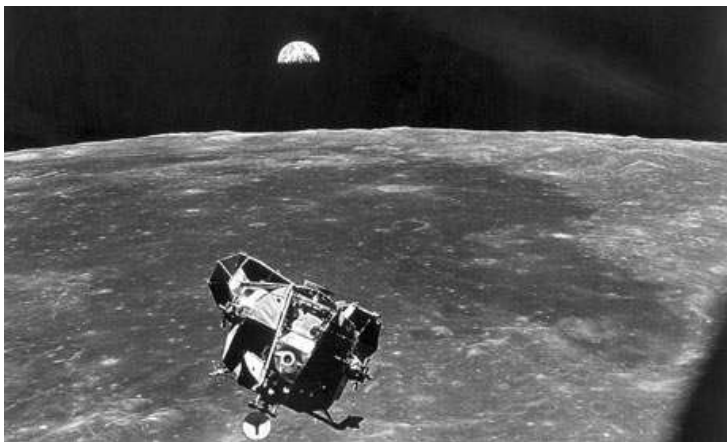




Noises off: Theatreland in 2034

Bloggers debate whether theatres have to fight for artistic integrity, reconnect to local roots or just be thankful to survive the next 25 years?



The moon ... a possible experimental theatre venue in the 2030s?

Photograph: NASA/AFP/Getty Images

We begin, this week, by gazing into a crystal ball. To celebrate its 25th anniversary, the American Theatre Magazine recently posed the question: "What will the theatre be like in 25 years' time?" They put this to 25 different theatre practitioners and received answers that ranged from the pragmatic to the poetic. My favourite comes from Sarah Benson, the artistic director of New York's Soho Rep who says, rather brilliantly and unexpectedly, that "as a space-travel nerd, I hope that by 2034 there is a space programme for theatre and the arts". Anyone for Beckett on the moon?

Bloggers, however, respond by focusing on the urgent and practical need for regeneration in the theatre. Tom Loughlin at the Poor Player sees things getting much worse before they get better. In the coming years, he says: "I predict the fight will be over economic survival, not over artistic integrity." But this financial squeeze, he argues, could just possibly create the ground from which a more

creative theatre grows: "Theatre over the next 25 years will become smaller, less consequential and highly undervalued by society at large. But this will give it the time it needs to formulate and nurture itself and get ready for what the following 25 years will bring."

Scott Walters at Theatre Ideas sees much sense in what Loughlin has to say. He blames the commercialised culture of Broadway (an "artistically bankrupt ... North-Eastern Disneyworld") for this current state of affairs. His hope is that "once smallness is embraced and magic reclaimed ... the theatre will rediscover the fact that its lifeblood is not drawn from the mass culture, but from the local culture. Instead of taking its business model from commerce, it will look to local churches as an inspiration for a new relationship to the audience."

So what will things be like on this side of the Atlantic, a quarter-century on? Well, I hope that we will see an end to pointlessly divisive arguments that suggest theatre should only be made in one particular way. Our flourishing new writing culture is certainly something to be proud of and nurtured. But why shouldn't we also encourage those who devise work, live artists, and, yes, auteurs? The development of this kind of theatrical mixed economy would not only provide audiences with the chance to see an excitingly eclectic range of work; it could also engender a creative cross-pollination that would ensure that all these different forms of theatre kept each other fresh.

Perhaps part of what we need if we are to develop this artistic diversity is a more diversified critical culture – one in which critics and artists can speak more directly with each other, rather than fighting over what does and doesn't count as art. I mentioned last week that the Spill: Overspill blog has recently been set up to provide space for a running discussion about the Spill festival. And now, one blogger seems to be taking this idea a step further. The Wicked Stage is drawing attention to Douglas McLennan's blog, where he asks, "Why don't arts organizations have critics in residence?"

The kneejerk response to this is, of course, that these "embedded critics" would surely have their independence and integrity entirely compromised. But as

McLennan says: "There are critics in the traditional press who pander. A critic in residence who pandered wouldn't have much following. But what kind of statement would it make for an arts organization to invite a critic to be really critical and help spread that criticism?" And as the Playgoer asks: at a time when critics are losing their jobs at record speed, is a rigid adherence to the "ideal" of objectivity really "worth actually decreasing the outlets for criticism in the modern world?"

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