

# There's a world of difference between films and theatre

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The major difference between cinema and play-going is that in the theatre your feet don't stick to the floor.

From an adolescence of blockbuster movies, until last week, such simple guidelines were enough for me. Then came the Montreal World Film Festival and an opportunity to watch more than 500 films, which if joined would stretch to Toronto and back and if shown without intermission would provide enough darkness to wither a full-grown tree.

Such statistics dazzle a playgoer for whom four-digit figures constitute box-office bonanza. But numbers aren't everything. The film festival's best theatre is its audience, incessantly milling, lining up, sitting and pouring out of dark rooms.

According to a random survey taken on location at the Parisien, most festivalgoers elected to see three or four films. Some saw that many each day, but as a result were unable to focus on a human face or synchronize voice with lips to explain why.

## Draw masses

Not for nothing does Serge Losique ban popcorn from his event. Movies draw the masses, but films interest the capuccino crowd. From the casually fashionable to the downright outrageous, festival fans are thoroughly unique at close range.

Yet en masse, even individuality blurs into a common style: mainstream urban hip spanning all ages, denoting a success-minded, striving, complicated folk, the kind of people who will someday be blamed for history, if their plans work out.

Should these fans bother at all with a film like *Creator*, they will go because director Ivan Passer is Czech, or because they will put up with Mariel Hemingway to see whether Peter O'Toole has salvaged his acting career. (Premieres today, 10:40 a.m. in Parisien 1).

By contrast, a typical Montreal theatre audience is a smaller sociological slice: distinct, reliable and homogenous. There are Place des Arts patrons, Quat'Sous ex-hippies, Centaur supporters, Espace Libre devotees, Quebec Drama Festival friends and next of kin. But the film festival has tout Montreal. A theatrephile cannot resist wondering why.

Writing for *The Atlantic* magazine last January, film critic David Denby pretty thoroughly articulated the filmgoer's excuse for avoiding theatre whenever possible. After ingesting an entire Broadway season, Denby wrote a funny,

insightful, and for the theatrephile, depressingly accurate piece entitled "Theatrephobia: Stranger in a Strange Land."

In essence, Denby can't stand the sight of real people pretending, and is embarrassed by the absence of technology to distance audience from drama. He's uncomfortable with the very word "play" when used on an adult activity.

"We (theatrephobes) suffer from a kind of physical embarrassment at the spectacle of actors pretending they are not being watched," he wrote.

## 'Saleable concept'

In the end, his grudging praise went to the literary aspect of theatre. Whether the crackling brilliance of repartee in George Bernard Shaw, or the chiselled mumbblings, excuses and fragmented attempts by David Rabe or David Mamet who wring meaning from jargon and evasion, a film-lover appreciates the language of the stage.

Literally, he listens for that quality which so many (high and low-budget) movies increasingly fail to provide. He goes there in search of the word.

According to Denby, a lot of movies now spring from a "saleable concept" rather than a script, thus undercutting the writer's role at the expense of language, character, story, and he implies, of intelligence and art.

By contrast, playwrights Rabe and Mamet "have achieved mastery of language, and not for its own sake, or merely as a vehicle for actors, or even as the essence of the 'drama', but as a sign, as a trace — a bit of spoor, actually — of the great beast lurking outside."

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Yes, but, next to the quality of silence sometimes found on screen, many contemporary stage plays seem downright yappy. And when you think about it, very artificial.

Most memorable silence on the festival screen: *Visage de chien*, an 80-minute film set in Paris that communicates a level of emotion only hinted at in the text.

On the surface, it's about a young, unemployed wheeler-dealer who's frantically trying to raise the money he owes a band of thugs, during one day spent with his 8-year-old son. Hughes Quester in the major role says everything about his loneliness, frustration and alienation from the family, without ever once talking about it.

For the stage, Harold Pinter has explored the spaces between words, but he has few followers. New plays hardly ever show evidence of a writer's attempt to explore the way people speak or the subtext of action.

Equally rare are plays (or films

for that matter) that recognize the peculiar linguistic context of this country, either immigrant or official languages. That theme is integral to Krzysztof Zanussi's film, *L'année du soleil tranquille*, about an American soldier who falls in love with a Polish widow at the end of the Second World War.

Through gesture and pure acting, the film builds a complex atmosphere of tenderness around the couple who do not speak each other's language.

Canada has produced a handful of documentaries exploring the political issue of English-French relations, but apart from *Balconville*, no major dramatic work reflecting the use of two languages in daily life here.

That is not to say that a timely issue makes a great play; issues often inspire very bad plays. It's story, characterization and emotional power that make the stage a powerful medium.

But to be perfectly blunt, human history is not democratic — some subjects are naturally dramatic, while others require a touch of genius. Our theatre very often fixes on the latter.

## Almost obsessed

Not surprisingly, Europeans are almost obsessed with dramatizing the conflicts of living (and dying) through occupation during the Second World War. Canadian playwrights have come up with two interesting plays on the period: *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, a one-man show, and *Waiting for the Parade*, about women left behind by the draft.

Fine plays, but the experience of "waiting" or "going to war" is a long way from being stuck in it, watching a familiar turf destroyed. It is doubtful a brilliant production of either play would trouble a theatregoer's sleep.

By comparison, Irene Lilienheim Angelico's documentary *Dark Lullabies* (premiered at the festival) is virtually bursting with dramatic potential.

An intensely personal film made through the National Film Board, it's about Angelico's journey to Israel and Germany (where she was born) to meet the children of concentration camp survivors, and with young Germans whose parents were directly responsible.

She should be commissioned to write a play immediately. From docu to drama is a leap talented Canadians must be challenged to make.

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Having recovered from some truly dreadful films — and the thought of their budgets — a moonlighting theatregoer relents, declares the trip worthwhile, if only for a flickering hint of what could be.

Live, onstage.