

Attending the Performing Arts: Audience Etiquette

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Now that we are returning to a semblance of normalcy and in-person arts events are once again occurring, we could all use a refresher on audience etiquette when attending a performing arts event such as theatre, dance, or music. Whether you are a frequent patron of the arts or discovered the arts during isolation and are now ready to incorporate event attendance into your social activities, these tips can help you be an attentive audience participant. Arts organizations are working diligently to build and diversify their audience base. By learning and practicing these expected behaviors, we are ensuring everyone a better experience as an arts audience.

WHAT IS AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE?

As cited in the Ontario Arts Curriculum 1-8 Glossary (2009), audience etiquette “is the acceptable audience behavior for a dance or drama performance”. An arts audience is a group of people who come together to collectively witness some form of art. This group of people should agree on what the shared behavior, or decorum, should be during their time together. This unspoken contract creates an atmosphere that would best allow everyone, audience and artists, to enjoy the event. Audience etiquette is essentially good manners specific to an event. Expectations are different in different events; what is expected, or condoned at a rock concert will be different from expected behavior at a symphony. While we want all arts to be accessible, we still need them to be enjoyable for the whole audience.

WHY IS AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE IMPORTANT?

Audience etiquette is a code of conduct for public events. The purpose of these shared behaviors is to provide respect to the

performers, other audience members, and the performance location. For performing arts, the performers are present in real time, live, and they are there to give their best art to this particular audience at this particular time. There is no screen or recording that can be backed up, replayed, paused, or the volume adjusted. This collection of people and time will only happen once, never to be repeated. This gives the opportunity for magic to happen. But in order for that magic to happen the audience must come together as a mass participant in the exchange of art and energy along with the performers. Your response-be it positive, negative, or neutral-is felt by the performers and has an impact on the overall experience.

ATTENDING THE PERFORMING ARTS: THEATRE, DANCE, AND MUSIC

According to a survey conducted by Nielsen Scarborough in spring 2016, over 47 million Americans had attended a live theatre event within the past month and around 73.5 million people had visited a performing art event in 2013. The National Endowment for the Arts show that number dropping in 2018 by 10 million. During COVID, we had the opportunity to watch recorded theatre, concert, and dance productions from the safety of our own home. Now that we are re-emerging, there are likely many individuals who may experience a theatre production or concert in person for the first time.

Attending a live performing arts event can be a magical experience, whether it be a play, a dance recital, or a symphony. It is a unique moment in time when performers and audience members gather together to share in an exchange of energy through words, music, movement, and emotions.

10 STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

1. *Arrive early*

The advertised time is the time for the performance to begin. Please arrive early enough to purchase tickets, use the restroom, find seats, and get settled. It is recommended to arrive at least 30-60 minutes prior to showtime, depending on the size of the venue.

2. *Dress appropriately*

Do your research to find out the appropriate dress for the event. Appropriate dress for arts events can range from casual to elegant ball gowns and tuxedos. Remove hats.

3. *Turn off all electronics*

Unless you have an "on call" job or urgent situation, turn off electronics. If you must have a device on, sit in the aisle near the exit and put your phone on silent--triple check to be sure. Leave the room and ensure the door shuts behind you before answering. No texting, no checking the time, and no scrolling.

4. *No photography or video*

Photos and video are distracting to the performers and other audience members. It can create unsafe circumstances for the performers, especially flash photos. It is also usually illegal due to copyright laws.

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5. *Use the restroom prior to the start of the show and at intermission*

You should never interrupt a performance to go to the restroom. If you have a medical need, sit next to the door or on the aisle to create less distraction. People will understand and overlook this circumstance because you made appropriate arrangements.

6. *Do not talk*

Do not talk or whisper. Do not sing along, unless the performers encourage it. Find the balance of what engagement noise is appropriate for the event--laughing, clapping, and audience participation if the performers call for it are all encouraged.

7. *Refrain from distracting noise*

Chewing, crinkling wrappers, cracking plastic bottles, shuffling pages in the program, rustling in your purse, jingling keys, tapping, or fidgeting is distracting to other audience members. If it is a tangible object, it will make noise.

8. *Actively engage in the performance*

Sit up straight. Put your feet on the floor, not on the chair in front of you. Open your mind and become a part of the experience. The performers are doing this entire event for you.

9. *Avoid shushing others*

Correcting other audience members' behavior can be more distracting than the original behavior. It simply adds and prolongs the distraction.

10. *Do not critique the quality of the show in the lobby or restroom*

Please hold all comments, especially negative ones until you are away from the venue. You never know who is nearby and listening. Your experience should not negatively affect anyone else. ■

References:

<https://www.code.on.ca/resource/audience-etiquette>

<https://www.statista.com/topics/1299/theatre-and-broadway/#dossierKeyfigures>

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