There is no substitute for SUBSTANCE … *even in Spectacle.*

By Kile Ozier

We owe our audiences more than mere magnitude.

Recently, the New York Times published an article on the escalating absence of actual creativity in American Entertainment Culture: offering that audiences are increasingly becoming trained to respond to entertainment "cues" as though they are actually being entertained…despite the fact that, in actuality, they are not.

Rather, and tragically, audiences are simply responding to learned stimuli.

Like jaded Pavlovians, people in the seats are learning – have learned – to respond "appropriately" to certain musical riffs, laugh tracks, looks on the faces of actors and – certainly in our context – the presence of mere magnitude; and to interpret that as "entertainment" or, more specifically, "being entertained." Audiences, any more, more often simply think they are being entertained rather than actually experiencing entertainment.

The ever-increasing presence of new developments in technology has effectively enhanced this trend in film and television. The influence of special effects over script or story has been the subject of ongoing debate and discussion in the pages of newspapers, trade journals and books (remember those?) for some time. Likewise and more recently,

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this has influenced the production and presentation of live theatre and theme-park and stadium shows in an even more insidious fashion.

If the music "says" what the audience is seeing or experiencing is funny, then they laugh. If it's really, really big and there are fireworks, explosions, flames and a cast of thousands, then, it simply must be a wonderful spectacle…

Shows get bigger and bigger (and more and more expensive) while not necessarily growing better; and certainly not becoming any more profound. The overarching trend in "spectacular entertainment" seems to reflect a propensity for magnitude-as-substance. This is, more accurately, the running-of-old-tapes rather than an effort to delve deeper, reach higher or stretch further for audience response.

While this bigness is all that's expected by most audiences, more can be offered-and such effort can, will be, and is appreciated.

How best to address this tragic trend? Can spectacular entertainment actually be imbued with substance while retaining the imperative Wow! Factor? Must we contract Entertainment Theorists to help guide the script and concept development process? Will audiences have to study, prior to each showing, in order to receive and retain this profundity?

We owe our audiences more than mere magnitude; we owe them Story. We owe them stories that move, stories that compel, stories that elicit laughter from within their souls, stories that offer answers to questions that live deep within those same souls… stories to which our audiences can respond and that will continue to resonate, long after

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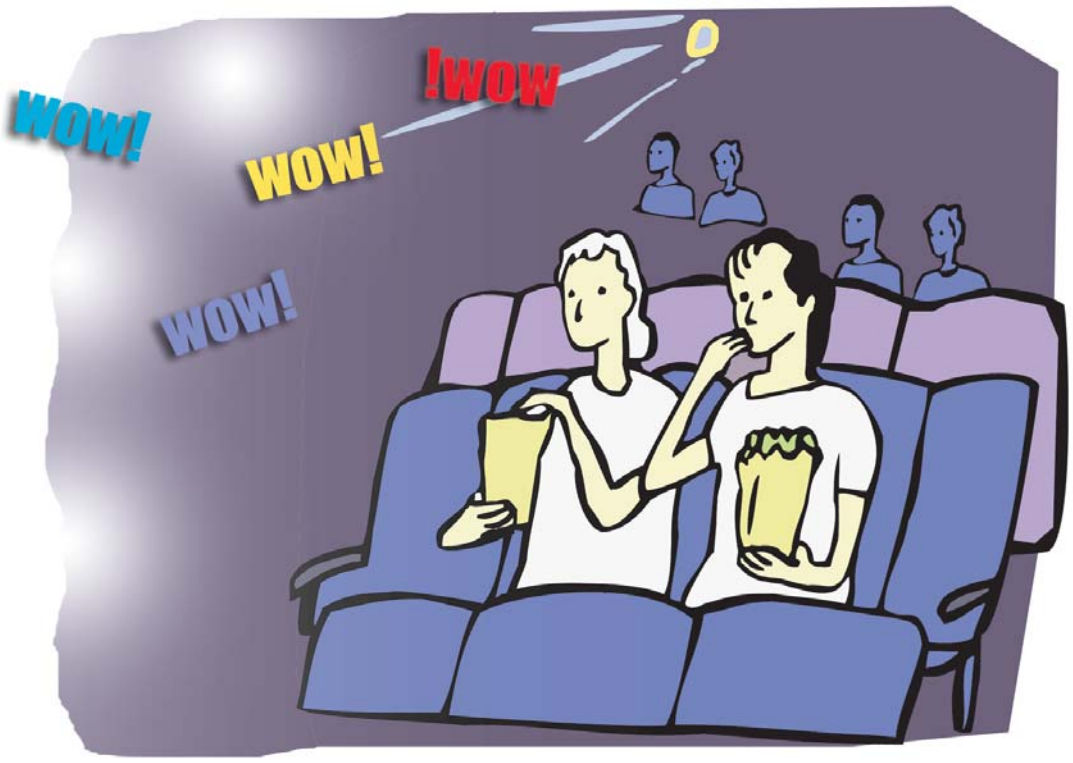

Take the audiences beyond the immediate experience and give them something to take home.

the actual experience has passed. Producing these shows – telling these stories – won't cost a cent more than shows that Wow for the moment of experience, then fade immediately into anecdotal memory.

These days, it seems that the money and time is spent in developing ways to overwhelm. The objective of "True emotional response" is often articulated as a primary goal at the outset (well, at least during the first charette…); but transmogrification soon takes place as resources are spent in wowing...wowing without wonder. What ends up being developed and produced are the components that add to magnitude and awesomeness; thousands of dancers, skydivers, massive stages, fireworks, card sections, airplanes and so on. The default seems to be interpreting a visceral response as one that incorporates the emotional.

I don't subscribe to this. I believe that the two, not mutually exclusive, can and must exist hand-in-hand; supporting one another.

All of the abovementioned "spectacular" stuff is great, and certainly contributes to the ever sought and appreciated gasps of audience delight and exclamations of surprise. Spectacle consisting of some (or all) these components, though, is likely still to fail to actually move audiences, emotionally; without script, without finesse, without managing to virtually reach into the mind and heart of each audience member and connect with something therein.

Not that specific-and often liberal-use of these "standard" Components of Spectacle is not effective. However, each spectacle or experience created and produced should touch the audience, move and compel them, give them a resonant experience that will remain with them as they drift to sleep that

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...find ways for the audience to do some of the work in the creation of their own experience.

night, and linger beyond awakening the next morning.

More often than not, success at this is achieved through a light hand: delicacy and creative discretion; finding ways, visually and aurally, to reach into the collective and individual experiences of those in the audience and inspire them to relive or re-experience something moving, enjoyable or simply funny.

Consider, then, the "Theory of Comfortable Disorientation" and "Theory of Successive (Re)Discovery." They work.

In applying these theories to the concept, design, construction and production of an arena, stadium, theme park or theatrical spectacle, the audiences are taken beyond the immediate experience and given something to take home, beyond the instant and passing thrill that comes simply of magnitude.

The first step is to Comfortably Disorient the audience. In all likelihood, they enter your space with some idea of what they are about to experience. At the very least, they are aware of a theme or raison d'show. Now is your first chance to gently surprise them (and this gentleness is key to comfortable disorientation): with lighting, sound, an entrance to the space through unexpected and unusual passageways, even the use of your stage, theatre or set in ways for which they may not have been designed.

A few suggestions:

- Enter your audience through backstage, across the performance space to their seats
- Seat them on the stage and deliver your show from the balconies
- Especially effective for touring productions is finding/creating simple ways to completely alter regularly-used performance venues and spaces so that your local audience enters the doors to a building/theatre they've entered before (comfort), only to discover that the lobby isn't the lobby, anymore, but may have disappeared behind a tent or other masquerading construct (disorientation)

If your audience is comfortable, if they feel protected, they won't be distracted by insecurity. The other side of this is that, being disoriented in what may be an otherwise familiar context, audiences are more inclined toward inquisitiveness, to "explore" your production, to view and examine the set and pre-show environment through more interested eyes-and this dynamic ought continue, throughout your show. This puts their heads, hearts and minds in your show, even before your show begins; and it sets them up for the application of Theory Two. (continued on p. 34) ➤

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As your show/production/experience unfolds, find ways for the audience to do some of the work in the creation of their own experience. Just as Julie Taymor's "Lion King" costumes have audiences completing the animals they represent and "disappearing" the actors in the process; give your audiences opportunities to fill in their own "blanks," whether they are visual, aural or even olfactory.

Giving your audiences opportunities to "discover" your show as it unfolds will offer you a most satisfying, quieter "oh!" of surprise, of intimate discovery. An expression that erupts from the heart of the audience member and which, when multiplied by 25, 250 or 250,000 becomes almost as tangible as the shouts of excitement at your pyrotechnics (real or virtual), and, to be completely candid, this more subtle gasp of awe can be far more profoundly rewarding.

It will also bring them back, sooner.

These sorts of shows may well be harder to write, but that's what a staff is paid to do. Once the team is under contract-Director, Producer, Writer, Creative Director, whoever-once you've bought the (appropriately qualified) brains, make sure you get what you want.

Producing "profound" or "moving" spectacle is NO more costly to mount (sometimes, even less so). Rather than leaving audiences hungry for more after they've digested what's been shown them in tonight's arena, give them something that continues to unfold after they've left their seats and returned to their schedules.

This, then, is should be our mandate as creators of large-scale entertainment and spectacle: Content, Script, Resonance…Story. Writers, Producers, Directors and Clients of same better serve our audiences when offering something that goes beyond the relatively easy road of bigness and grandness.

Touch them. Move them. This is our responsibility.