

Why can't you take smartphone photos in a theatre? (guest blog)

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2014/11/07/why-cant-you-take-smartphone-photos-in-a-theatre-guest-blog/

2014-11-7

This article by LSE student Vaios Papanagnou

Actor David Cromer walks into the stalls of the [Almeida theatre](#) with one hand raised way above his head, holding a mobile phone. He comes in from the audience entrance and looks like he could too be sitting next to us, a man in his late 40s, casually dressed. He stands right in front of the first row of seats, showing the phone to the audience without speaking. We understand that this is the time for us to silence our own phones. He then says “This play is called *Our Town*. It was written by Thornton Wilder; directed by David Cromer” and, as he recites the first lines from the play he also acts in as the narrating Stage Manager, he still holds the phone in his hands.



The official image – David Cromer in *Our Town* at the Almeida Theatre [photo by Marc Brenner]

The play is not performed on a stage, but rather in the stalls of the theatre right among the viewers, and the actors make use only of a few chairs and tables to enact the life episodes of the residents of Grover's Corner, the 80-year-old iconic small town of American theatre. They are also dressed casually, in what could be their own clothes, or in what the director thought these would be, and speak in their regional accents.

The stalls stay fully illuminated throughout the first act by the theatre lights – not the typical array of spotlights but dozens of ordinary ceiling lamps. And as we are all – actors and audience – at the same level, no stage to separate the performance from the real, no spotlight to distinguish, it seems that the director's intention is realised and our own everyday intermeshes with the small and big events of this theatrical town.

Some of us might think that what takes place in front of us could be our life, our friends, our neighbours, our parents and lovers, our children. The phone comes up again during the play, the stage manager checks the time on it, fiddles with it. It is a theatrical mechanism employed to bridge the gap between the scripted reality and the actual

one. The smartphone is a symbol of the every day. It organises and captures all our minutiae. And some of us choose to share them on social media.

Copyright Issues

I find it appropriate to share a photo of what I see in front of me on Instagram. At the first break, when the lights are still on I take out my phone and take two snapshots of the stalls. The Almeida is a gorgeous theatre both on the inside and outside. A minute later an employee of the theatre comes over and asks me to delete them. As he mumbles something about copyright issues in an overtly apologetic tone I understand he feels as awkward about this as I do, which is probably why I somehow fail to press delete in front of him and he fails to notice.

A theatrical performance is a par excellence photogenic subject matter. These are spectacles masterfully designed to be impressive: they are imbued with the physicality of people trained to re-enact life in front of audiences, and for the better part are framed by scenery and lighting designed to be aesthetically excellent. Even more than that they are unique: they are ephemeral acts performed in set time and places often with the dynamic variations that theatre people cherish vis a vis their stable filmed performances. And they are public gatherings of the best kind, people mingle over a drink at the foyer and on their way to their seats, their conversations often enriched with the ideas of the plays. All these make them by all accounts events with great social media value.

This is value produced by all who attend the performance and all who have worked for it, and cannot be awarded to one single person or organisation. It is at the same time shared and unique to everyone, for some distilled in the clapping and the congratulations, for others in a mere photographic memento of a night in the theatre.

Social Amplification

I do not believe that a theatre would reduce a play into copyrighted material if for no other reason than it makes no business sense. There is absolutely no commercial value in an amateur shot of a play or the inside of a theatre. And even more, visibility on social media can only lead to a higher box office turnover; these are after all tools that amplify the word of mouth.

I could accept practical reasons for discouraging photos, but they could easily be overcome with common sense; if a theatre audience can be trusted to mute their phones they can certainly be trusted not to use their camera flashes.

This is more evident of a cultural conflict. Theatre is often defined as an experience only truly accessible by a knowledgeable caste. A hermetic world of people in the industry, scholars and journalists who affirm their expertise to interpret the intertextual nuances of scripts and performances. A certain distrust towards the non traditional theatrical elements can also be associated with this perspective, and in this sense a performance supported by advanced technology might be more suitable for a West End spectacle rather than a modern Ibsen staging.

I understand the effort and pain required to acquire expertise and appreciate the talent experts possess, especially in the creative industries. But an opening up of this world to the social media can hardly be seen as an invitation to the hoi polloi. The dominant project of the 20th century's theatre was challenging traditional conventions and establishing this art form as high art for a wide audience. Maybe a photo on social media is just another small way of going about it. If not, it certainly is more interesting than yet another photo of a cat.

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