



## The ten commandments of theatre etiquette

*Words to live by when you're watching the show*

BY LARRY GRAY

*The following ten commandments of theatre etiquette serve two purposes. First, I must admit that as an actor and director of plays, musicals and operas I just had to get this off my chest. There, I feel much better. The second purpose is education. I hereby give permission to anyone to reproduce and to print these commandments and to spread them far and wide. May I suggest you print them in your programs? If that's not an option, perhaps you can hand out copies to your students at the outset of a new class or before they're heading out to see a show. One way or the other, maybe we can educate a few people and make the theatre a more pleasant experience for everyone.*

### **I. Thou shalt not talk.**

This is the first and the greatest commandment. Please note that the commandment does not say, "Thou shalt not talk loudly," or "Thou shalt not talk excessively," or "Thou shalt not talk about subjects other than the performance in progress," or anything else. No, the commandment is quite categorical. Thou shalt not talk *at all*. There are two reasons for this commandment, both so obvious that experienced theatregoers are in danger of becoming consumed with the theatre-going equivalent of road rage when they encounter a talker. But since talking in theatres is so epidemic, apparently lots of people don't get it.

So here goes. Reason number one. No matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, no matter how quiet you think you are, it is simply impossible—yes, impossible—to talk in a theatre without disturbing people around you. And please note that talking is also annoying, disturbing, and distracting to the actors onstage. No, you are not an exception. And no, the play or movie or concert does not improve with your running commentary to your friend. And no, there is no question you feel compelled to ask that justifies annoying everyone else.

Reason number two. No matter how clever you think you are at multitasking, it remains an immutable law that if you are talking, then you are not completely listening. Theatregoers are allowed, indeed encouraged to talk before and after the perfor-

mance. But when the houselights go down, that means the only sounds in the theatre should be coming from the stage. Now is the time to listen. Talking in the theatre is: 1. stupid and 2. rude.

### **II. Thou shalt turn off and put away all cell phones and beepers.**

This is the second commandment and it is like the first. Cell phones and beepers going off disturb and annoy (and, if the truth be told, infuriate) other theatregoers as well as the performers on stage. There are no exceptions. If you are a doctor awaiting word on the impending labor of a pregnant patient or some other emergency, you can set your beeper to vibrate or you can leave your phone with the house manager or you can stay home and give up the theatre for the evening. You cannot claim that your needs are more important than the hundreds of other people who have come to the theatre and have a right to expect a cell phone-free zone.

Please note that the commandment says "turn off *and put away*." Even if the sound is disabled in the phone, the bright lights of a cell phone in a darkened theatre can be seen throughout the house and disturb everyone. Furthermore, it is extremely uncool to be seen holding and fondling your cell phone, so turn it off and *put it away*.

Better yet, don't bring it into the theatre at all. If there is an absolute prohibition against using the thing, why have it?

### **III. Thou shalt not take pictures (with or without flash) or videos or sound recordings.**

Such activities cannot help but be annoying and distracting to other audience members as well as to the performers on the stage. Besides, it is almost always illegal. Contractual agreements with the owners of the royalties, as well as Equity rules in many professional theatres, forbid pictures, videos, and recordings of performances.

A special note to parents of children who are in a production in which parents are allowed to take pictures or video: don't do it. Your pictures and video will almost always look pretty terrible. Your child will be the small moving object in the corner. Take pictures before and after the show. Not only does your picture taking disturb other people, it means you are not really watching the show.

### **IV. Thou shalt not arrive late.**

Most professional theatres have the admirable policy of not seating latecomers until an appropriate break in the performance. This might mean you will miss half the show. Other theatres are more lax and allow people to sneak in. Sneaking in cannot be done without disturbing people. It is astonishing but true that many people believe that if a performance begins at 8:00, then it is reasonable to pull up to the theatre at 8:00. No. You have to park. You have to walk to the box office. You have to get your ticket torn. You have to find your seat. All of this takes—you guessed it—time. Arrive early. You'll be happier, and so will the people around you.

### **V. Thou shalt not leave early unless mightily provoked.**

Leaving before the performance is over (and that means before the curtain call, too) is rude. It is annoying and distracting to other audience members and it is insulting to the performers. If you *want* to insult the cast, well okay, but if you're just leaving early because you're tired or bored or want a quick exit from the parking lot, the message you give to the other audience members is not that you think the show is no good, but that you are either ignorant or rude. Leaving at an intermission is acceptable, but realize that to do so is to make a statement.

### **VI. Thou shalt laugh at the jokes but thou shalt not laugh at the death scenes and love scenes.**

Unless mightily provoked by the incompetence of the performers, laughter at inappropriate times (emotional scenes such as love or death) generally means the audience is filled with sixth graders or perhaps adults with the emotional maturity of sixth graders who, unable or unwilling or too embarrassed

to feel strong emotions, prefer to defuse those emotions by laughing. They don't know that's what they are doing, but experienced performers and theatre-goers do. Ironically, these inappropriate laughers, in trying to avoid embarrassment, actually draw attention to themselves and advertise that they are emotionally immature.

### **VII. Thou shalt not bring food or drink into the theatre.**

Food and drink are an expected, almost compulsory accompaniment to a movie. Some pop concerts and so on offer food and drink. Most theatres prohibit it. Act accordingly.

### **VIII. Thou shalt not open those little candies covered in cellophane.**

If you *must* open a cough drop or some such thing, then do it *quickly*. Do not torture your fellow audience members with your prolonged and futile attempts to open those things quietly. It can't be done.

### **IX. Thou shalt remove fidgety small children and crying babies immediately.**

No, your child is not an exception. Yes, your futile attempts at shushing, bribing, scolding, explaining, etc. are even more annoying than the children. Some children are simply just too young to bring to the theatre. It is unreasonable to expect them to act like adults. It is quite admirable to bring older children to the theatre, but that does not mean that you have your fellow audience members' permission to use this opportunity to educate them to the nuances of what's going on up there on the stage. The child should be silent and you should be too. The education you should be giving your child is how to behave in the theatre. You can answer his or her questions about the performance when it is over.

### **X. Thou shalt be prepared to enjoy thyself.**

Whatever brought you to the theatre, even if it was an insistent spouse, an obligation, an assignment from a teacher, whatever, realize that the performers are intent on one thing—entertaining you. Open yourself up to the possibility of pleasure. You cannot possibly enjoy yourself if you insist on expecting to have a bad time. Ever hear of the self-fulfilling prophecy?

*Larry Gray is an artist-in-residence at Southeastern Louisiana University where he directs plays, musicals and operas. He is also a playwright, a working massage therapist and an avid theatregoer who longs to see his ten commandments printed in every playbill in the country—maybe the world.*