



Script for *StageWorks* Episode 2, by Katrin Redfern

I'm Katrin Redfern, and this is *StageWorks*. Today we're going to be asking, "why are London and New York theatre audiences so different?" Having seen a lot of theatre on both sides of the Atlantic, I've noticed that from ticket prices to timing, London and New York audiences demand very different things from the theatre.

Let's start with how theatre is *funded*. In London, the theatre is supported to a large extent by the Arts Council – subject to cuts of course – whereas in New York, theatre relies on a *subscriber* model because, you know, the government would rather spend the money on other things. Ticket prices are steeper and so the audiences tend to be older, which dictates what kind of plays get put on.

Also, the New York subscription system means that quite often the audience that is seated in the theatre doesn't really wish to see the play they're watching – they bought the subscription because of the play before this one, or for the one after – whereas British audiences go to plays because they *want* to see that particular play or because they trust the theatre where the play is being performed. But each ticket has to be booked individually and so they make a choice to see a *particular* show. A subscriber model isn't needed to fill seats, as British audiences go to the theatre out of habit, it's more deeply a part of the culture. American audiences are more event-oriented and so the theatre experience is linked to a birthday, or a getaway weekend, rather than say, "oh it's Thursday, let's go to a play!"

Now, moving on to what I think is the most *important* difference between putting on a play in New York versus London - the approach to the actual material. In the States, and New York in particular, the *customer is king*. The play, and the playwright, are under much more pressure to cater to the audience, who is the real boss, not the playwright. In a place where the business ethos is that the customer is always right, that extends to a theatre audience, an effect made even stronger by the insecurity of not having institutional support for the arts.

So, this leads to New York directors feeling much freer to be critical of a new play in rehearsals than directors in London are. It is *much* more common in New York for a director to ask for rewrites or even substantial revisions from playwrights – particularly with new works – whereas in London even getting notes at all on the text seems a much rarer thing; it's considered the domain of the playwright. I talked to one British playwright who was surprised to be given rewrite suggestions for his play in its New York premiere, despite the fact that it had debuted in London to near-universal acclaim. This *may* also have to do with hierarchical assumptions in New York about the powers and functions of writers and directors.

In terms of the *actors*, different styles of training seem to contribute to how the text is approached. Actors in the UK tend to have a stronger focus on theatre, so are less influenced by working with movie and TV scripts where wording is changed all the time. They *assume* having to adapt to a text and find a way to make it work *as is*, no matter how tricky the wording. That's part of the job. It could be that American training, particularly Method acting, is more about the individual actor and if the wording isn't working they feel more comfortable suggesting changes. They may also be more career-focused and less interested in the material itself. Whereas I asked a couple playwrights here in London and neither can remember a single moment when an actor even implicitly criticized the text. In the UK, the writer might feel comfortable using the retort Harold Pinter gave to an actor rehearsing his play who asked about a character's backstory: "None of your fucking business!"

So in London, and British theatre more generally, the play's the thing. As well as more respect for the role of the playwright, there is also less pressure to be hampered by a presumed need to pander to the audience. As every theatre artist knows, the audience varies night to night. So to build a piece according to assumed whims is a process of engaging with one's own shadows, and can compromise the playwright's intentions and limit the scope of the play.

And speaking of limits, a great thing about theatre in the London is that plays that are political and comment on the state of the nation are accepted and encouraged. In fact, the "State of the Nation" play is a well-accepted genre in Britain – David Hare for example. New York, and the US more generally, seems to prefer small, personal stories about that closed unit, the family. Perhaps a more insular country sees this turning inward as a sign of success and prosperity – to have to think about the rest of the world, and our place in it, would signal a problem. But in London, a consciousness of the larger world is more apparent and considered a worthy subject of drama.

And, one last thing – I've noticed most plays on Broadway get a standing ovation. New York audiences are more exuberant and *seem* to be more easily approving than the British, however that's mostly just the American form of politeness. On some level I wonder if Londoners enjoy the theatre *more* than New Yorkers. Consider this: transitions between scenes that don't feel problematic in London seem long, momentum-stopping crises in New York; plays that felt brisk at 100 minutes in London feel five minutes too long at 95 in New York; monologues that were full of drama in London feel strangely inert in New York. It might be argued that British culture has always viewed theatre as central in a way American culture does not; perhaps the British have more appreciation for the emphasis on spoken language in the theatre whereas Americans' decades of preference for films, make for a stronger focus on less wordy, more visual mediums.

So, generalizations all, but perhaps with a grain of truth – those are some differences I've noticed, but it would be great to hear from you. Let's have a conversation – you can find us on Facebook, or follow us @Stageworks007 on Twitter. See you next time!

END CREDITS:

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