

The Play of the Interval

The interval too is a ritual. At first glance it is a secondary ritual. What justifies the existence of the theatre - the performance - for many is no more than an alibi for their own public prestige. For not a few people, what brings them to a performance is a non-artistic motive. In the variegated procession of people who make up the audience, pass and rub shoulders colleagues and young enthusiasts, people brought to the theatre by convention or by custom. Those who have come there because of personal or social obligations, those who seek prestige and those who have a need 'to go out'. Lovers of the theatre rush there, the others simply come. And while the first live by the performance, by the others the performance lives. Theatre exists by the will of its 'invited' public, which not only provides material support to the institution, but, from time to time, also imposes sacrosanct assessments concerning its achievement. A small quantity of specially numbered seats, often the first or second row, or, still better, a separate box, from which, as is fitting, one may look down upon everything, are carefully reserved to the last moment for all kinds of dignitaries: their empty places have worried actors more than the most unbearable crush of an excitable public. It has been known for the beginning of a performance to be postponed because of the lateness of some prestigious person. It has been known for it to be suggested that a performance, already begun, should be repeated, the moment such stars of society arrive. Hence, the former rule of snobbish good manners concerning the necessity of arriving late at a performance is merely a pure imitation of this obvious proof of personal importance and social power. It is said that the presence of many distinguished and generally important people at a premiere at the Paris Opera so excited a French journalist that he pedantically enumerated all who were present but, in his confusion, completely forgot to mention the performance that was being given that evening. If this anecdote is not accurate, at least it is close to the truth, and this, above all, because it proves that a performance is never a merely artistic, but also a social event, and only as a social event, due to the nature of its definite and essential tie with the public, does it become also an artistic event. This is one of the reasons that all institutionalised theatres have to care equally for the 'public' which justifies their existence, but also for those institutions of power, that is to say their representatives in whose hands are the means of

material force, means which they proclaim for allocation, donation and remuneration, which, in theatre circles, stimulates a feeling of conscience regarding its donator and an awareness of its own uselessness. The critic, however, stands somewhere between the theatre-goer and the magnate: no matter how competently written his critical review of the performance, it rarely incites the public to visit the theatre and, still more rarely, can it change anything in the inflexible awareness of the powerful. The hierarchy of seats, maintained from ancient times to today, accurately reflects the social significance of those invited to a premiere: the first row, the second row, the gallery ... Every more experienced actor can foretell, with considerable accuracy, who will come to a performance, every long-serving usher, where each should be seated, every street-wise manager knows at a glance those who, in the interval, he should treat to drink and kind words. This naturally is not the main reason for his looking at his watch, although he, like all those who, for some reason, have begun to fidget in their seats, will greet the interval with relief.

There are not a few for whom the interval is more important than the performance. The interval arose from the need for a short, periodical break, for an essential relaxing halt and temporary intermission (*pausis*) in the action, as a respite for the actors and audience. It stems from the early canonisation of the drama of five acts, by Horace and Seneca, where it had a completely practical character, and it has, with time, evolved into a definite social event. There have been and still are many attempts to abolish the interval completely, as it did not exist in ancient Greek drama or later in Expressionism, or at least to fill it with some unpretentious content, apposite to the performance, just as there are performances in which the interval is used to transfer the audience from one stage ambience to another, which is often, together with the performance itself, an added method of ill-treatment of the patient and suffering public. There are however, people, especially women, who are simply miserable if there is no interval. The lack of such an opportunity for social climbing cannot, for them, be a substitute for the pomp of entry into the auditorium before the beginning of a performance, and, indeed, they often linger in the theatre foyer or entrance, even after the end of the performance, like the village youth which, after mass, lingers in front of the church doors.

The interval is a cross-section of 'public life'. It transforms the theatre foyer into an open, public salon in which there pour from all sides often uncompleted, floating, cutting remarks on what has been seen, all under the excuse of being an 'exchange of opinion' which is closer to an impatient, ill-assorted and ill-considered exchange of cliché, than to any dialogue. The realisation that the first judgement of a performance emanates from the *salon* has driven many managers to recommend that the theatre staff and especially the performers restrain themselves from any mention of any 'hiccups' during the performance, for to admit this would simply turn attention to error and provide additional arguments to the potential danger of a negative assessment by those ever ready to be discontented with everything, and especially with a performance. But, despite this caution, the whisper concerning a failure already spreads from the depths of the theatre itself, from the buffet in which have gathered uninvolved actors and marginal intellectuals, who swear by their own good intentions and integrity, which gives them the right to belittle everything in detail and in principle. Such apathy and malice occupy them to such an extent that they continue the interval in the buffet right up to its closing. During this time, the connoisseurs excitedly foregather in the foyer or, like faithful members of the same sect, congregate, silently, with a sigh, a sneer or exclamation, to affirm their solidarity of experts, a solidarity which may not be threatened even by completely conflicting opinions. And while they occasionally cast a glance at the assembled public, whom they despise as a lot of empty lay people, the lonely lover of drama, who continues to live with the performance during the interval, does not vacate his seat, making it clear that he is in the theatre for his own sake and for that of the performance and not for the sake of others. Alone, also, is the local critic, who maintains an inscrutable silence, under the gaze of interested parties, in the hope that, at least for one evening, he may have the importance so often denied him behind his back. Although all his critical skill is directed to what he has just seen, this is no place to attempt to air his knowledge. This he leaves to those who wish to be considered 'intellectuals'. For this reason, in the end, in the rush which saves him from hasty comments and draws him to his notebook, he is the first to leave the theatre.

There is a crush round the bar. In the ladies' room, make-up is refreshed and dress adjusted, the culturally essential snobs and masks greet one another

in passing and with the fake of being blasé, conceal their emptiness. On all sides there is a burst of flirtation, superficial cordiality, exaggerated *bonhomie* and unmotivated merriment: on the stage, the actors play, during the interval, the audience plays down. The actors project their skill, the audience, their external appearance. Everything strives towards making the audience see, in what is portrayed before them, something which inhabits themselves. So those who come to the theatre to see and be seen are never in the power of the performance, for they themselves wish to 'perform'. To the usual question: "How did you like the play?", they reply, firstly, with neutral remarks, because they know that the question is only a password which covers what truly interests the enquirer. For the interval is a time of meeting, 'a chance to meet', to take measure, to examine. All thoroughness is excluded, since the potential mass of events and the temporal brevity of the interval demand swift reactions and superficial contacts, so that nothing 'essential' may be missed. The curious desires to see everything and to be everywhere: he devotedly partakes in the event of the interval. Nor do those with power, whom he watches from afar, evade his attention; the powerful who, in so far as they are not exchanging forced conversation with the protagonists or, in the manager's office, not listening to his tirade of lament and praise, are standing in the attitude of the central figures of the entire spectacle, while, gathered in semi-circles, the politest and most attentive listeners in the world listen to them, those who would listen to them even when the speaker is silent. And, while some, due to the performance itself or to some unforeseen occurrence, take advantage of the interval to creep out of the theatre, the public returns to the auditorium. One more smile, one more discrete greeting and the lights go out. The public has had its show: "The actors are here, Sire ...". The actors, for whom the interval has been merely a light relief which the stress before the following act has quickly eliminated, arrive. The actors arrive to lead the audience from the illusory truth of the interval to the true illusion of the performance. That the interval merits the title of illusion, should surprise no one. It owes this title to the lack of a true relationship and to the pretence of life with which its duration is filled. But then is not everything in the theatre a performance?