

UNITED WE STAND

THE SHOW JUST WOULDN'T END.

For all intents and purposes, the story was over. Secrets had been revealed, villains vanquished, lovers reunited, and yet there I was in the darkened auditorium, watching the narrative of this theatre piece continue to unfold. Those around me shuffled uncomfortably, and my companion pinched my leg and gestured to his watch. Someone coughed, and a teenager two rows ahead of us rather indiscreetly checked his Grindr. The elderly patron on my right was hunched forward, deep in sleep.

Then, darkness. An awkward moment of silence and...

Lights up — and those around us leapt to their feet. The teenager, the elderly patron and even my bored friend had risen from their seats, clapping.

I stood up, somewhat reluctantly, and leaned into my friend. "I thought you didn't like the show?"

He looked at me strangely. "Well, it would have been rude not to stand."

And in a way, he was right. The whole audience was up, and to be the odd one out would have been making a bigger statement than merely standing with everyone else. I mean, yes, the story was a bit boring, but the performers were good, and I didn't dislike the show enough to be the lone voice of dissent in a packed house. So I stood and clapped. But the whole experience got me thinking — has the nature of the standing ovation changed? Was what was once reserved to express admiration for a job well done now nothing more than a polite social gesture?

"Sometimes it feels a bit like a tip at a restaurant," says performer Johnnie Walker. "Once upon a time, it was a gift left only for the truly exceptional, whereas now it's just considered part of the fee."

Walker, a seasoned playwright and co-artistic producer of Nobody's Business Theatre, has performed for festival audiences across Canada and recently took his hit SummerWorks show *Redheaded Stepchild* to the US. "Standing ovations at the [Fringe/independent level] are hard won and not to be taken for granted. But if it's opening night at one of the theatres in town — from the Passe Muraille backspace to the Royal Alex — ovations seem

to have become... polite? Obviously, lots of wonderful work is being done at all of those theatres, but I think we've all been to opening nights of shows that just weren't great only to see a slew of people, who were yawning through Act 2 just as much as you were, suddenly leaping to their feet the moment it's over."

What motivated this repurposing of the standing ovation? An educated guess would perhaps attribute it to Toronto the Good's reputation for polite-but-staid conduct, but a recent piece in *The Village Voice* also made note of Broadway audiences participating in what journalist Michael Musto argues has become an "obligatory part of the theatrical experience." So if civic character isn't necessarily responsible for this behaviour, what is?

"It depends on so much," Walker says. "I think the city sometimes is less important than the context of the performance itself. Is it in a well-attended festival? What part of town is it in? Is it in a theatre's season? How old is their subscriber base?"

Multidisciplinary performance artist Ryan G Hinds agrees that context is key. "People stand for their friends. People stand at big musicals so they can feel satisfied they paid over \$100 per ticket. People in poorly designed theatres stand up if the person in front of them stands up so they can see. People stand if they agree with the artist or it's an opening night."

Still, Hinds is reluctant to stand without reason. "As a performer, I believe very strongly the traditions and the histories of theatre must be honoured, and I award standing ovations only to artists or productions that move or entertain me on a deep, deep level and cheering, applause and foot stomping isn't enough. Being 'good' isn't good enough."

For comedian Maggie Cassella, participating in the occasional polite standing ovation isn't that big of a deal. "I know that I stand when the rest of the audience stands — so I'm a lemming," she jokes. "[But] I remember standing for my friend Lea DeLaria either on or off Broadway and for a Brad Fraser play. As to why? Well — *res ipsa loquitur*."

But to choose not to stand? Cassella is considerably less forgiving. "I was in *The Vagina Monologues* at what is now



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“Each audience member who stands congratulates himself for knowing that this is the done thing.”

JENNIFER WISE,
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA
THEATRE DEPARTMENT

the Panasonic right when it first came out... One night, though, everyone in the audience stood except for one person, a television critic sitting in the front row. I'm not naming names, but suffice it to say, I noticed. And this made me laugh, because really, it was *The Vagina Monologues*... Whoa, the one guy in the audience doesn't think the show was worth getting out of his chair. Apparently he missed the irony in his not standing."

Associate professor Jennifer Wise, of

the University of Victoria's theatre department, sees the polite standing ovation as a widespread phenomenon and one connected to the history of the act. "I'm from Toronto, but the behaviour of audiences here in Victoria is identical to what you describe, and it's depressing beyond belief: they dutifully rise to their feet at the end of every show as if the Queen had just walked into the room. And it's nauseating, in the way that any thoughtless knee-jerk behaviour

THE THEATRE ISSUE

JP LAROCQUE

is nauseating, because it's obviously so [disconnected from] the audience's actual experience of the show."

According to Wise, the first standing ovation is often attributed to King George II, who in the mid-18th century rose to his feet during a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. Although England was a parliamentary democracy at the time, the monarch's position and the oratorio's "sacred" status soon made it custom to stand up during the "Hallelujah" chorus of *Messiah* in imitation of the king.

"If this story is true, it suggests that the custom became popular as a way of showing that one is fashionable and suitably reverent and, above all, 'in the know,'" Wise says. "Each audience member who stands congratulates himself for knowing that this is the done thing."

Interestingly, audiences prior to 1876 often engaged in a far more active form of spectatorship than what we are used to now. The theatre during Shakespeare's and Molière's lifetimes had much in common with contemporary rock concerts, with crowds picking fights, duelling, heckling, drinking, flirting, chanting and taking drugs. Meanwhile, ancient Athenians were known to call out instructions to the judges, insult the playwrights, hiss at the actors from their seats and bang their heels against the wooden bleachers to show their approval.

It would seem that — from its very inception — theatre encouraged a form of audience participation that went far beyond merely standing at the end of a performance.

"The knee-jerk standing ovation is best understood as a symptom of the bizarre, historically unprecedented passivity of theatre audiences in the age of film," Wise says. "[Spectators are] so used to movies, where you're supposed to sit silently and passively in the dark, that when they go to the theatre they behave in the same way; standing up at the end of the evening is the only act of physical involvement that such spectators can conceive of or can be bothered to perform."

For Brendan Healy, artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, this passivity isn't necessarily a bad thing and can still signal a deeper — if less declarative — engagement with the work being presented.

"Sometimes [a standing ovation] is more about emotional flow inside of a performance rather than the quality of the performance itself. Audiences enjoyed [Sarah Kane's] *Blasted*, but they didn't want to stand up at the end of it because of the nature of the show. It would have been breaking the spell."

In turning the focus to local audiences, Healy is hesitant to describe Torontonians as more or less keen to stand than spectators from other cities, although he does think that our theatre patrons tend to be very invested in both narrative and the overall tone of a piece. "Toronto audiences like to listen. They really love stories. They like to be polite and to seek permission to participate."

Cassella agrees. "I love Toronto audiences — now. At first, being an ex-pat from the States, they terrified me because Toronto audiences are respectful, and sometimes respectful comes across as quiet. And quiet, at times, when you're looking to elicit a response — especially a laugh — can be terrifying."

"But what I learned from being on both sides of the equation is that Toronto audiences are thoughtful, and they're actually listening and paying attention and, even though they don't blow beer through their noses, may still be loving your show."

So, for all its historical associations with conformity and middle-class insecurity, can the standing ovation still be capable of forging a legitimate connection and celebrating excellence? Healy thinks so. "For me, especially as an actor, it really is a moment of real exchange — a real conversation between the audience and the performer that is both beautiful and necessary."

Walker agrees. "I have been fortunate enough to have received a bunch of standing ovations for various shows, and it always feels awesome. It's really powerful to get an audience leaping to their feet because a) you know that it's meant for you and your work, which might not be the case in a show with a large cast, and b) it feels like a direct interaction between you and each audience member."

"It's intimate and loving and makes you feel like a million bucks." X

What Toronto theatre event are you most looking forward to in the coming months?



"I am most looking forward to the Rhubarb Festival at Buddies in Bad Times. The works are shorter, so you see more in one night. I like that. I'm also workshopping a new piece there called *The Rape of Cleopatra/Love Letters for Anthony*."

Nina Arsenaault, performance artist



"I was lucky enough to see the original productions of both *Angels in America* and *Perestroika* in New York. Both were seminal experiences for me, life-changing theatre. I'm very excited to see Soulpepper will be producing both this season. I see they're also doing *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, by Joe Orton. That's another must-see for me. Although I would like someone to create a theatrical version of Joe Orton's diaries — perhaps a musical. Maybe next year."

Rick Mercer, host of the Rick Mercer Report



"The upcoming theatrical event that I am most looking forward to is *Dachshund UN*. I love installation as a performance form, and I am particularly intrigued by this ridiculous and irreverent concept. Also, my little friend Lola, Steph Rogerson's dachshund, will be performing in it, so of course I'm going to go to support her! *Dachshund UN* is showing as part of the World Stage festival at Harbourfront, from Feb 28 to March 3."

Moynan King, independent theatre artist and scholar



"Brad Fraser's next play — he's doing a reading of it on Jan 25 at Buddies. It's called *Kill Me Now*."

Maggie Cassella, comedian/actor



"I always look forward to the Rhubarb Festival for its riskiness, diversity and randomness. I enjoy that in one night you can see performances that run the gamut, from inspiring, to hilarious, to poetic, to 'What the hell was that?' to 'I don't get art.'"

Lindy Zucker, actor/performer



"I'm excited to finally see *The Penelopiad*. I've been away each time it ran."

Thom Allison, actor/singer/writer

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