

PART III

SPECTATORS

**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ELITES:
AUDIENCES FOR *THREE SISTERS*
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Introduction

The material presented here with regard to *Three Sisters* is part of my research on theatre audiences, where empirical data and methodological and theoretical considerations are closely connected. In other words, my research is not being carried out in a positivistic manner. It does not, therefore, assume that facts can be organized without the intervention of interpretative principles.

Those who are familiar with the work of Pierre Bourdieu will have understood from the title of this essay that I am referring to some of Bourdieu's major conceptual categories. However, it will become clear that, although these categories help shape my interpretation - at least for my present purposes - I by no means follow Bourdieu step by step. This has nothing to do with the fact that Bourdieu does not study the theatre. It has everything to do with my premise that theories neither can nor should be "applied" mechanistically.

As for matters of method, questionnaires devised by me have been my source of information on audiences. Numerous methodological issues are involved in constructing and distributing questionnaires and then in assembling replies from respondents. Let me cut through a long argument by saying that questionnaires are adequate for gathering sociodemographic data, that is, quantitative data, but are notoriously difficult when it comes to evaluative, *qualitative* information. I have attempted, in my audience research as a whole, to highlight spectators' interaction with whatever production is at hand, as well as to highlight other qualitative responses from them. I link these evaluative areas of inquiry (and they are far from

straightforward) to quantitative material which, if less troublesome than the former, is certainly not trouble-free. The linkage between the two allows what would otherwise be purely statistical data to take a human form. This human form is theatre played by and to living beings in society.

My last general introductory point concerns spectators' awareness of the formal-stylistic qualities of *Three Sisters* and their sensitivity and receptivity to these aesthetic qualities. The kind of awareness spectators may have can only be gleaned from their observations on the production. Thus, by the phrase "aesthetic education" I am referring to the awareness, receptivity and sensitivity as articulated by, or deducible from, their remarks. I am not referring to the teaching programs of schools, universities, specialized arts institutions, and the like, where spectators may have learned about the theatre or developed their capacity to talk about it.

Some Explanatory Remarks About Qualitative Questions

It was not possible, for many reasons, to have the questionnaire focus on the stage processes - use of space, gestures and movements, music, lights, and so on - which together, in play, constitute a production's formal-stylistic qualities as well as give it sense and meaning. Spectators were asked to rank their enjoyment of *Three Sisters* on a scale of 1 to 5. They were then asked to explain their ranking. This open question assumed that unprompted and, as it were, "spontaneous" replies would mark out the spectators' immediate frame of reference, whether to do with stage processes or, say, thematic structure or didactic "message".

The next question "What do you think *Three Sisters*, a Russian classic, has to say to theatre audiences in Australia today?" principally sought information on cross-cultural perception and evaluation. It also solicited thoughts on the term "classic". Since the question referred to a specific production of a specific classic, it hoped to stimulate further commentary on the staged version (which, in fact, it did). I worked on the hypothesis that additional commentary on the production would provide clues to spectators' sensitivity to its aesthetic (which happened in a number of cases).

Other evaluative questions targeted their aesthetic education according

to the meaning assigned to these two words above. This was also the target of questions probing spectators' overall assessment of, and attitudes towards, the work of the Sydney Theatre Company as a whole. One question asked what interested them about STC productions. Another asked what kinds of plays and productions they would like to see more of by the company. Yet another asked what they thought was the main purpose of theatre. The assumption behind the "purpose" question was that spectators would indicate their perceptions of the social role of the theatre, as well as suggest their expectations of it.

It should be clear from my remarks that my notion of "aesthetic education" cannot easily be separated from what I call "theatre culture". Indeed, the questionnaire was designed in order to keep the two in tandem. Thus questions on the frequency of spectators' attendance at play productions, ballet and contemporary dance performances, and performances of opera aimed to find out something about their theatre culture, now measuring it quantitatively. This statistical data was to provide support for the qualitative material coming from the open questions. Furthermore, it situated playgoing in the broader spectrum of *spectacle*. By doing so, the notion of "theatre culture" was able to appropriately embrace several different performing arts while, at the same time, allowing play production, which is integral to theatre culture, to be singled out for special attention. The second, narrower concept underpins the request to spectators to name the last production they saw, and where, before *Three Sisters*.

Brief Theoretical Remarks

The first point to make is that what Bourdieu defines as a social elite is predominant in the sample audience. By educational qualifications and profession, it belongs to the intellectual strata of the dominant classes, if not necessarily to the intelligentsia as traditionally conceived. Two questions emerge in respect of all the information I have gathered, a selected part of which is included here. Does this social elite have an aesthetic education? Is it also a cultural elite? It must be remembered that the term "cultural" includes, but is not exclusive to, my notion of aesthetic education. When these questions are set in the context of Bourdieu's theory, they may be conflated roughly as follows: Are those who possess

social capital also possessors of cultural capital?

We must keep in mind the fact that Bourdieu makes distinctions between social, economic, intellectual, and cultural capital. Nevertheless, he maintains that there is a tight relationship between them, even though they do not always directly correspond with each other. For example, those with economic wealth do not necessarily have intellectual or cultural wealth. Just the same, Bourdieu argues, the relationship between these different forms of capital usually makes them overlap. As a result, a disposition towards culture is acquired by individuals through family environments that look favourably upon culture. This disposition is nurtured through schooling, whether at high school or university, and whose real benefits are contingent upon the family milieu which has already encouraged an interest in, and competence in, cultural activities. In the case of the class fractions at the top of the social hierarchy, a disposition towards culture is fostered by the culture inherited from the same class, both disposition and inheritance usually being linked to economic well-being. From here follow Bourdieu's theses on the reproduction of privileges: the benefits derived from social status ensure greater gain from the educational system; the surplus value culled from education guarantees greater access to the professions (especially to "top" professions), as well as to cultural goods; the cultural capital already accumulated generates more of the same capital; the classes or class fractions who have already accrued multiple riches, cultural wealth included, become entrenched and reproduce themselves; their reproduction (moreover within a structure that, extrapolating from Bourdieu, could accurately be described as oligarchic) occurs alongside the serial self-reproduction of the remaining classes.¹

Bourdieu's theory, although theory and thus having generalizing power, essentially responds to the socioeconomic, institutional and historical structure of France. My data regarding audiences for *Three Sisters* suggests that the tight relationship between the different forms of capital identified by Bourdieu may not hold for Australia today - or, at least, not for Sydney society.

Results

My data comes from 551 completed questionnaires which represent 25% of the audience for four performances, or 2% of the total number of viewers of the production (24,190 total viewers).

Of the 551 total, 60% belong to the two upper classifications "managers and administrators" and "professionals" defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The largest groups in the 40% left are clerks and students (8% each). Those classified as paraprofessionals (mostly nurses in our sample), and as salespersons and personal service workers account for 4% each. Of particular note, where distribution by social class is concerned, is that two people are drivers, while another two (nurse's aid and concierge) fall into the lowest category of "labourers and related workers". No factory, farm or other "hard" labourer appears in the sample. As for the middle class primarily serviced by the STC, the academics and teachers included in it (24% of the two upper categories combined) cannot be said to comprise the economic elite, even though they are in the country's higher salary brackets. Lawyers and doctors, on the other hand, arguably do constitute an economically superior group. So do, in general, the company directors, bankers and various managers belonging to the first classification. The majority of them are university educated, by which fact they join the professionals to form an intellectual elite. However, since their social status is perceived to be more important than their scholarly achievements, they are not commonly identified with that elite.

Over half (57%) of the elite, whether "intellectual", "social", "economic" or whatever description best suits pockets in it, ranked the production at 4 and 5. Explanations as to ranking may be divided into two large blocs: the first to do with the playtext as such, and the second to do with the stage production.

Answers in the first alluded to the play in general ("good", "marvellous" and similar expressions of appreciation), picked out specific elements of composition - story, characters, dialogue ("as in real life") - or talked about its themes and their relevance (here anticipating the next question). Very few refer to the play's structure, a male lawyer noting, however, that it is "beautifully structured" despite its "typical Russian length".

Those scoring below 4 thought the play was "ponderous", "wordy", "boring", or "depressing", sometimes linking their judgements to what they believe are national-cultural traits (thus, for example, "turgid", "typically Russian", or "another inexplicable Russian dirge of a classic").

Very few, whether making a positive or negative statement about the playtext, attempt to situate it sociohistorically. Those who dislike its characters usually cannot be bothered to explain why. An exception, therefore, is particularly noticeable, as in the case of an accountant for whom the characters are “superficial upper-class snobs”. He continues: “They justify Stalin’s purges”(!).

Answers in the second bloc are grouped around components of the stage work: acting, sets, costumes, lighting, pace, spatial configuration, choreography, music and atmosphere. I have listed these components in order of importance according to the number of times respondents refer to them.

A good 40% of the respondents were sufficiently struck by the actors’ work to comment upon it, usually in enthusiastic terms, while a few found the parts “over-played” or “played too sweet”. In addition, respondents refer either to the production or to the direction/director, thereby suggesting they have taken in the ensemble, the director being, of course, its guiding force. Put mathematically, this means that 23% of respondents indicate they are taking into account the whole stage work, albeit without specifying which features in particular have captured their attention.

There are about the same number of references to sets as combined references to production and direction. It must be stressed that respondents who appreciated the scenography usually took note of the actors and/or the production or direction. Just the same, references solely to the sets were recorded, thus swelling the count for this word and its collocations. The sets were central to the production’s sense and meaning. Furthermore, even if their interpretative function vis-à-vis everything else on stage escaped notice, they could hardly be missed. They were sumptuous in the first Act where they depicted a dining room-cum-salon, design details such as billowing curtains, piano, candelabra and masses of flowers having considerable visual impact. They were stately, though austere, in the open-air, autumnal scene of the closing Act. In fact, given their importance and visibility, references to them were disappointingly few.

Richard Wherrett, when I interviewed him about his overall conception of the production, spoke movingly of the relevance of scenic detail to it. When queried about the elaborate sets, he replied that they faithfully followed Chekhov’s stage directions. When asked whether a less ornate, or even bare, stage would have done just as well, he replied that this would not have been in accord with Chekhov’s intentions. Nor, in his view, would have been direction of the actors’ voices, gestures, and so on, outside the parameters of realism. Wherrett, in other words, synchronized his stage interpretation with what he believed was true to Chekhov’s text.

And here it is worth adding that only one or two isolated remarks from spectators pin-pointed such details of acting as diction, accent (denoting the class difference between servants and gentry) or gesture (putting feet on a table which, one respondent noted, was inappropriate for women at the turn of the century).

By the same token, when we measure statistically, a mere two references to choreography and spatial configuration pale into insignificance. So, too, does one perfunctory mention of music, and, again, of atmosphere. Considering that Richard Wherrett gave a great deal of attention to the use of space, to movement and steps in space (dance steps included), to the narrative and evocative powers of music, and to changing atmospheres - each of the four Acts marked by a distinctive mood - respondents' inattentiveness to these elements is disappointing. Much the same could be said of the insignificantly few remarks on lighting. The second Act, for instance, is an arresting tonal composition of light and shade, which gives subtlety to the dialogue uttered, the events taking place, the interaction between actors and their characters, and the temporal transitions binding the parts to the whole (day turning to night, summer to winter, and years past to years future).

Now, we must remember that the information here presented can only chart trends. It can only give an impression, an overarching view, of respondents' aesthetic awareness and receptivity. The extreme difficulty of tabulating qualitative data is compounded in this case by the fact that most of the respondents who say something about the stage work usually note several points, for example, acting as well as direction and/or sets. What this indicates, however, in terms of an overarching view, is that a relatively small minority are *most aware* of the constituent elements of a production. When these "most aware" respondents are added to respondents who show a little awareness (defined, for my purpose, by referring only to one element or by merely stating "production"), they make up 34% of all respondents belonging to the social elite as demarcated above. Our figure may have been higher if all the people who gave information about their occupation and formal education had answered the question to do with the production.

Whatever the case may have been in ideal circumstances, the results we have are striking in that spectators record, above all else, their awareness of, and response to, acting - this followed some way behind by their allusions to sets. Secondly, all other stage processes, which are inseparable from a production's aesthetic, seem to recede so far from sight as virtually to disappear from the horizon.

If our elite appears to have limited aesthetic vision, it is by no means short on intellectual comprehension, as is clear from answers regarding "a Russian classic". Observations, here, are wide-ranging, though give discernible motifs: times, life, people, problems, dreams, human nature and human emotions have not changed very much since the turn of the century; Chekhov examines interpersonal relationships, marriage and the family, and the social condition of women; the play is about the meaning and purpose of life; act instead of being a "passive bystander" because, now quoting another spectator, "only we can control our destinies"; goals must be striven for and achieved. All these reflect the motifs of the production itself.

When spectators are not explicit but say "themes", they invariably describe them as "eternal", "timeless" or "universal". A few of them point out that this is precisely why classics are "classics" and yet are pertinent today regardless of racial, social and cultural differences. Some insist, on the contrary, that the play is irrelevant to Australia in 1990. Those who are not totally dismissive as to its contemporary significance find it "historically interesting". Not one single spectator, not even the actors in the sample, refers to the challenge of performing as well as viewing classics, the training ground they provide for theatre workers, or any other matter in respect of theatre art.

We cannot draw definite conclusions from our respondents' remarks as to whether they dissociate artistic processes from content-substance - the relationship between form and content being one of the thorniest issues in aesthetics, and not only with regard to classics. Yet the attraction of classics for our managerial and professional group is great, judging by the number of times individuals in it state they would like to see more classics mounted by the Sydney Theatre Company. When a count is made by author, Shakespeare comes out well and truly first. Chekhov is named extremely infrequently by comparison. Tolstoy rates a mention.

A count by national identity shows a very marked preference for more Australian plays. They are followed, although a long way behind, by British, then American, and, further still, by Russian plays. Spectators' predisposition towards Australian works is not altogether well defined in that some speak of "Australian classics" (such as, for example, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*), while others either state "contemporary Australian plays" or merely "Australian". Furthermore, when spectators' expressed desire to see more classics is compared with their wish to see more contemporary works, the first just about matches the second. This is corroborated by what spectators say about their interest in STC productions, where interest in classical and contemporary plays is

virtually equally weighted.

A count by genre puts comedies at the top of the wish-list, followed by drama and musicals, which, if graphed, would show a noticeable distance separating them from comedies. The term "tragedy" does not turn up once. Does this mean that the tragedies of Shakespeare are peripheral to our respondents' idea of Shakespeare, who is at the summit of their hierarchy of desires?

Whatever the answer may be, Shakespeare is clearly part of their theatrical canon. And their canon duplicates *the* canon, as is evident from the playwrights cited, going from Marlowe via Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, O'Neill, Tennessee Williams to Beckett. These are the dramatists of university courses. They are also integral to the STC repertoire. Thus our elite's theatre culture, whether acquired at the theatre or through schools of one kind or another, or both, is aligned to established culture. Moreover, by expressing the desire to see more of what they already know, members of this elite not only demonstrate their orthodox taste, but also suggest they are happy to reproduce it.

It would, of course, be inappropriate to isolate the theatre culture absorbed by the elite from the culture available to it on the Sydney stage. A glance at the productions viewed by spectators before they saw *Three Sisters* shows a fairly narrow margin. The productions in it belong principally, though not exclusively, to the STC. The concentration can be partly accounted for by the fact that most of our respondents are subscribers to the STC.

Productions named by them were either performed during earlier seasons or ran in the season including *Three Sisters*. The production immediately preceding the latter, *Hot Fudge and Ice Cream* by Caryl Churchill, was cited more than any other. Unprompted, respondents gave a negative assessment of it, their asides suggesting a distaste for what they perceive to be "avant-garde". The next most frequently cited production was *The Tempest*, mounted shortly before at the Belvoir Street Theatre. The fact that the range of productions available in Sydney is greater than appears from the data may suggest that the upper echelons attending performances at the STC are not, on the whole, predisposed to broadening their theatre culture.

Yet the upper echelons are accustomed to the theatre. Half of them see at least five or six productions per year (six being offered by a subscription). Another third see up to twenty productions annually. Their attendance at ballet or contemporary dance performances is lower. Half of them see none, most of the remaining respondents seeing up to three per

year. As for opera, slightly more than half never go. Most of the rest go up to three times, as occurs for ballet/dance. Their theatre culture, then, is principally shaped by verbal theatre.

Furthermore, this elite believes in quality. A good quarter of its members, when talking about their interest in STC productions, mention quality or use terms like “standard” and “professionalism” to convey a similar idea. Quite a large number of them were among respondents, for the same question, who specified that acting, casting, or the productions of the STC as integral entities held their interest before all else.

Although the creative side of the STC’s work certainly did not pass unnoticed, what scored highest, numerically speaking, was the company’s repertoire as such, for which the terms “variety”, “diversity” and “range” were used repeatedly. By comparison, only a very small group focuses its attention on scenography, lighting and costumes, these aspects of *mise en scène* being the only ones mentioned. In other words, well below half of the social elite articulates an awareness of stage processes/aesthetics. What occurs at a non-articulated, subliminal level is anybody’s guess.

To all appearances, then, the information coming through suggests that our socially privileged spectators place aesthetic concerns low on their list of priorities. The same information also suggests the relative weakness of their aesthetic education. This is confirmed by their opinions on the main purpose of theatre. Time and again they note the words “entertain” or “entertainment”, which, when the count is made, gain an overwhelming majority. Other purposes are by no means excluded. Those noted most frequently give the following summary: the main purpose of theatre is to educate (with several variations on the themes of teaching and learning), provoke thought, stimulate intellectually, and deal with ideas, issues or views (notably of the author). However, none of these options can begin to compare with the vote for entertainment. They fall well behind even when they are merged into one. Even such qualifying statements as “educate in an entertaining way” do not significantly affect the results.

As for aesthetics, a mere 16 out of 332 spectators constituting the social elite refer to this area in some way. Thus, for them, theatre is “Art”, “artistic creation”, “fantasy”, a place for “new art forms” or a “vehicle for artistic excellence and originality”. Some in this tiny minority believe theatre’s main purpose is to allow audiences to enjoy talented performers, performance styles, words, visual images and music. A musicologist believes it must appreciate the “art of the author”, who is a “master craftsman of language”. He cites wit and elegance as examples of verbal craftsmanship.

Theatre understood as a facet of culture fares worse still. Here and there an isolated spectator suggests that theatre opens a path to foreign cultures or gives people insight into their own culture.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's categories as regards various elites or types of elite have been relevant and useful for organizing the information gathered on spectators attending performances of *Three Sisters*. The elite at issue here, which is a composite elite incorporating variations that stress this rather than that factor (economic rather than cultural, and so on), concerns the 60% majority of the audience who belongs to the managerial and professional groups discussed above. We may conclude that our elite is a social one that has financial access to established culture, its buying power varying according to different pockets or class fractions of it. We may also come to the conclusion, on the basis of the data available to us, that the "establishment" (in some sense of the word) which is formed by this elite and established culture support each other. However, we may also have to conclude that the cultural status of our elite does not match its social status. I am here drawing on, though not relying solely on, an elevated concept of culture-cultivation inherited from the upper-middle class or the *haute bourgeoisie* and which encompasses the idea that proficiency in artistic matters is integral to being cultivated.

Whatever we decide, it appears that the theatre, for our social elite, is firstly a matter of entertainment and, secondly, of education. This data may suggest that the social elite is primarily a pleasure-seeking group. The value it accords to entertainment may well be indicative of how the theatre is evaluated socially in Australia today. The question to ask, then, is whether the elite of a given society fixes or determines value in such a way that the value set by it is - or becomes - the going value across the board.²

NOTES

1. See, notably, *Les Héritiers* (with J-C. Passeron). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1964; *L'Amour de l'art* (with Alain Darbel and Dominique Schnapper). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1969; *La Reproduction* (with J-C. Passeron). Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1971; *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979; *Homo academicus*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1984.
2. When raising this question, it is useful to remember Antonio Gramsci's argument on how dominant classes propagate their values through all social institutions, art institutions included, thereby ensuring their hegemony as a class and their values (political, ethical, artistic or whatever values are at issue) as *the* legitimate values to be accepted and emulated by all other classes in society. See *Antonio Gramsci: Selections From Cultural Writings*. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds. Harvard University Press, 1985.