

THE IMPORTANCE OF ART: Family Values, Ritual, and Live Theatre
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There is concern today about the loss of "family values", about the increasing lack of civility in society and the blurring of what's right and wrong. Much of the fault can be traced to a decline of ritual.

Ritual is not the exclusive domain of exotic or infrequent practices. Something as simple as a family sitting down to dinner at an appointed time is ritual. As the family separates "dinnertime" from "everything else", dinner with the family receives focused attention and becomes extra-ordinary.

Ritual is to everyday life what good punctuation is to grammar; it clarifies meaning and makes distinctions. On a broader scale, ritual can be a channel through which the virtues and the traditions long revered by societies pass on to younger generations. Ritual reminds us of the eternal Truths, and keeps higher aspirations alive.

Because it requires focused attention by both the artist and the observer, Art involves ritual. Focused attention means sacrificing time and energy that may have been spent elsewhere. The more ritual a work of Art demands of the observer, the more likely it is to be remembered and/or to be taken seriously.

Although good Art can be found there, movies and television do not demand ritual from their audiences the way live theater does. Late arrivals, their hands filled with cartons of soft drinks and popcorn commonly loom across the movie screen well after the beginning of the story. Good Art on television competes with the general informality of the viewer being home as well as the viewer's divided attention during any commercials.

Live theater still insists on a certain amount of formality. Usually, viewers are in their seats at a prescribed time. There is a meditative kind of silence as the lights go out and the darkness fuses the viewers into a more complete unit. Then, lights up. Time has been punctuated. Ritual has separated that which is now being observed from the myriad of previous events. And because of the undivided attention it has been given, a good work holds that attention and, if it inspires, it will be taken "to heart" by the viewer thereby enriching the quality of life. In this way, the Art of live theater can be a catalyst leading us back to ritual and family values.