

Jessica Swale presentation at the LTG National Conference, 14 May 2022

"**Panem et circenses**". *Bread and circuses* - a quote from Roman poet and philosopher, Juvenal, in his assessment of 'the essentials' needed to keep society's great unwashed content and out of trouble.

It may have been intended as a critique, but I like to think of it as a compliment. To all of us who create, who participate in and who share in the arts- this is the view that 'circuses' or entertainment are one of the two most essential requirements in life- a satisfied stomach, and a satisfied heart.

The past two years have been terribly difficult for us all, but when you strip everything away, look at what we had to give up- and then look at we have chosen to leave behind versus what we are bringing back with a vengeance, consider this- there are empty offices everywhere. Abandoned desks, conference rooms with great views but not a soul in them. And yet- the theatres are full. To the rafters. And so are the restaurants...some of them. Whatever Juvenal's sarcastic intentions with his phrase, he got it mostly right. People seem to want dinners out- a bit- but culture and entertainment a whole lot.

It's such a privilege to take this post. I grew up in Wokingham, Berkshire, and went to primary school in Hurst, a tiny village with more sheep than people, one small village hall and one extremely keen annual pantomime-making crew. So, I know something about putting theatre on in unlikely spaces. And the joy of that annual event- the community putting it together, rigging the lights, sewing the dame's oversized bra, the back and front of the comedy camel... those experiences have stayed with me my whole life, and set me on a passionate course to try and make a career of that strange, magical, captivating world of the theatre. A career out of trying to make people laugh. And cry. In a good way.

I wasn't one of those kids who was taken to see shows in London. My mum was an English teacher, so I occasionally got to go to Stratford, but my theatrical diet as a young person was almost exclusively little theatres, regional theatres, local establishments with very small budgets and very big hearts. And it's those shows which I remember, some in vivid detail, to this day. A production of David Wood's *The See Saw Tree* at the Novello theatre in Ascot stays with me to this day. As does an amateur performance of Annie in a church hall, which ignited a long-standing passion for musicals, especially ones starring children my age- that could be me! *That* was my education- and not just in drama. To everything. Drama introduced me to travel, to history, to people I knew not of. Until my mid-teens I'd never travelled further than France, but in my imagination, through the theatre, I had been everywhere! Egypt, Ancient Greece, even a strange island populated by fairies where everyone seemed to burst into warbly song for pretty much no reason at all. I couldn't get enough of it. And by the time I was fifteen I was working as a dresser, swapping drama lessons for odd jobs and directing the school musicals. And the pantomime. And that, as they say, was that.

So, I have a great, great fondness for regional theatre, for small theatres and theatres at every level of amateur and professional. Whilst the West End is wonderful, it is the bread of the privileged few. The rest of us depend on whatever is being cooked up in our local cafe, so to speak. And as we all know, homemade food is always the best. I couldn't be more excited or honoured to take this post. Please know I will do my utmost to support you all and this great cause.

I have spent the last few years working mostly in film and television, writing and directing, telling stories from the heart but on a different scale. People often ask if that's my preference- my trajectory, have I 'moved on' as if there's some sort of hierarchy. Never! There is simply nothing like theatre. Weeks on a tv set making something which you never get to experience with the intended audience? I've done it, and I'll tell you, it has none of theatre's glorious magic. It's thrilling in other ways, don't get me wrong. And I won't lie, I also do it because it means I can finally go on holiday to places beyond France! But theatre will always hold the most special place in my heart. And that love of theatre makes me write, and has been, sometimes, what I write about and try to articulate.

Forgive me for quoting from a play which I wrote- but I wanted to share these words as I wrote them from the heart, in a scene where I was trying to put into words why the act of theatre in performance is so very special. And who better to give those words to than Nell Gwynn. I wanted to capture what that is - the magic - the essential transience....

Nell Who cares what happens next? You won't be here to see it.
Charles Well, thank you for cheering me up. I'd like to be remembered well.
Nell Why?
Charles Because it matters.
Nell No it doesn't.
Charles Britain's finest actress'. You must want people to know.
Nell Why? They never saw me. Why should I give a fig? It's only now that matters. It's no wonder I miss the playhouse.
Charles What's it to do with the playhouse?
Nell 'Cause that's all there is in a play. That moment. London could be burning down-
Charles Not again.
Nell Or the Thames could rise. But just for that moment, we're all there, us and the crowd. And it's all that exists. And it fills us. *(She pauses and witnesses it)* And then it's gone. And it can never be again. And then - it's someone else's moment.

Theatre keeps us present. It builds community. And it gives us hope. Hope, brightness, opportunities, and the chance to tell stories which help us explore and understand what it means to be human. That in itself seems like a strong enough reason never, ever to stop making it.

To finish with a favourite quote of mine from the actor director Terence Mann,
"Movies will make you famous; Television will make you rich; But theatre will make you good."