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Theater

Commentary: Why theater should stick its neck out

By Misha Berson
Seattle Times theater critic

Few people attend theater to be lectured at, browbeaten or hectored about what they already believe — or choose not to believe. But plays triggered by contentious, newsworthy events of our day don't have to be dry or message-mongering. And just as the 2006 Oscar race was dominated by quality films pondering race relations, gay rights, the geopolitics of oil and terrorism, so is topical stage drama making a quiet but palpable comeback locally, for the first time in a long while.

Seattle has been a late-bloomer in offering some of the *au courant* plays that have already triggered interest in London and other U.S. cities. In Seattle, we haven't had a chance yet to see "Stuff Happens," David Hare's backstage-at-the-White-House play on the lead-up to the Iraq war. Following London and L.A. runs, it opens soon in New York.

Meanwhile, no local theater has snatched the (more easily gained) rights to "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom." This hailed docudrama (premiered in London, and staged since in San Francisco, New York, Chicago) probes the personal and legal ramifications of the U.S. jailing of terror suspects at Guantánamo Bay.

And after it was announced that Simon Levy's antiwar L.A. hit "What I Heard About Iraq" would be aired "worldwide" in dozens of readings Monday, it took awhile for it to find a berth in Seattle. (The play will be read at 7 p.m. Monday at Trinity United Methodist Church in Ballard.)

Not that Seattle's theater scene has totally ignored the war abroad or the conflicts at home. In 2005, David Tucker II's "Another Day in Baghdad," based on the Seattle author's military service in Iraq, debuted here, and Theater Schmeater staged "Back of the Throat," a chilling, widely produced take on the Patriot Act's effects on Arab Americans, by local writer Yussef El Guindi.

Of course, writing plays "ripped from the headlines" is not mandatory. Nor is it easy to make sure such works are smart, lively and absorbing.

Yet despite the challenges, and a general antipathy toward "political" art, I hope we see more topical tales on our stages — good ones, in a variety of voices, styles and stances. And before I'm accused of promoting propaganda, preaching to "the converted," or asking theaters to commit box-office suicide, let me explain why.

1. Theater can show us compelling human stories we don't already know.

An example: Iraqi-American playwright Heather Raffo's "9 Parts of Desire," in which one actress portrays nine modern Iraqi women, opens Wednesday at Seattle Repertory Theatre.

I hope Raffo's play, lauded in London and New York, affords valuable insights into the concerns of a people we are involved with as a nation — but, at least in my case, know little about as individuals.

I also was regaled by "hidden" AIDS stories that hadn't previously hit my radar in the recent New York show "In the Continuum."

Created by actor-writers Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter, the piece engagingly juxtaposed the disparate lives of a TV journalist in South Africa with that of a pregnant African-American teenager — both newly infected with HIV. Both women came off as complicated, humorous and severely tested by a disease that recognizes no national boundaries.

Imagine the personal dramas coiled within the Katrina disaster, the Enron scandals, global religious conflicts, et al. Imagine what inspired and skilled theater artists might do, to bring those sagas to us onstage, with human-scaled intimacy.

2. In the theater, the "real world" can meet the imagination.

We look to the news media for hard facts about wars, political scandals, humanitarian crises. But unlike reporters, theater artists have license to experiment, exaggerate, invent while dramatizing. Melding reality with fantasy, they can offer a multifaceted truth that engages the emotions and imagination as well as the mind.

Recent shows at Consolidated Works reminded me of the broad array of tools stage artists can muster to relate their own visions.

The Bread and Puppet Theater uses masks and puppets. Guillermo Gómez-Peña employs video, live poetry and (odd, but true) acupuncture to critique the state of world affairs. Tim Miller addressed the gay marriage debate via his love of Broadway show tunes.

What next? Anything. Everything.

3. The freedom to express, and receive, a multitude of ideas and opinions is a precious right in our democracy.

In many nations, playwrights have literally risked their lives to "speak truth to power" from the stage. Or just to represent their society in critical ways.

It would be utterly naive to suggest theater in itself can, or should, change the world. As playwright Edward Albee said in a recent interview, artists who want to alter public policy should go at it more efficiently — by voting and protesting.

But as we're often told, our inalienable rights of free speech and assembly can atrophy if we don't use them. And who better to speak the unspoken, air the unaided, than artists who can explore the human dimensions of public affairs?

4. Good topical theater does not lecture or hector, but enacts and humanizes.

We are complex and multidimensional animals. So are good plays.

At their very best, socially-engaged playwrights such as Brecht, Fugard, Shaw, Kushner and Stoppard portray how unpredictable and contradictory we humans are, how complicated our moral and political landscape.

Consider G.B. Shaw's "Heartbreak House," on tap for Intiman Theatre this summer. In this masterwork, Shaw penned a scathing critique of Europe's drift into World War I. But his own disappointment over the failure of socialism to remake the world is imbued there too.

And as in many a great tale, we get to the politics through the romantic and comic aspects of the story.

5. Risk, adventure, escapism, comfort: The theater can offer all those things.

I'm not arguing for Seattle theaters to program only topical scripts. Most of what's offered will always be more popular fare — well-known classics, musicals, comedies, family sagas. And understandably so.

All of the above can appeal and illuminate. And as many directors know, some long-canonized plays can feel richly immediate.

Consider "Richard III," scheduled this season by both Intiman and Seattle Shakespeare Company. As long as ruthless politicians grab and abuse power, this Shakespearean classic will be in vogue.

Ultimately, theater is mostly about being pulled into stories — familiar ones, new ones. And as polarizing or perplexing as our present-day stories can be, they come to us from a different angle in the theater than from our TV sets or computer screens.

As wars and debates rage on many fronts in our world, why not also consider the turbulent sagas of our own age from this intimate vantage point? Why not gaze into the two-way mirror theater holds up, and ponder those reflections of ourselves?

Misha Berson: mberson@seattletimes.com

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