in the pit through soccer. It's exactly this kind of community-saturated connection that distinguishes community production audiences from professional production audiences. These connections do not occur in professional theatre events. Community theatre, moreover, is not expected to be a high-quality artistic experience; it is an

opportunity to support someone to whom you have a social tie. Community theatre events and professional theatre events are entirely different social experiences.

Juxtaposing professional theatre to community theatre clarifies the social impact that it has. Professional theatre, as observed in the Berkshires, does not have the community-building power that theatre-makers have claimed that it has. Not only do professional theatre events not build communities out of their audiences, they aren't *supposed* to. Other events sponsored by the company – such as a yearly community production or social events to thank donors – produce that community, but not the theatre event itself. Professional theatre, with its emphasis on quality of the performance event, intends to do something else. As I argued in Chapter 2, the fundamental intention of professional theatre is storytelling such that an audience achieves *flow*, which has the consequence of creating isolated experiences.

Thus, there is a paradox between the two perceptions of what happens inside a theatre event: theatre-makers see a collective experience and social bonds while theatre-consumers – the people who are supposed to be having these collective and social experiences – see only their individual relationships to the performance. These two social groups are looking from two different vantage points and see two different experiences. It is important to note that these two groups are making very different meanings out of the same event. I think that both perspectives can be true. When theatre-makers see a collective experience, they may in fact be hearing the utter silence of an entire audience engaged in *flow*. While the individual reactions and meanings of each audience member may be different, they all share the same captivation. Within that captivation, audience members are by design not present to their neighbors, being in the focused attentive *flow* state while watching the stage.

Thus, it may simply be that theatre-makers see a different aspect of the event than theatre-consumers.

To consider briefly the vantage of a theatre-maker, it is true that as some audience members are in *flow*, others in the audience can enter more easily. Consider:

To the delight of producers, programmers, ethnographers and sometimes even audiences themselves, flow is often visibly manifest in the spectator: “Through their facial expressions, body language and audible reactions, audiences communicate impact as it is happening. There is no mistaking the silence of rapture during a concert, the moments of shared emotion in a theater when the plot takes a dramatic twist or the post-performance buzz in the lobby. All are reliable evidence of intrinsic impact” (2013: 76).

Flow begets *flow*. When a member of the audience is in *flow*, the small shifts in posture, checking one’s watch, crossing one’s legs – all the potential distractions to other audience members – are eliminated. They are captivated. The collective experience theatre-makers talk about must describe the incredibly fragile state when the entire or the majority of the audience is in *flow*. There are no distractions, there is no “in and out” focus. Everyone is captivated and listening, and even if they are having different internal reactions to the performance, they are united in their captivation. And that is a powerful experience to observe from the stage.

Returning to the audience, even if it is the case that audience members do share a collective experience in these moments (which I, as an actor, think they do), what’s fascinating is that they don’t conceive it as such. Whatever influence the rest of the audience may have on any particular spectator, it must be pre-conscious thought. Examining the experience of *flow*, any individual immersed in it is by definition not attending to themselves, and not using cognitive energy to evaluate how they are being impacted. It seems that the experience of *flow* precludes any conscious awareness of a

shared experience because one is not conscious of oneself as an entity to be influenced.

What is most interesting in terms of our question is that a “communal experience” is not a meaningful part of attending theatre for my Berkshire informants. Because of the lack of structures to facilitate social bonds and the emphasis on *flow* in the western professional theatre structure in general, I find it likely that the same is true for much of the contemporary western theatre audience. This lack of conscious awareness of a communal experience does not mean that theatre practices and theory should be reevaluated; it simply means that this phenomenon, which is apparent from the stage, remains undetected by audiences.

None of these outcome-based models – to escape, to learn, to feel, to have a communal experience, or to have a social experience – completely describes the audience experience. What audience members in the Berkshires (and, based on the literature, other contemporary western theatre audiences) want is a synthesis of these drives and outcomes, and the emphasized outcomes vary between individuals and groups. While each of these models brings out a single aspect of the theatre event, they do not describe the entirety of the experience. Even when they are applied together, an individual-centered outcome-based perspective does not acknowledge that theatre attendance has social meaning (even if individuals do not conceptualize a communal outcome) and thus does not include potential meanings the theatre event may have to the wider social group, not just the individual. These meanings include functional analyses of how theatre operates in society. There is further potential significance to be considered at the level of society.

Meaning on the Level of Society

Ritual Significance

In Chapter 2 we explored the ways in which theatre can be considered ritual behavior. Defining theatre as ritual allows us to see that part of the meaning of the theatre event comes from ritual significance. It is a familiar set of behavior people engage in within a culture. The model we have developed focuses on the structure of the theatre event, the symbolic elements that create *flow*. But these elements themselves do not provide meaning to audience members, rather they – through assisting *flow* – facilitate the meaning making process out of the specific performance material being performed. The structure itself does not hold significance. We will later see some examples of these specific meanings. Seeing theatre as ritual helps us understand the process through which meaning is created, but it does not help us to understand what that meaning is. I think those meanings lie in audiences integrating their own life experiences with external ones. That is, they create meaning in response to the stories that are presented while they are held in the especially receptive state of *flow*. I will explore the significance of *flow* later. For now, it is adequate to recognize that identifying theatre as a social ritual provides insight into *how* meaning is created, but is not very helpful for identifying what those meanings are. The other models we have considered are more helpful for determining those meanings.

Social Class Identifiers

Also on the societal level, we have seen that contemporary western theatre can be seen in a functional analysis as a social class identifier. By attending theatre in the Berkshires, audience members affirm their belonging in a certain social class. While this expression of social class is inherently present, performance of their own social

class was in no way a primary element of the theatre event in the minds of my informants. However, they were aware of their placement in society as indicated by their ability to see theatre. All of my informants, when asked why they thought people chose not to attend theatre, said it was because theatre is too expensive. They emphasized that they felt that money was the most significant obstacle between audiences and performances. And they understood that their ability to pay the ticket prices meant they were in a different social class than most people. They were cognizant of the expression of their social class, but they did not emphasize it as a reason they attend theatre.

Additionally, not everyone who is active in the Berkshires is of this social class. Several of my informants did not have the financial flexibility required to be able to attend theatre as much as they would like to, so they offer something else in exchange for tickets: labor. Most performance companies in the Berkshires offer free tickets to patrons who volunteer to work as an usher for a performance, which essentially allows patrons to exchange labor instead of money. BTG practices this exchange substitution and several of my informants utilized this method as their primary way of acquiring tickets.

Being an usher is also an inherent expression of social class, but opposite to purchasing a ticket. It is an acknowledgment that one doesn't have enough money to buy a ticket, and must resort to other means to attend shows. Again, the social class implications are barely acknowledged by patrons. I never heard a comment belittling an usher because they chose to usher, nor did I observe any active alienation of ushers. I did notice in my informant pool that most of the ushering informants knew each other but not the informants who did not usher, however I have little to say about this

observation since it would require a significantly larger subject pool to determine if there really is a subtle social selection at play (i.e. Do ushers tend to have communities mainly of other ushers, thus creating two separate classes among Berkshire audiences?), but in the experiences I had at non-ushering events (BTG has a Friday play reading series which is free to attend, and a mix of ushering patrons and non-ushering patrons are present) there were no apparent distinctions between the two kinds of patrons.

The fact that these patrons usher indicate that the significance of attending theatre is not immediately related to the expression of social class. They are willing to publicly lower their social class in order to attend plays. Again, the expression of social class, while inherently present in the market exchange which underlies the theatre event, is not a primary motivator for audiences in the Berkshires to attend theatre. Social class distinctions are only implicitly part of what it means to be an audience member in the Berkshires. The other meanings related to being a dedicated audience member are so affecting that some patrons will find a way to attend theatre regardless of their financial circumstances. For instance, one couple I interviewed shared:

Way back when we were in our twenties... we got the newspaper six months in advance, and we ordered the tickets six months in advance, and we got the last row, up in the heavens. But we went to theatre even at that point. We had no money, we had shared a twenty-cent piece of pie for dessert, and that was all we could afford.

The people I interviewed attend theatre out of a conviction, and the means to that attendance – as well as the expression of social class inherent in it – are of secondary concern. These most dedicated audience members pursue meaning amidst social class implications, not from it.

Thus, my informants do not see attending theatre as a means to distinguish their social class. However, whether or not they see themselves as doing so, the Berkshires contain a highly self-selected group of individuals, by both wealth and taste. The Berkshires are not a place that any of my informants happened to find themselves living in. They all intentionally chose this specific area to retire to. These choices were made as a result of the set of interrelated cultural myths about the class and beauty of the Berkshires.

By far the most interesting piece of data relating to the financial/social class aspect of the Berkshires I found was the fact that my informants bemoaned the price of tickets. They saw it as an obstacle to theatre attendance and asserted that if it were just less expensive, everyone would value seeing theatre in the Berkshires. While this critique further demonstrates that expression of social class is not an explicit expectation of their theatre going, it also illustrates a fundamentally class-distinguishing aspect of the Berkshires.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu describes art appreciation as a decoding process which – especially in the case of “high art” – requires cultural competence. If the specific cultural competence is only acquired through education in a certain strata of society, then art which depends on that competence is a class identifier. Anyone who can’t “get it” can immediately be identified as falling below the work’s social class. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu quotes Suzanne Langer who brings to light an assumption present in the upper class about their art:

In the past, the masses did not have access to art; music, painting, and even books, were pleasures reserved for the rich. It might have been supposed that the poor, the ‘common people,’ would have enjoyed them equally, if they had the chance. But now that everyone can read, go to museums, listen to great music, at least on the radio, the judgment

of the masses about these things has become a reality and through this it has become clear that great art is not a direct sensuous pleasure. Otherwise, like cookies or cocktails, it would flatter uneducated taste as much as cultured taste (1984: 31).

Langer identifies that there has always been the assumption that high art, if exposed and accessible, would be enjoyed by everyone; that it is somehow inherently understandable, a “direct sensuous pleasure.” The dissemination of mass media has provided an opportunity to test this assumption. Now that there is even more access to such art since the publication of *Distinction* (for example, listening to classical music on YouTube), that fact that it is not more popular among the working class demonstrates that it is not universally appealing; high art appreciation requires a particular education and enculturation, and the perception by the bourgeois that their art is actually for everyone is a delusion that denies social class realities, thus maintaining those distinctions.

It seems to me that the attitudes of the general Berkshire audience fit into this pattern, and that the theatre they wish were more accessible would not necessarily be more popular if it were. I would be surprised to find what immediate relevance a show like *Oklahoma* – one of the mainstage productions BTG produced this summer, chosen for its reputation as a classic and because of the entertainment value – would have to a poor, inner-city non-white youth, and why they would choose to see that over something more immediately meaningful to themselves. In the case of theatre for black audiences, Amiri Baraka writes that it must be created by black people, for black people, and be accessible to black communities in order to be truly successful. Theatre created in this way creates meaning for its audience members through immediate relevance to their cultural identity. Much contemporary theatre being produced is incredibly specialized in its intended audience. That is, its meaning and relevance are

very specific. This kind of theatre flourishes only within its own audience, and tends to attract only its intended audience. When theatre in the Berkshires is created for a specific audience other than the Berkshire “elite,” it is not successful.

I was privileged enough to interview the artistic director of BTG during my field work. She told a story of one season where the company mounted a production about the experience of being a black American which starred a cast of black actors. You may remember that I wrote that the Berkshires, and especially the Berkshire audiences, are almost exclusively white. This play, she said, was a complete box office failure. It was not a story that was relevant to the primarily white Berkshire audience. Theatre that is normally produced in this area *is*.

While Berkshire audiences feel that their theatre would be meaningful to anyone, it is a result of a failure to recognize the implicit maintenance of class and social distinctions. Demonstration of social class may not be *why* Berkshire audiences attend theatre (and other arts) or be the source of the meaning they derive from it, but it is certainly part of what is happening in the larger social action, which is distinguishing the Berkshires as a whole from other areas.

There is some tension between this argument and the previously identified motivation of my informants wanting to experience different life perspectives. If people really do want to experience different parts of life, why do they implicitly reject voices of other classes? There are two potential explanations of this paradox: One, that the individuals I happened to interview really do seek completely different life experiences and they would be part of the minority who did attend that play about black Americans, which would bring into question my authority to represent the wider Berkshire audience with this informant pool. Or two, that the Berkshire audience,

while genuinely desiring to explore to other life experiences, is only receptive to those differences if they are interpreted through the voice of the class they identify with. I tend to lean toward the latter, not just because it does not question the merit of my interviews, but because it seems more likely based on my observational experiences outside of my informant pool.

Additionally, being reinterpreted does not diminish the value of those exposures. Even though the representation may be colored by their own experience, Berkshire audiences do receive meaningful insight into other experiences, which can authentically expand their empathy. Reactions to *Southern Comfort* demonstrate this point. Theatre of the bourgeois still has a worthwhile effect even when it is influenced by the voice of its audience; spectators are not merely spinning their wheels in a self-fulfilling artistic gluttony; they are really getting something out of the experience.

Finally, I want to report that the artistic director is aware of the overlap between class and theatre. She described having to play to the “elite” and acknowledged that the work of the company is partially determined by that dependent financial relationship. She said that the theater “will fail if we make it an institution for the elite,” even describing the tension between the desires of artists and the desires of donors as a “war.” There is a general aesthetic among theatre-makers which drives them to attempt to be accessible and relevant to as wide of an audience as possible (ideally, humanity as a whole), or at least not to be confined by the tastes of a single class. However, much of professional theatre is seen in a much less optimistic way. The following quote is from James R. Brandon, a theatre historian, as quoted by Peacock in *Rites of Modernization*:

[theatre] is a cultural appendage... a luxury cultivated by sophisticates, a commercial property exploited by profit-seeking businessmen, a

marginal and often desperate way of life for the artist, a haven of comfortable clichés for the bourgeois ticket buyer (1968: 3).

Brandon's words express a common evaluation of theatre in contemporary society.

The artistic director of BTG sees this placement with the elite as an obstacle to creating truly great theatre and works against it.

While much more could potentially be said on theatre's role in creating class and power distinctions, especially in the area of the Berkshires, this topic is not the primary concern of this work and will be left at this point in analysis. The most pertinent observations are that Berkshire audience members are aware of some class distinctions which are made by the theatre (consequences of high ticket prices) but they do not conceptualize these implicit class distinctions as a substantial component of their theatre experience. These class distinctions do, in fact, happen, though they seem more to distinguish the Berkshires as a whole from other areas than they do make distinctions within the Berkshires. And these distinctions are part of why the Berkshires have attracted and maintain "high art" and "high culture," reputations which have encouraged individuals to retire there. In this way, the social distinction resulting from taste in theatre has influenced why these people go to theatre, but it is not an immediate, conscious influence. The lack of emphasis on this element demonstrates that there are many other meanings at play. Though no less real, it is secondary and implicit, and like the other models we have discussed, it is only a part of what attending theatre means to audiences.

As a final note, I'd like to mention that both theatre-makers and theatre-consumers tend to distance themselves from the significance of money in the event. In what seems to be an endeavor to make the theatre event seem as little about money as possible, advertisements encourage consumers to become a "patron of the arts" by just

purchasing a season subscription. They tell the consumer that they will not only be a customer, but a patron, a title they can be proud of. The market exchange of purchasing a ticket is obscured by describing it as a donation to the arts. By adding to the semantic load of purchasing a ticket, the prospect of spending \$50 on an evening becomes more palatable. On the side of the theatre-consumers, I already have described how my informants rarely discussed money. In fact, they only discussed money when they were either a) explaining why they usher or b) answering the question “Why do you think people *don’t* attend theatre?” Theatre-makers and theatre-consumers work together to distance the theatre event as far from dirty, evil money as they can and to idealize it a pseudo-utopian endeavor dependent on the generosity of its loving supporters. Are we wrong to idealize it in this way? I don’t necessarily think so. I think there are less than pleasant social realities related to contemporary professional theatre, but their presence does not exclude other, more likable meanings from being present. As I said, even if a work is interpreted through the vision of a particular class, it doesn’t mean that work can’t still create true empathy for its audience. We may find distasteful social trends when examining contemporary professional theatre, but we also find enlightening human experiences. We will see examples of these experiences after considering the two cross-cultural models.

Examining the Cross-Cultural Models

Potential for Social Change

Ludruk provided an example of a theatre tradition where the structure of theatre was used as a vehicle to support social change. In the Berkshires, there wasn’t any explicit conversation I had with informants about theatre effecting social change.

This aspect of theatre, which has been so clearly identified in other theatre traditions and by western theatre artists, was absent from the meaning that my informants made as audience members. What limited discussion of social structure there was with informants has already been reported in the previous section. The social structure has already been discussed in the previous section and the ways in which Berkshire theatre operates to maintain social class have already been demonstrated.

The potential for theatre to be a social critique depends entirely on the material that is performed, instead of the structure of the event itself. There has been some material in the Berkshires that could fit the description of effecting social change, such as *Extremities*, which comments on the rights of victims of rape. However, most of the material presented in the Berkshires does not have this agenda, and social critique is not present in the minds of audience members. Even discussions of *Extremities* were limited to individual empathetic impacts instead of its significance to the American judicial system (see the section on Outcome-Based Meaning in this chapter). While theatre in general has the potential to be a social critique, it simply was not consciously present to my Berkshire informants as such. Theatre in the Berkshires is not significant to audience members as a social critique, or even because it has the potential to be a social critique. Because commentary is dependent on the material and not on the structure, Berkshire theatre will always have the potential to comment on society, but, considering the discussion on social class maintenance, it is clear that its meaning for my informants lies elsewhere.

Religious Meaning

The Ramlila provides an example of theatre which provides religious meaning. Again, it was quickly clear that this also would not be a model that would explain

much about attending theatre in the Berkshires. Most notably, audiences of contemporary professional theatre lack a unified religious identity, so the structure is inherently unable to provide consistent religious meaning, which is highly contextual and specific. Where any individual growing up in North India would know the story of Rama by the time they were 5, there are no such assumptions that can be made for the contemporary American theatre audience, at least in respect to religion. The theater can still provide meaning which confirms cultural identity rather than religious in a similar way, but again that meaning is largely dependent on the content of the play. Instead of religious meaning, comparing Berkshire theatre to the Ramlila does give us a way to consider professional theatre as a cultural identifier, analogous to the way Ramlila is a religious identifier. It simply must reproduce the same values that one becomes acculturated with growing up, just like an individual is acculturated with the story of Rama in North India. Any narrative resulting from a culture must in part confirm the cultural values from which it sprang.

I would also like to briefly consider the ways in which the Ramlila has meaning beyond the religious realm. Directly comparing to other identified impacts, Schechner discusses escapism as an impact of Ramlila: "In a real way, Ramlila provides for a number of people a temporary relief from this grind; a restive season, a time-out," (1985: 161). The Ramlila immerses its spectators in an extraordinary time and experience, in opposition with the daily grind of life in Northern India. Similarly to theatre in the Berkshires, escapism is not said to be one of Ramlila's primary functions, but it is acknowledged as one of many outcomes.

However, I find it likely that these same secular motivations and impacts, though marginal in religiously-meaningful performance traditions, do still occur

within those performances. Perhaps there is secular meaning couched within religious meaning. While Schechner notes escapism as one impact of the Ramlila, there is opportunity to discuss evidence for this occurrence in other traditions since it has not been the focus of ethnographic work on theatre traditions, so it will remain a hypothesis at present. But if it is the case that participants in religious theatre traditions also experience secular significance similar to that of this Berkshire audience, then perhaps the reverse is also true: secular audiences of western theatre can also have pseudo-religious experiences. Some theatre makers talk about theatre as a pseudo-religious experience, where actors are given the same transformative powers that priests have during communion, or where the collective experience is the same as ones in a church. But again, without appropriate ethnographic data it remains a hypothesis. These are just some of the questions which arise when considering theatre traditions that are primarily religious in nature.

Because of the shared religious significance among its spectators, the Ramlila is a cultural identifier: it validates the cultural identity of its participants and has a greater potential to unify the identity of its audience. Schechner quotes one spectator as saying “Each goes to Ramlila as an individual but returns from it as part of a group,” (1985: 158). This formation of group identity is the same assertion that we said western theatre makers make about western theatre, even though it was not observed in my ethnographic data of the Berkshire audience. It is not clear if the observable indications of community-formation which I was looking for in the Berkshires are present in the Ramlila of Ramnagar (Are lasting community bonds formed? Do spectators see each other outside of the event?), but given the sheer size of the audience, it seems unlikely that they are. However, it seems to me that the

Ramlila differs in its potential for unifying its audience because it tells a culturally identifying story. It reminds its audience of the morals and significance within the story of Rama that every spectator has heard since they were children, and thereby reminds them of their own cultural identity. It is because of this already shared identity that the Ramlila has the power to unify, in a Durkheimian “cultural effervescence.” Any unifying force contemporary western theatre has, since it cannot operate through religious identity, relies on more fundamental human qualities: empathetic emotional experiences.

These two models, rather than being effective ways of understanding the value of theatre attendance to Berkshire audience members, suggest that the structure of theatre has a wide range of possible applications. Just between these three case studies, we can see that theatre can take many different forms within different cultural contexts. In ludruk is it an agent of social change, in the Ramlila it provides religious meaning, and in the Berkshires it is something else entirely. The fundamental qualities of theatre are present in all cases, but with radically different applications. To understand this variation perhaps we can think of theatre cross-culturally as a structure, which, because of the value humans place on storytelling and because of the ritual aspects which can draw a diverse audience, happens to be easily applied within a variety of different social forces. In other words, the unique structure of theatre is a malleable tool which is easily adapted to the needs of any particular area. This flexibility would explain why there are so many different theatrical traditions worldwide which share fundamental qualities but operate in such different ways. The three considered in this paper are just a few examples. It is just a hypothesis at this point, since the goal of this project is to understand the Berkshire audience, but I think

it is a hypothesis worth considering to better understand the independent development of theatre structures worldwide.

Returning to the main argument, we have easily dismissed these two models as adequate descriptions of the meaning of the Berkshire audience. We have now broken down all of the models we have developed and seen how none of them individually is a complete description. It is a synthesized view that most fully encompasses what it means to be an audience member in this region. So the question remains, with each of these sets of meanings developed, considered, and subsequently rejected (or adapted), is there anything left that has not been described? Are there any other meanings that have not fallen under these categories? We've said ludruk is an agent of social change, the Ramlila provides religious meaning, and Berkshire theatre is something else entirely. What is it?

What's Left?

Up until this point, we have built up various models for understanding the meaning of the theatre event and systematically broken them down into ways of understanding *parts* of the meaning of the theatre event. We can understand each of these models as describing one piece of the jigsaw puzzle which assembles to form a holistic understanding of Berkshire audience members. But these models have missed one important piece: the humanity of the experience. We have broken down the structure and found meanings within it, but the center of the puzzle has yet to be filled.

What remains, in short, are stories. Narratives: the vast array of performance material that has been placed within the theatre structure and presented to the people with whom I have spoken. All audience members only experience concrete examples of the theatre event; they see *a play* that moves them, and then become interested in

plays in general. At this point, I think the best way to approach a true understanding of what it is to attend theatre in the Berkshires is to consider some of these concrete examples from my informants which have not fit into the aforementioned models. These are deeply personal and meaningful experiences which have occurred to people in audience seats. One informant said to me: “There’s a moment when you see a great piece of theatre where it’s extremely uplifting, and it leaves you where you never forget it.” Most of my informants had at least one or two stories of particularly impactful audience experiences. They often recited them to me with vigor. These moments were ones in which they felt theatre was most successful, moments which most fully described the meaning they derived from being theatre audience members. I have chosen two of the most fully articulated stories to report. This first is from a woman who has been a BTG subscriber for several years. No doubt her choice to continue to subscribe was influenced by her experience watching the production of *Amadeus* she describes:

My very first show that I saw my first [BTG] subscription was *Amadeus*, and I really connected to Salieri, his struggle with God, and at the time I was struggling with God. And I think there are certain times when you see a play that you connect with a certain actor, a certain performer, a certain character. And I think that happens to me quite a bit when I’m seeing a show. That one particular character will really speak to you, or speak to me, and it does make a difference. You know? You kind of like connect to that person... I remember when I really connected with Salieri, with the trouble he was having trying to connect with god, and I was going through the same thing, it’s like you have this companion. You know it’s like this companionship that you’re sharing, you know, what’s going on in your life with that person that’s in a play... it made it feel like, okay, I can sit back and go home and think about it, and not worry about it, you know that I wasn’t alone in the struggle.

This experience of being an audience member provided her with a resolution to an internal conflict she was experiencing at the time. The storytelling experience of the theatre provided her with an external life to compare with her own life, in the same way that we inherently make meaning out of any narrative we hear. This particular experience, where someone in the audience feels less alone after seeing a character struggling just like they are, is one that is personally very motivating to me as a theatre-maker. The value of experiences like these is very clear to me, as it resolves suffering. I believe this is what Arthur Miller meant when he wrote: “I regard the theater as a serious business, one that makes or should make man more human, which is to say, less alone.” But this experience is one example of a wider range of highly meaningful experiences. For this informant, the meaning, while substantial, was very concrete. The following is an example where the meaning was not so concrete:

There was a play two or three seasons ago at Shakespeare [& Co – another theatre company in the area], which was a two person play... these were two old actors portraying these two intellectuals very late in life. And, the play was okay. It was one of those plays that they used to do at the end of the season with minimal acting preparation, but they just went up there and they did it. But these were two really seasoned actors. And there was a moment at the end of the play when [the male actor] said something like: ‘I’m sorry I haven’t been wonderful.’ And [his wife] says: ‘I don’t want wonderful. I want you.’ ... [The experience] was like all of life summed up in a tiny number of words. Delicately, slowly, profoundly. And it was, just like- you couldn’t breathe. And I’ll never forget that instant... It totally boiled down what our lives as humans is about... I’ll never forget the words, I’ll never forget the emotion, I’ll never forget the idea, and I’ll never forget that sort of ineffable, you know my breath taken away at that instant. And again, I don’t know how it changed my life, but it was clearly a life-changing event.

Frankly, I find it difficult to adequately discuss these two experiences. These are examples where the informants speak for themselves. The former was significant

enough that she found a profound connection that gave her solace. The later was a moment so saturated with meaning and value that it contained what felt like “all of life.” These are moments where, for my informants, theatre was successful. This is the kind of meaning that attending theatre holds. The possibility of significance perfectly crystallized during a moment of utter captivation. These highly impactful experiences occur in response to the performed stories. The structure of the theatre event, which admittedly was the primary focus of my field work and interviews since it is easier to observe, facilitates these meaningful opportunities by providing a space but does not itself create them. It is the reflexive experience of experiencing concrete narratives that creates the central meaning for audience members.

These meanings are what drive dedicated audiences to come to the theatre. It is not predictable (beyond knowing that if you’re not captivated, it won’t happen), like gambling every time one attends a performance. An informant says it best. Referring to his profound experience at the Shakespeare & Co show quoted above: “Hoping for that is what I go to theatre for. I know I won’t get it most times. I know I won’t get it anywhere else. And there are a lot of other good things that happen even when that doesn’t happen.”²¹

These meaningful experiences occur when one is in *flow*, when one is in a cognitive harmony which allows sustained focus. In this state, one is particularly receptive to meanings because there is less “white noise.” Without the distractions of observing oneself, being bored, or thinking of other things, narratives are much more rapidly dissected and reconstructed into meanings in this state, and captivated

²¹ When described in these terms, the most frequent theatre-goers can appear to be exhibiting semi-addictive behavior, pursuing a kind of emotional drug.

audience members can almost automatically construct these meanings. The two anecdotes above which exemplify the center of the Berkshire audience experience (or, I believe, the professional western theatre audience experience) occur within *flow*, which allowed our *Amadeus* spectator to deconstruct Salieri and see herself in his story, and allowed our other informant to see a meaning that resonated deeply with, probably, his values of love, commitment, and perhaps his own view of himself. *Flow* is quintessential to the potency of the theatre event for my dedicated theatre-attending informants, and provides the experiences which mark the center of the jigsaw puzzle that composes all the meaning of their theatre attendance. Additionally, this necessary condition of *flow* helps explain why captivation has been found to be most highly correlated with audience satisfaction in survey-based studies (Brown & Novak 2007: 11). This is the full significance of *flow* in the theatre event: it is the optimal state to facilitate the meaning-making process of experiencing narratives.

While I do believe that this *flow*-facilitated meaning-making through narratives is descriptive of western professional theatre audiences in general, there is something that I find to be particular to Berkshire audience members: the significance of their ages. I have acknowledged that the Berkshires are a retirement-heavy area and that most of my informants were themselves retired (and those who weren't retired could be described as well into middle age). Many of my informants created substantial meaning from attending theatre relating to their age. Sentiments such as "It keeps us young" were consistently echoed in interviews. One informant said: "You can pick out the ones who are caving into old age." Because he continued to regularly attend theatre, he was not one of those people. Another informant emphasized the "edutainment" meaning of his experience, stating: "As I come to accept a person's

mortality, I am trying to do as much as I can,” referring specifically to attending as many performances as possible. My informant’s perceptions of their own ages make attending theatre even more meaningful. By attending theatre, Berkshire audience members are affirming themselves as active, living agents in the world. Importantly, it is more a way to avoid the cultural exile of aging than it is a swan song to one’s life; none of my informants seemed to view theatre attendance as part of them living out their final days (perhaps that’s too macabre a thought for anyone to live with). While the significance of it related to their ages, instead of an acceptance of death, it is a rejection of fading into aging. My informants are seeking life. They are seeking new experiences, ones that expose them to new points of view. They are seeking moving emotional impacts that contain the profound significance of life. The meaning of attending theatre in the Berkshires is the significance of being alive.

This significance is what’s left after we’ve considered each of the various models for understanding theatre attendance. We now have systematically discussed every element of theatre attendance which I found to be important in the course of my field work, from the simple answer “to escape” all the way to the religious significance of theatre across cultures. We have found that each of these models provides a potential piece of the meaning of attending theatre, none adequate by themselves. And we have seen that the meanings are legion, and a holistic understanding requires a multifaceted perspective. Attending theatre does not mean one thing; it is a very complex social event that requires extensive consideration to understand.

So, to return to our initial question: What does it mean to attend theatre in the Berkshires? It means a lot of things. An escape, an entertainment, a declaration of

identity, an enlightenment. But in the Berkshires it is not *about* those things. It is not about being entertained, it isn't about consumption, it isn't a social critique, it isn't a cultural affirmation. It has the potential to be those things, but it is not. It is about individuals integrating their lives with external narratives and affirming their active participation in the world in the process. This is the center of what it means to be an audience member in the Berkshires.

Thus, my discussion of the case study of the Berkshire audience is complete. This is one set of audience members at a very particular place at a very particular time. It is my belief that certain aspects of this audience reflect wider trends in contemporary western theatre-goers, such as the central meaning of digesting stories, while others seem very particular to the region, such as the significance of age. I also think that the social impacts, namely defining and maintaining class distinctions, operate in other professional theatre contexts. Whatever can and can't be extrapolated from this case study, it is clear that attending theatre in the Berkshires is a multifaceted experience. It has many pieces to it which each demand to be understood and acknowledged. Also, my informant pool consisted of the most dedicated audience members. To extrapolate this case study to other kinds of audience members, it is my assumption that the meaning they derive is only different in quantity, not quality. That is, even the most frequent audience members in the Berkshires experience the same things as other audience members, but in a more profound way. The same meanings are present, but maybe in a different balance.

Attending theatre in the Berkshires has been shown to be a deeply personal, highly valuable experience for its audiences. Looking ahead, I can certainly predict that watching plays is something that these people will do for as long as they possibly

can, continuing to find meaning, value, and significance from sitting quietly in the dark.

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