

My dears! To wet your proverbial whistle (as well as your show pants), please sit back, practise your jazz hands, and enjoy this little sample of my upcoming book *Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Going To The Theatre (But Were Too Sloshed To Ask, Dear)* by me, West End Producer. Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the West End... x

The Types of Audiences

We've all been to the theatre and groaned with despair when sitting next to someone who noisily wafts their programme, takes their shoes and socks off, and updates their Twitter status ('I'm at the theatre, getting cultured' or 'Watching @lindsaylohan trying to act. #LOL'). Sadly, sometimes there is no escaping these annoying people – it is something which you simply have to put up with.

Over the years there have been reports of all sorts of behaviour in the auditorium – ranging from people talking loudly about how bad the show is, answering their phones and having full-volume conversations, to a couple actually having sex in the stalls, which was quite extraordinary to watch. Most theatre seats don't have enough room for legs, let alone enough for intercourse. Theatre attracts all sorts of people – and it all depends on the type of show as to what kind of audience members you can expect.

There are many different types of audience – the snorers, the laughers, the fans, the actors, the tourists, and the people who actually thought they were going to the cinema. If the show you are watching is boring or bad, it is rather fun to have a look around to see if you can spot these different audience types. And if you are feeling brave, see if you can decide which one you are yourself. And be honest. Nobody is judging you, dear. Well, only several hundred other people in the audience.

The Fans

Fans are very easy to recognise. They wander around the theatre in their show T-shirt, hugging the programme, clutching the soundtrack, and wearing an outfit that is meant to resemble a character from the show (ranging from small accessories like cat's ears to full train outfits with roller skates attached to every limb). These kinds of audience members are obviously very popular in the theatre industry, as they spend their hard-earned money in our buildings, seeing a production time and time (and time and time) again – and they are passionate, vocal supporters of the show.

They sometimes convene in a group outside the theatre posing for photos, discussing the cast, and peeking through windows in the hope of seeing actors in their show-pants. Generally, fans are lovely and incredibly passionate people who have found a special connection with a show – and their support is important to its success. Sometimes, however, they begin to think of the production as their own property.

This is where it can get a little difficult – as they openly offer their advice and criticism to performers, particularly those in long-running shows. You will occasionally overhear them saying things like: 'He's not as good as the one that's just left', 'He's a bit wooden' or 'She sings like SuBo' (sometimes their assessments are spot on). It gets even worse when they offer feedback to actors post-show: 'I think you're good, but the actress before you did this... and it was much better', 'You were great, but you're not going to keep doing it like that, are you?' They will then follow their remarks with a request for a lingering kiss. As a result, some fans have been slapped, spat on and dismembered by annoyed actors. One cardinal rule of theatre is *never* give an actor any criticism or advice (even if you're a fellow actor) – particularly straight after a show. That is the time when an actor is on an adrenalin high and wants everyone to tell them how good they are, even if they're not.

The Obsessives

Like fans, but with an evil stare and voodoo doll of their favourite actor.

The ‘Just Landed’ Tourists

These people are very easy to spot as they will either be asleep, speaking in a funny accent, or wearing a ‘Make Theatre Great Again’ cap (American tourists only). The ‘just landed’ audience members will literally have just got off a flight but, in an effort to cram as much into their holiday as possible, will force themselves to see a show. Which is a complete waste of time as they’ll fall asleep within the first five minutes, only to wake up at the curtain call and applaud enthusiastically. All so they can excitedly update their Facebook status with: ‘We’ve already watched a West End show!!!’

The Snorers

These people, usually male, don’t want to be at the theatre at all. They’ve been dragged along by their better halves on a cultural visit to see something arty – when in actual fact they want to be at home watching *Match of the Day* and not Darren Day. But that’s perfectly understandable.

The most annoying thing about snorers is the volume at which they choose to do it – alerting everyone to their dreaming at the most quiet of stage moments. ‘I Dreamed a Dream’ is not meant literally, dear. It’s just as bad when the snoring is quiet – as they wake up, forget where they are, and scream wildly (I frequently do this when watching an Ibsen).

However, I do understand how easy it is to fall asleep in theatres – they can be very comfortable places, especially after a couple of bottles of Dom. When you’re comfy in your seat and the lights go down, an auditorium can become a big theatrical bedroom – dark, warm, with the scent of stale sex (particularly prevalent on the fringe).

The best thing to do upon hearing a snorer is to throw something. Maltesers are perfectly sized and fly across the air brilliantly. You get 90 theatre points for every sweet you manage to get into the snorer's mouth. (See page 104 for how to win maximum theatre points and become one of my Theatre Prefects.) Some snorers are so sleepy, however, that this technique doesn't make a jot of difference – in which case you have to revert to extreme measures and throw something heavier. Like a brick.

The Critics

Critics are the ones dressed in old suits and dusty shirts, often confused for the homeless tramp sitting outside – in fact sometimes they *are* the tramp (they don't get paid as much as they used to). These species will usually be found on a press night, eagerly scribbling away in their notebooks – where it looks like they're recording well-observed thoughts about the show when in fact they're drawing cartoons of the actors.

Sometimes you may even find critics making an appearance before press night – which they're not supposed to do – particularly if it's a Shakespeare starring Benedict Cabbagepatch. But these are the rebellious ones who are not following protocol, and their early reviewing causes widespread theatre rioting of the most dramatic kind. First critics' commandment is: Thou Shalt Never Upset Producers. Especially Sonia Friedman.

The Kiddies

Now I'm a big advocate of children going to the theatre. They are, after all, the future, and will be the ones supporting the arts when I'm in my theatrical grave. So we should do as much as we can to allow youngsters to experience the thrill of live performance. However, sometimes when going to a show, the last thing you want is to be surrounded by these

little darlings. So plan ahead. If you want to avoid the sound of children screaming in the aisles then you should avoid theatre during school holidays. Also, it is useful to find out when there will be a school's performance – which you can easily do by calling the box office. A school's performance is when the whole auditorium is filled with coachloads of children, apart from the unfortunate couple who have been seated slap bang in the middle of them. Because the children are on day release they get so excited that it becomes virtually impossible to hear what the actors are saying. Of course it all depends on the age of the child as to how noisy they will be – the worst run around with their bags of Haribo and cartons of Um Bongo, falling over, crying and babbling like they're characters from *In the Night Garden*. But then we were all eighteen-year-old A-level students once, dear.

Obviously the type of show you are watching will depend if children are in the audience. If you're going to a modern gritty play at the Royal Court there won't be many there – apart possibly from a coachload from Walthamstow who will be grittier than anyone in the play anyway. If attending a play that is on the school's syllabus, or a musical like *Oliver!* or *Matilda*, then of course you will be surrounded by thousands of the little cherubs – both on *and* offstage. So if you have a child allergy, like Mr Bumble or Miss Trunchbull, avoid these productions at all costs.

The Hen Parties

At some shows you may find yourself sitting near a hen party. Now there's nothing wrong with ladies enjoying themselves before one of them is led to the guillotine of marriage, but there are far better venues for this ritual than a dark theatre. However, saying that, some shows are aimed at this sort of audience – and involve male torsos, erotic dancing, and puppetry of the genitals. It really is remarkable what the RSC is doing to make Shakespeare more accessible.

If you want to avoid the cackling sounds of overexcited ladies then you might want to miss shows like *Mamma Mia!*, *Girls Night Out* and anything starring Duncan from Blue. You will easily be able to spot the hen parties by the combination of headdresses, feather boas, matching T-shirts, and wobbly models of Jean Valjean's penis (at the end of the day it's another day longer, dear).

The Good Timers

These people go to the theatre with the sole intention of enjoying themselves. They've usually paid upwards of £50 for their ticket, and therefore will do *anything* they can to make it feel like they've got their fifty pounds of theatrical flesh. Typically, these people laugh at everything, ostentatiously sniffle at the sad bits, and ovate wildly at the curtain call – all in a vain attempt to prove to themselves and everyone else that they're having a great time (even when they're not). These determined audience members are very easy to spot – and hear – as they'll guffaw loudly at every opportunity, taking their cue from other people's genuine laughter.

The Gays

Where would theatre be without gay men? Gay men work in theatre, watch theatre, make theatre – gay men *are* theatre, dear. Even people like Laurence Olivier, who wasn't actually gay, ended up being a little bit gay.

Gay men are easily recognisable at the theatre. They will be well groomed and very comfortable in their theatrical surroundings. They will either be sitting on their own studying the programme and remembering when they first saw the play as a child, or will be in a big group of friends loudly discussing all aspects of the show and the latest season of gay plays to be produced at the King's Head. You

can always spot gay men sipping something sweet in the interval, and chatting about the first time they saw Hugh Jackman in *Oklahomo*.

The Romantics

There are always a couple of horny people on their first date at a show, which puzzles me. Theatre dates don't allow much talking, limited drinking time, and only one twenty-minute interval for fornication. But I suppose at least it limits the number of awkward silences – and the darkness can be good for brave first-date fumbling.

You can easily spot the different types of couples by the way they behave with each other:

- First-date couples spend the show exchanging shy glances with each other.
- Couples in a new relationship can't keep their hands off each other.
- Newlyweds are deliriously happy, but so drunk they can't keep it up.
- And couples who have been in a relationship for five years or more haven't got anything to say to each other. So theatre is perfect for them.

Sometimes the romantics become so confused that they think the theatre is actually a hotel room, and spend the entire show partaking in their own private performance (which can be particularly awkward if you're sitting next to them, or particularly exciting if you're a pervert). Only recently there was a couple in the front row at *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* at the Playhouse, where actors Tamsin Greig and Haydn Gwynne had to ask ushers to stop the couple playing with each other. Now it wouldn't have been so bad – but they were doing it mid-performance. They could have at least waited until the end, dear.

The Creative Team, Understudies and Swings

There will always be a member of the creative team in the audience. The director, resident director, associate director, casting director, fight director, children's director, director's boyfriend – the list goes on. These are the people that walk into the auditorium just before the shows starts, smile insincerely at people working front of house, and march to their designated seat. You will then see them leave just before the interval – so they can get backstage in time to discipline actors who have forgotten lines – and will re-enter the auditorium the second before the second half begins. During the curtain call they will either clap enthusiastically, or shake their head and begin taking off their belt for whipping purposes.

You may also spot some young people wearing tight denim, baseball hats, trainers, and carrying around a large folder – these people will be the swings or understudies. These are the talented individuals who have to learn and rehearse numerous roles, so that if actors are off they can step in and allow the show to go on. Swings and understudies always have a look of fear on their faces, as they pray they don't get asked to suddenly play a part they've never done before. They often go unnoticed by the public, but in truth they deserve as much, if not more, recognition than anyone else in the company. To the theatre world, swings are the fourth emergency service.

Sometimes you will spot swings deftly scribbling notes onto their script, as they frantically record any new moves that are happening on stage. Also, you can often spot members of the actual cast sitting in the auditorium having a 'show watch' – which is their opportunity to watch the show. This is particularly prevalent in long-running West End productions, where the actors also understudy a role as well as playing their normal part. It can be alarming looking at your programme and spotting an actor sitting next to you

whom you expected to see on stage. But very handy for getting those mid-show autographs.

The Actors

These extravagant specimens will be smartly dressed in tight attire, or casually flaunting the 'I've just come from rehearsals' look (jogging bottoms and a Pineapple Studios T-shirt). They will have managed to blag a cheap ticket by sweet-talking the box-office manager, or by chatting up a cast member the previous evening.

People who work in theatre will always walk into an auditorium and see someone they know. It's a small world – and there's no smaller world than the one of entertainment. They will shimmy into the dress circle with their cravat and chinos and instantly spot a fellow actor. They will embrace and chat loudly about what they are currently rehearsing, involving words like 'darling', 'recall', 'change agent', 'Billie Piper', 'profit-share' and 'dear'. If they're particularly keen they may even whip out a script and point at their lines (but only if they've got lots of them). After that, they will laugh politely, hug again, pat each other on the bottom and return to their designated partners. This ritualistic pattern will continue until they've told everyone about their guest lead on *Holby*. These same actors will whisper comments throughout the show, always ending with 'It should have been me!'

The Friends of the Actors

These people are only at the theatre because they know someone in the cast. Maybe they feel obliged to be there, for fear of upsetting their friend, but really they are glorying in the fact that they know a 'real actor'. You will be able to recognise this audience member instantly as they shout

loudly about knowing their friend in the show, and laugh inappropriately whenever they are on stage. During the curtain call they whoop and stand up for their friend, then quickly sit down again when anyone else is taking their bow. It can be awkward watching these people when they go to stage door after the show, only to have their actor 'friend' walk straight past them as they don't remember them. Turns out they only met once when they were kids on a caravanning holiday in Llandudno.

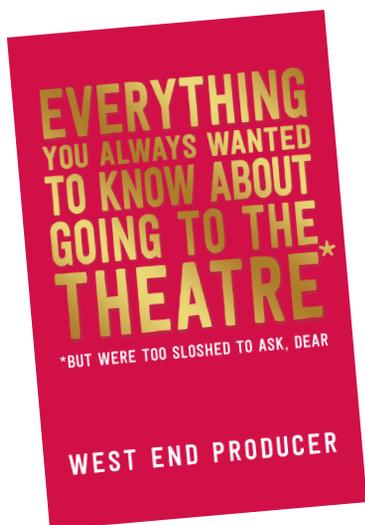
The Heavy Drinkers

You can spot these people in the local Wetherspoons before, during and after a show. They find a stiff drink is the only thing that gets them through such a harrowing thing as being at a theatre. Which is really quite worrying – particularly as most of them are the cast.

The Normal People in an Audience

Not very often.

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