

17th Storyworth: What Are Your Favorite Plays?

Sorry for the delay in response this week; we traveled from FL to CNY, stopping along the way for three nights at Bird In Hand PA for some of Dawn's interests. Coincidentally, one of the activities was a huge religious production play called "Queen Ester", which was based on the biblical story of her convincing the Persian King to protect the Jews because her father, unknown by the King, had saved Him when his military plotted against Him. The production and presentation was certainly a remarkable effort, which by "play standards" would be described as a "musical", and contained elaborate and dynamic (moving) sets. It was entertaining enough, but nothing I would actively seek out myself in the absence of Dawn's interest, and staged as it was in Amish country near Lancaster PA. Dawn has seen other productions there as well. For me it was mostly a yawn, but LOUD, so it was difficult to miss it ;-)

I cannot honestly say I have seen a lot of plays, so I probably should temper this response a bit. I usually have little patience for the confinement of a theater, which by the nature of economics MUST be constrained for audience space. Live performances tend to be very expensive, so examples I HAVE seen as video presentations like "Cats" and "Hamilton" have been better for me personally to see on the TV as recordings, not least because I could interrupt them for potty breaks and the like. And, like "Queen Ester", those were musicals. So I would suggest that "musicals" would seem to be a popular characteristic for me.

I do like drama, however, and "Masterpiece Theater" on PBS has very much been a favorite, especially when the subject timeline is around the period of 1930-1980 with some basis in actual events. For those who have experienced them via PBS or another of the streaming services, the fact of their British origin has not hurt one bit, and I believe that has contributed to their popularity here in the USA as well. But, again, I don't really think of them as plays, although they certainly could be. I would also say, jokingly, that a "double play" is fun to watch, although Dawn might protest that I never told her my passion for Ice Hockey until it was too late for her to escape it, and I LOVE to watch THAT "play" ;-)

I most assuredly would never envision myself putting up with the hassles of trying for a live performance of either "Hamilton" nor "Cats", nor any other Broadway spectacle. The costs even without the show price are simply outrageous. And again, I like the flexibility of time-shifting allowed by recorded media in any case. I am also not at ALL a metropolitan fan. Whatever cultural advantages are enabled by the population of any urban location, by the time you can muster adequate customer base to support live performances as would be appropriate for stage regularly, the traffic would be the antithesis of my desired "environs". One of the things I have liked about CNY has been its ability to support museums, symphony, pro and semi-pro sports, and cultural diversity, even while allowing me to essentially reach roads on which I might NEVER see a cop car, able to be reached within under ten minutes driving time almost any time of day or night. As a driver who does so as an end unto itself, that matters more to me than most "cultural" activities like playhouses.

And I have watched and enjoyed many recorded productions which started life as Broadway plays, like "The Producers", "The Birdcage", "The Sound of Music" and so on. I have simply waited for them to become televised. I don't recall any plays which were televised AS PLAYS, showing the stage and sets, as was exhibited for his first production in NYC for Richard Dreyfuss' character in "The Goodbye Girl", for example, although it was interesting to see how a play develops "behind the scenes" so to speak. Blame the engineer in me for wanting that level of detail instead of the subject matter of the play. That the Dreyfuss character was portraying Shakespeare's "Richard III" was recognized by me, although I am no fan of the genre. But I fully enjoy parody of the subject matter as well, and Shakespeare could make a career for those who practice THAT art; just ask Monty Python ;-)

As to my favorite TV entertainment, it must be suggested that I prefer to have a program require that I brought a mind. I like it challenged; from framing its period to other things happening at the same time, to being allowed to think through implications without every detail being spoon fed to me. I am definitely NOT a fan of “made for TV” programs like “reality shows”, I dislike most everything on HGTV, and I can only tolerate so much “chick flick” at one sitting, although I do like most romantic comedy as a diversionary activity. Satire, and the Brits are world famous for theirs, is VERY enjoyable, as is bawdiness.

Sitcoms, for the most part, are boring because they repeatedly depend upon obviously simplified stereotypes rather than real live people. But some originals have been excellent by their very nature of being original and stretching the envelope. I think specifically about programs like “All In The Family”, “Married With Children” and “Benny Hill”, and recognize the sheer improbability that any of those episodes could be produced in today’s oversensitive environment. I also wonder how we can be so sensitive to humor even as we accept the outright dehumanization we live with on a daily basis for so many of our citizens, which I find pathetic.

However, some comedy is so brilliant as to be a tragedy if it is missed. I am thinking of things like much of the Carol Burnett Show, with Tim Conway and Harvey Korman specifically, as well as almost everything ever attempted by Mel Brooks. But I caution that you dear reader ONLY bother to watch actual uncut originals, and not the emasculated renditions of them after censoring by the network TV companies, who seem afraid of their own shadows even as they say they want their programming to be “edgy”. “Blazing Saddles” and “History of the World; Part I” are ONLY as funny as they are originally envisioned, and otherwise are numbing.

And the most important “play” for me is play on words – often called puns. They require a fast wit and the ability to think WAY outside the box even while freely associating. If one can get past the “objectification” such humor often insists upon, I find they make me feel much better after watching them than I ever was before doing so. And I think that was the purpose for the Storyworth question this week, after all, right? ;-)

Joe Holzer 4/25/2021