

Yes, Paddy, There Is a Theater Audience

In the foreseeable future, I see nothing for me on Broadway. It's really because there are no audiences. The theater has become a kind of unnecessary institution.

—Paddy Chayefsky, New York Times, January 12, 1975

Wrong, Mr. Chayefsky, though it's easy to see why you and so many others considered Broadway moribund in recent years. But this season things have changed. Not only is there a Broadway audience; there are three: the old guard has become active again, and two groups of newcomers have emerged, encouraged by more efficient ticket distribution and more effective advertising.

Audience I consists of the remaining dinner-jacket elite who occasionally venture south of Fifty-seventh Street and west of Fifth Avenue, for a show and dinner at Sardi's, ladies who attend Wednesday matinees in little flocks, executives who wine, dine, and entertain clients, wealthy couples who go to see (or be seen at) the latest hit in order to stock up on theater chatter for upcoming cocktail parties.

Clearly, Mr. Chayefsky had written this audience off as incapable of appreciating anything but sentimental froth

and bubbly musicals of the sort they've been offered in recent years: *A Little Night Music*, *Irene*, *Gypsy*, *Lorelei*. But this crowd is changing, getting tougher, more liberal. It has placidly endured a nude scene in *Equus*, listening to a young boy graphically describe his sexual-religious worship of a horse; it has watched Sandy Dennis's repeated abortive attempts at suicide in *Absurd Person Singular*; it has staunchly supported *The Ritz*, a comedy set in a hotel whose patrons are primarily male homosexuals; and it has even applauded Murray Schisgal's *All Over Town*, a farce based on the black male's supposed sexual superiority and his infallible appeal to white females. Hardly your conventional theater-party fare.

If those theatergoers still don't please Mr. Chayefsky, there's Audience II, made up of a younger, hipper, post-Beatles, post-*Hair* generation, which doesn't expect its musicals to stay comfortably behind the proscenium arch, but to spill out around the audience, à la *Candide*, and which does expect its "straight" plays to reflect the fact that much of urban life is not "straight." This is the audience that now really determines the economic welfare of many Broadway

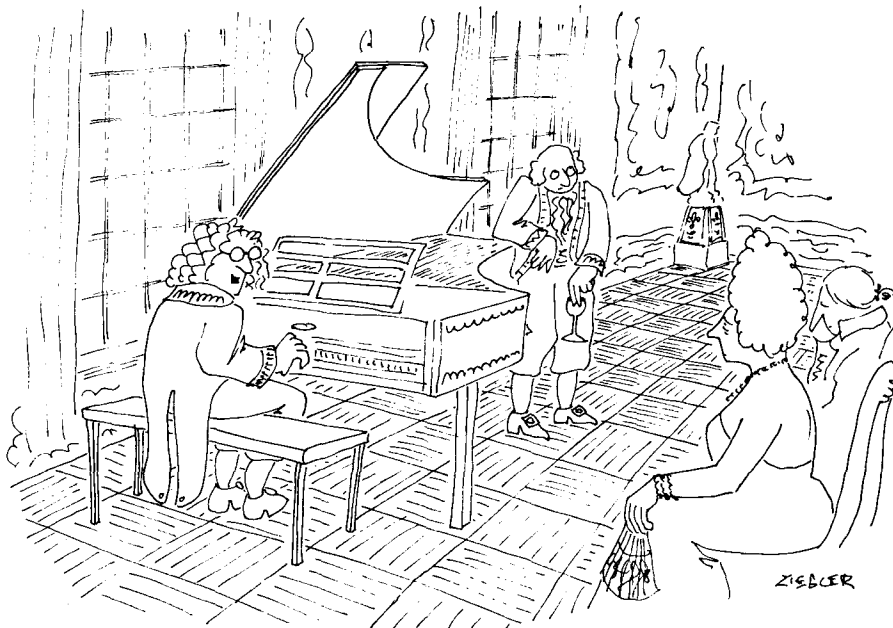
shows. *Shenandoah*, a lifeless imitation of *Oklahoma!*, loped along, while *The Wiz*, a black version of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* full of finger-poppin', jive-talkin', very cool characters, played to full houses every night.

Though Audience II may still attach status to sitting in the orchestra, though it may still equate the success of an evening with the amount of money spent, and though it's not necessarily more liberal politically than Audience I, it is altering the old images associated with Broadway. The "average" theatergoers are no longer a middle-aged man and his mink-coated wife who prize their tickets for their inaccessibility and their outrageous price, and who see only what Clive Barnes recommends. Rather, they are more likely to be a denim-clad couple (though admittedly a diamond-studded denim outfit may cost more than the mink) who sandwich their theater dates in between backgammon tournaments and discothequing.

This audience includes everyone from teenyboppers to swingers fending off middle age. It consists of single men and women, married and unmarried couples, has a larger proportion of blacks and homosexuals than Audience I does, and is a prime target for the Fifties nostalgia shows (*Grease* and *Dance With Me*), for the "youth-oriented" shows (*The Magic Show*, a concoction of first-rate hokum by a young, long-haired magician), as well as for the plays dealing with contemporary psychological and sexual problems: *Absurd Person Singular*, *Equus*, *The Ritz*, *Same Time Next Year*, *P.S. Your Cat Is Dead*, *In Praise of Love*, and *All Over Town*.

Audience II is also ready to support the more off-beat productions on Broadway, like *The Rocky Horror Show*, a blend of Boris Karloff movies, rock music, and transvestism—a production one might have expected (and preferred) to find tucked away in some wretched loft in Soho. In general, Audience II's tastes run to the new and different more than to the familiar and approved; and, though the group may include a number of unemployed ex-stockbrokers, it is financially stable enough to risk wasting \$10 or \$12 per ticket. Even the youngest members of this audience have money and are as ready to spend it on Broadway shows as on the latest record album.

Audience III is less affluent. Comprising students, blue-collar workers, and professionals, this audience is largely the



"After that I wrote Symphony no. 8 in A Minor, which goes something like this. . . ."

creation of TKTS, the Times Square Theater Center, which sells half-price tickets for the same day's performance. According to the current TKTS financial report, its patrons are younger, less wealthy, and better educated (median age 30, median income \$15,800, 70 percent college graduates) than most customers who buy directly from the box office (median age 40, median income \$17,100, 45 percent college graduates).

Although Audience III's impact is small in relation to box-office grosses (during the first year of TKTS's operation it accounted for about 6 percent of Broadway's income), there is no question that it has contributed, and will continue to contribute, to a basic sociological change, making Broadway less an Elite Street and more a vital entertainment source available to a much broader public.

Economic pressures, restricted travel, the presence of several good shows and many big stars, and the current appetite for entertainment are all partially responsible for the emergence of these three audiences. But there is another factor that has been more important than all the others combined in the creation of a new, younger audience: the increased use of radio and television advertising, which has parlayed that hunger for entertainment into a massive compulsion to consume. If nothing else, this season will go down in history as the year producers finally became aware of the power of the tube.

Last spring, for example, *Pippin* had been doing six months of good business, but went into a little slump before summer. After an excellent television spot, its box-office sales perked up immediately. After that, an effective television campaign was launched for *Raisin* (although the TV spot distorted the production, making the story of a black family's struggle for survival look like an African dance spectacular), and *The Magic Show* recovered from a bad start soon after it was advertised on TV. But *The Wiz* offers the best proof of how television, traditionally a threat to legitimate theater, has been employed to bolster Broadway. Clive Barnes, the *New York Times* critic whose negative reviews have been known to close shows overnight, gave *The Wiz* a fair to middling review, but the producers countered with a \$45,000 TV campaign, and within two weeks it became the hottest show in town, its weekly grosses shooting from \$70,000 to \$110,000.

Even though it's expensive (it may cost as much as \$30,000 to produce a good commercial and another \$4,000 per minute of prime time), TV ads reach a newer, broader, younger audience, and the total TV investment may buy far more attention than will the \$14,000 you pay for a full-page ad in the Sunday *New York Times*.

There's also a new Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway crowd emerging, too. The classic long-haired, bead-and-bell types have been replaced by an apparently more conservative group, though shock-thresholds have altered in Greenwich Village as surely as they have on Broadway. The audience that has kept the primarily nude, utterly lewd sex musical *Let My People Come* running for over a year, and that supported the female impersonator Charles Pierce for an extended engagement last winter, is basically a middle-class, suburban, middle-aged, heterosexually coupled crowd. At a recent production at the La Mama Experimental Theater, which used to be the most avant of avant-garde theaters, several white-haired ladies seemed to enjoy thoroughly the spectacle of scant-

ily clad prostitutes prancing about, delivering obscenities and sexy dialogue on cue. And the Theater Development Fund, which offers vouchers to students, teachers, servicemen, churchworkers and the like, allowing them to see Off-Off-Broadway shows at about one dollar apiece, reports that a good portion of its patrons are over 60, men and women who can no longer afford Broadway prices and have been forced to limit themselves to revivals by small companies in out-of-the-way theaters.

In short, Mr. Chayefsky, there are audiences. The orchestras of plush legitimate theaters may be filled with sophisticated 16-year-olds and millionaires in blue jeans while some of Broadway's older ex-patrons are sitting in the bleachers in drafty Greenwich Village lofts—but the spectators are there. The question to be asked now is why America's playwrights have not sought them out before this, why—with the single exception of Edward Albee—our writers are avoiding the stage. Could it be that it's not the public but the playwright for whom theater has become an "unnecessary institution"? □

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Seeing Things

by Hollis Alpert



The "Python" perpetrators (left to right): Eric Idle, Graham Chapman, Michael Palin, John Cleese, Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam—"Entirely fruitless, irreverent, ridiculous, madly insane."

The Quest of Monty Python

The lines extended around the block from Cinema II, New York's fancy little arthouse, when it presented the first preview of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. How odd, then, that the film's creators and perpetrators had to shop around for several months before

they were able to find a distributor for the funniest movie since . . . well, since *Young Frankenstein*. Wasn't anyone in the business aware that "Monty Python's Flying Circus" had been taking ratings away from most of New York's commercial channels during its late-Sunday-night

showings on WNET, the PBS station, and that some 50 other PBS stations around the country had taken on the BBC program with the same audience response? It seems that millions of our young have taken to heart the six-member group that writes, directs, and performs (and also animates) the brilliant nonsense.

WHO IS MONTY PYTHON? He doesn't exist, of course, or, as one of the group puts it, "He is nowhere and everywhere." The humor of the six zanies comes from what is now a British tradition that began with "The Goon Show" and invaded the stage with *Beyond the Fringe*, and, more recently, *Good Evening*. While all concerned claim that what they do is utterly without redeeming social value, they are merely demonstrating becoming modesty. There is considerable social and entertainment value in pricking pretension, satirizing stuffiness, and upending excessive solemnity. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the six—Terry Gilliam, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin—have taken on the entire King Arthur legendry and smashed it into gorgeous bits and skits.

The fun begins with the title credits. Why let that traditional display of egotism go unscathed? Not only are the credits without redeeming informational value; they are translated into what appears to be pidgin Swedish. They (the six) are unconcerned about our identifying who is who or who does what. I managed to identify Graham Chapman as King Arthur, who lopes along, horse-

Film Notes

Le Secret. An intriguing French thriller in which an escapee from an institution for the criminally insane is either a homicidal maniac or a journalist in possession of knowledge of such import and secrecy that his death is called for, along with the elimination of anyone he might contact. He is befriended by a writer and a sculptress living in a crumbly chateau in Carcassonne. The pair is thus endangered whether he is insane or not. Robert Enrico's direction is clever and fairly convincing, and he is aided by exceptional performers, namely Jean-Louis Trintignant as the escapee, Philippe Noiret as the middle-aged writer with a desire for adventure, and Marlene Jobert as his young artist wife. We never do learn the exact nature of the secret,

but that doesn't matter. What does matter is the growing atmosphere of fear and menace as the three make their way through the French countryside, pursued by the implacable forces of society. Enrico may have intended some metaphorical implication of a kind fashionable in contemporary "film noir," but it is the suspense element that predominates, and, for the genre, it is sustained very well.

The Invitation. Swiss films are showing considerable quality of late, and this study of a meek man who inherits his mother's holdings has poignance and humor that, at times, is quite cruel. Rémy, the middle-aged hero, buys a country estate with his new fortune and invites his office co-workers for a day-long party. The types who arrive represent a satirical cross section of middle-class Swiss so-

ciety. There is the office cutup who regards himself as the answer to the romantic dreams of the young women in the office. There is the pompous manager, his stuffy elderly assistant, and his middle-aged secretary. One can hardly say that a good time is had by all, even though a butler hired for the occasion keeps everyone's glass filled constantly with champagne. There is one trouble with the film: as the party descends into boredom, the film tends to get somewhat somnolent, too. Michel Robin, as Rémy, has quiet charm. The butler, played by François Simon, steals the show, though, as he insists on elegance and grand manners in the midst of a group poorly equipped for such style.

Mandingo. This attempts to show us the brutalizing nature of slavery (as if