

Mid-19th Century Theatre Etiquette
by Miss Katwin



From: “How to Behave At a Theatre,” *Punchinello*, Vol. 1, No. 1, New York, April 9, 1870:

Mr. PUNCHINELLO: I take it you are willing to receive useful information. Of course you are. Why? Because, while you may be humorous, you intend also to be sensible. I have in my day been to the theatre not a little. I have seen many plays and many audiences. I know—or, at least, think I do—what is good acting, and what good manners. Suffer me, then, briefly to give you a few hints as to how an audience should behave. I shall charge nothing for the information, though I am frank to insinuate that it is worth a deal—of the value, perhaps, of a great deal table.

First. Always take a lady with you to the play. It will please her, whatever the bother to you. Besides, you will then be talked to. If you make a mess of it in trying to unravel the plot, she will essentially aid you in that direction. Nothing like a woman for a plot—especially if you desire to plunge head foremost into one.

Second. If you have any loud conversation to indulge in, do it while the play is going on. Possibly it may disturb your neighbors; but you do not ask them to hear it. Hail Columbia! isn't this a free country? If you have any private and confidential affairs to talk over, the theatre is the place in which to do it. Possibly strangers may not comprehend all time bearings; but that is not your fault. You do your best—who can do better?

Third. If you have an overcoat or any other garment, throw it across the adjoining or front seat. Never mind any protests of frown or word. Should not people be willing to accommodate? Of course they should. Prove it by putting your dripping umbrella against the lady with the nice moire antique silk. It may ruffle her temper; but that's her business, not yours; she shouldn't be ridiculous because well dressed.

Fourth. Try and drop your opera-glass half a dozen times of an evening. If it makes a great racket, as of course it will, and rolls a score of seats off, hasten at once to obtain possession of the frisky instrument. Let these little episodes be done at a crisis in the play where the finest points are being evolved.

Fifth. Of course you carry a cane—a very ponderous cane. What for? To use it, obviously. Contrive to do so when every body is silent. What's the use in being demonstrative in a crowd? It don't pay. Besides, you dog, you know your *forte* is in being odd. Odd fellow you. See it in your brain—only half of one. Make a point to bring down your cane when there is none (point, not cane), and shout out Good! or Bravo! when you have reason to believe other people are going to be quiet.

Sixth. Never go in till after a play begins, and invariably leave in the middle of an act, and in the most engaging scene.

These are but a few hints. However, I trust they are good as far as they go. I may send you a half-dozen more. In the mean time, I remain, Yours, truly, O. Foggy.

Ask a frequent patron of the arts about the state of theatre etiquette in the 21st Century, and you are likely to get a litany of complaints about people who arrive late and cause a commotion, who talk during the performance, who rustle their programs, and who wear outlandish clothing. You'll hear how many theatres now have an announcement before the show reminding the clueless to turn off their cell phones. You may even get a sort of nostalgic longing for the "good old days" when people knew how to dress and behave in public.

There may have been such a time at some point in the 20th Century; however, a denizen of mid-19th Century America would certainly recognize the types complained of but would definitely not long for times past. In fact, he or she would breathe a sigh of relief that things had gotten so much more pleasant lately! No one was throwing sheep carcasses or rotten vegetables at bad actors anymore...at least, not in the more civilized portions of the country. The theatre had become a respectable place for ladies and families to spend an afternoon or evening without being accosted by disreputable types. And not *quite* so many people insisted on heartfelt renditions of "*Yankee Doodle*" or "*Home Sweet Home*" during every act.

Were things really that bad? Apparently so; according to various European travelers, particularly during the Jacksonian era, America was a land of rough-and-ready rubes whose antics were recorded in a number of highly entertaining and best-selling travel books. Entertaining to other Europeans, that is; Americans were appalled and embarrassed at these portrayals. Perhaps the most notorious was Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). Mrs. Trollope made no bones about disliking almost everybody she met and practically everything she saw. Her descriptions of audiences at various theatrical performances are quite enlightening:

The theatre at Cincinnati is small, and...really not a bad one, though the very poor receipts rendered it impossible to keep it in high order, but an annoyance infinitely greater than decorations indifferently clean, was the style and manner of the audience. Men came into the lower tier of boxes without their coats; and I have seen shirt sleeves tucked up to the shoulder; the spitting was incessant and the mixed smell of onions and whiskey was enough to make one feel...the acting dearly bought by the obligation of enduring its accompaniment. The bearing and attitudes of the men are perfectly indescribable; the heels thrown higher than the head, the entire rear of the person presented to the audience, the whole length supported on the benches are among the varieties that these exquisite posture-masters exhibit. The noises, too, were perpetual, and of the most unpleasant kind; the applause is expressed by cries and

thumping with the feet, instead of clapping; and when a patriotic fit seized them, and “Yankee Doodle” was called for, every man seemed to think his reputation as a citizen depended on the noise he made.

...The theatre...in Washington...is very small, and most astonishingly dirty and void of decoration, considering that it is the only place of public amusement...The spitting was incessant; and not one in ten of the male part of the illustrious legislative audience sat according to the usual custom of human beings; the legs were thrown sometimes over the front of the box, sometimes over the side of it; here and there a senator stretched his entire length along a bench; and in many instances the front rail was preferred as a seat.

...There are three theatres at New York, all of which we visited. The Park Theatre is the only one licensed by fashion, but the Bowery is infinitely superior in beauty; it is indeed as pretty a theatre as I ever entered, perfect as to size and proportion, elegantly decorated, and the scenery and machinery equal to any in London, but it is not the fashion. The Chatham is so utterly condemned by *bon ton*, that it requires some courage to decide upon going there; nor do I think my curiosity would have penetrated so far, had I not seen Miss Mitford’s *Rienzi* advertised there. It was the first opportunity I had had of seeing it played, and, in spite of indifferent acting, I was delighted. The interest must have been great, for till the curtain fell I saw not one quarter of the queer things around me: then I observed in the front row of a dress-box, a lady performing the most



BOX AT THE THEATRE.

maternal office possible; several gentlemen without their coats, and a general air of contempt for the decencies of life, certainly more than usually revolting...

Well! Obviously, there were exaggerations, and no mention was made of the portion of American society that did know how to behave. After all, one must keep in mind the bias of the author—she was the wife of a man who had bungled or frittered away the family resources and prospects for fortune and who had failed in the attempt to try anew in America. As a result, she placed all her hopes for the family's future on the sale of her book in England. In her defense, her contact with the so-called "lower orders" may have indeed been novel to her. In the late 1820s and 1830s, seeds of the social disorder that would sweep Europe were germinating; it was likely that the prospect of the various social classes intermingling the way they did in America was frightening to Mrs. Trollope, and she vented her fears in her book. She really gave her reading public their money's worth.

One reviewer of the book spent a great deal of effort in picking apart her prose and "proving" its falsity. He went on to point out that even if her pictures of America were true, other Europeans found England just as wanting. He quotes a German nobleman who attended several theatrical performances in England during the same time period that Mrs. Trollope was in America:

The most striking thing to a foreigner in English theatres is the unheard-of coarseness and brutality of the audiences....English freedom here degenerates into the rudest license and it is not uncommon, in the midst of the most affecting parts of a tragedy, or the most charming *cadenza* of a singer, to hear some coarse expressions shouted from the gallery in a stentor voice. This is followed, according to the taste of the by-standers, either by loud laughter and approbation, or by the castigation and expulsion of the offender...It is also no rarity for some one to throw the fragments of his *goute*, which do not always consist of orange-peels alone, without the smallest ceremony, on the heads of the people in the pit or...with singular dexterity into the boxes; while others hang their coats and waistcoats over the railing of the gallery and sit in shirt-sleeves. (From *North American Review*, No. LXXVIII, January 1833)

Still, other Americans had to admit the legitimacy of Mrs. Trollope's observations; nearly everybody who was anybody had something to say about Mrs. Trollope, and her book was still being quoted and referred to during the 1860s as a standard of reference on how *not* to behave. One of the more considered reviews of the book was found in the *New-England Magazine*. Commenting on the book in

general and the state of American theatre in particular, the review stated in part:

Politeness is relative and conventional. What is polite in England, is rude in Persia; and what is fashion in London, is, sometimes, not tolerated at Paris. The English, like all people, make their own laws for social regulation, and by these they judge, not only themselves but others. The Americans have been charged, by almost all English travelers, with outraging these social ordinances...We are not called upon to deny the fact, that, generally speaking, our countrymen have more sturdiness than polish; yet we believe, that they have, at least, infinitely more knowledge and good manners than the same classes in Great-Britain. But we have many deficiencies, and there is no better way to amend us than to read the satires of foreigners. There is generally some foundation even for caricature, and, if we will not look at the picture which enemies make of us, we may never be acquainted with our own peculiarities....If it be a true saying that the judgement of our enemies concerning us is more correct than that of our friends, then has Mrs. Trollope's book in its favor, at least, the authority of the proverb. There are some satires in it that it will not injure us to read. (Vol. III, July-December, 1832, pp. 144-146).

Old habits die hard, and changes were not made overnight—read any biography of an actor or actress prominent during the 1840s and 1850s and you'll see what I mean. These contain accounts of audiences behaving badly, such as booing and hissing unpopular performers, and sometimes causing riots (e.g., see Mrs. LaBreck's account of the Astor Place riot in her article "Success and Scandal: Notes on the Life of Edwin Forrest," *Spray of the Falls*, Vol. X, No. 1, Jan. 1998).

American behavior was being prodded in a more decorous direction, however, and etiquette manuals including sections on how to behave in public places like theatres began to proliferate. In addition to the etiquette manuals, theatre and orchestral associations printed requests for good manners on the part of their patrons in their programs and advertising materials...among other things, these requests included pleas to be quiet during the performance, to arrive on time, to stay seated until the performance was over, etc. A playbill for an 1863 performance of *Box and Cox* at a prison camp for Confederate officers contained the following rather tongue-in-cheek notices:

- The sentinels on the outer walls have been specially engaged to preserve order and decorum.

- Little boys will not be allowed to eat pea nuts in the pit, nor throw orange peel from the gallery during the more affecting parts of the play. In order to carry out this arrangement more effectually, a special order will be issued, forbidding Joe Reynolds selling any of those articles to the little boys.

Of course, changes were effected in urban areas much sooner than in rural areas or on the frontier. Theatres in large cities such as New York and Philadelphia became much more segregated as to audience type and bills of fare. In sparsely populated areas, such as Minnesota in that era, the luxury of theatres and bills of fare suited to particular audiences and/or social classes would not have been economically viable. It is therefore likely that quite a variety of people and behaviors would have been present at any given performance.

The *Punchinello* excerpt on page 1 may be useful to you if you portray the more rustic element of 1860s Minnesota. However, on the chance that your particular persona is that of the respectable middle class, or someone aspiring to be thought of as respectable, there are appended hereto numerous excerpts from period etiquette manuals.

From: *The American Gentleman's Guide to Politeness and Fashion*, by Henry Lunettes, Derby & Jackson, New York, 1858:

Whenever you are in attendance upon ladies, as at the opera, concerts, lectures, etc., there is entire propriety in remaining with them in the seat you have paid for, or secured by early attendance. No gentleman should be expected to separate himself from a party to give his place to a lady under such circumstances, and in no country but ours would such a request or intimation be made. But while it is quite justifiable to retain the seat taken upon entering such a public place, nothing is more wholly inadmissible than crowding in and out of your place repeatedly, talking and laughing aloud, mistimed applauding, and the like. If you are not present for the simple purpose of witnessing the performance, whatever it may be, there are, doubtless, those who are; and it is not only exceedingly vulgar, but *immoral*, to invade their rights in this regard. Be careful, therefore, to secure your *libretto*, concert-bill, or programme, as the case may be, before assuming your seat; and when you have ladies with you, or are one of a party, especially, as then you cannot so readily accept the penalty of carelessness, by not returning to your first seat. Should any unforeseen necessity compel you to crowd past others, and afterwards resume your seat, presume as little as possible upon their polite forbearance, by great care of dresses, toes, etc., and each time politely apologize for the inconvenience you occasion. Let me repeat

that no excuse exists for the too-frequent rudeness of disturbing others by fidgeting, whispering, laughing, or applauding out of time. And even when standing or moving about between the exercises, on any public occasion, or the acts at a play-house, or opera, well-bred people are never disregarding of the rights and comfort of others.

In a picture-gallery, at an exhibition of marbles, etc., nothing can be more indicative of a want of refinement sufficient to appreciate true art, than the impertinence exhibited in audible comments upon the subjects before you, and in interfering with the enjoyment of others by passing before them, moving seats noisily, talking and laughing aloud, etc. With persons of taste and refinement, there is an almost religious sacredness in the presence of the creations of genius, to desecrate which, is as vulgar as it is irreverent of the beautiful and the good. Always then, carry out the most scrupulous regard of the rights and feelings of others, when yourself a devotee at the shrine of aesthetics, by attention to the minutest forms of courtesy. This will dictate leaving your place the moment you rise, carrying everything with you belonging to you, and never stopping to shawl ladies, don an overcoat, or dispose of an opera-glass, until you can do so without interrupting the comfort of those you leave behind you.

When you wish to take refreshments, or to offer them to ladies, at public entertainments, it is better to repair to the place where they are served, as a rule, unless it be in the instance of a single glass of water, or the like, except when a party occupy an opera box, etc., exclusively.

From: *Chesterfield's Letter Writer and Complete Book of Etiquette*, Dick & Fitzgerald, New York, 1857, 1860:

Gentlemen who attend ladies to the opera, to concerts, to lectures, &c., should take off their hats on entering the room, and while showing them their seats. Having taken your seats remain quietly in them, and avoid, unless absolute necessity requires it, incommoding others by crowding out and in before them. If obliged to do this, politely apologize for the trouble you cause them. To talk during the performance is an act of rudeness and injustice. You thus proclaim your own ill breeding and invade the rights of others, who have paid for the privilege of hearing the performers, and not for listening to you.

If you are in attendance upon a lady at any opera, concert, or lecture, you should retain your seat at her side; but if you have no lady with you, and have taken a desirable seat, you should, if need be, cheerfully relinquish in favor of a lady, for one less eligible.

To the opera, or theatre, ladies should wear opera hoods, which are to be taken off on entering. In this country, custom permits the wearing of bonnets; but as they are neither convenient nor comfortable, ladies should dispense with their use

whenever they can.

Gloves should be worn by ladies in church, and in places of public amusement. Do not take them off to shake hands. Great care should be taken that they are well made and fit neatly.

From: *Martine's HandBook of Etiquette, and Guide to True Politeness*, by Arthur Martine, New York, Dick & Fitzgerald, 1866:

It will never do to be ignorant of the names and approximate ages of great composers, especially in large cities, where music is so highly appreciated and so common a theme. It will be decidedly condemnatory if you talk of the *new* opera "Don Giovanni," or Rossini's "Trovatore," or are ignorant who composed "Fidelio," and in what opera occur such common pieces as "*Ciascun lo dice*," or "*Il Segreto*." I do not say that these trifles are indispensable, and when a man has better knowledge to offer, especially with genius or "cleverness" to back it, he will not only be pardoned for an ignorance of them, but can even take a high tone, and profess indifference or contempt of them. But, at the same time, such ignorance stamps an ordinary man, and hinders conversation.

Don't talk of "the opera" in the presence of those who are not frequenters of it. They will imagine that you are showing off, or that you are *lying*, and that you have never been to the opera twice in your life. For the same reason, avoid too frequently speaking of your acquaintance with celebrated men, unless you are a public man yourself, who would be supposed to have such acquaintance.

Do not press before a lady at a theater or a concert. Always yield to her, if practicable, your seat and place. Do not sit when she is standing, without offering your place. Consult not only your own ease but also the comfort of those around you.

Do not cross a room in an anxious manner, and force your way up to a lady merely to receive a bow, as by so doing you attract the eyes of the company toward her. If you are desirous of being noticed by any one in particular, put yourself in their way as if by accident, and do not let them *see* that you have sought them out; unless, indeed, there be something very important to communicate.

Gentlemen who attend ladies to the opera, to concerts, to lectures, &c., should take off their hats on entering the room, and while showing them their seats. Having taken your seats remain quietly in them, and avoid, unless absolute necessity requires it, incommoding others by crowding out and in before them. If obliged to do this, politely apologize for the trouble you cause them. To talk during the performance is an act of rudeness and injustice. You thus proclaim your own ill-breeding and invade the rights of others, who have paid for the privilege of hearing the performers, and not for listening to you.

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Gloves should be worn by ladies in church, and in places of public amusement. Do not take them off to shake hands. Great care should be taken that they are well made and fit neatly.

The books on etiquette will tell you, that on waiting on a lady into a carriage, or the box of a theater, you are to take off your hat; but such *is not* the custom among polite people in this country. The inconvenience of such a rule is a good reason against the observance in a country where the practice of politeness has in it nothing of the servility which is often attached to it in countries where the code of etiquette is dictated by the courts of monarchy. In handing a lady into a carriage, a gentleman *may* need to employ both his hands, and he has no third hand to hold on to his hat.

If you are in a public room, as a library or reading-room, avoid loud conversation or laughing, which may disturb others. At the opera, or a concert, be profoundly silent during the performances; if you do not wish to hear the music, you have no right to interfere with the enjoyment of others.

In accompanying ladies to any public place, as to a concert or lecture, you should precede them in entering the room, and procure seats for them.

From: *Frost's Laws and By-Laws of American Society*, by S. A. Frost, New York, Dick & Fitzgerald, Publishers, 1869:

A gentleman who wishes to invite a young lady, who is not related to him, to visit any place of public amusement with him, must, the first time that he invites her, also invite another lady of the same family to accompany her. No young lady should visit public places of amusement with a gentleman with whom she is but slightly acquainted, alone.

It is a gentleman's duty to invite a lady long enough before the evening of the performance to be certain of securing pleasant seats, as it is but a poor compliment to take her where she will be uncomfortable, or where she can neither hear nor see.

Although a carriage may not be necessary on account of the weather, it is a more elegant way of paying attention to a lady to provide one.

Never assume an air of secrecy or mystery in a public place; and if you have



the right to do so, assume no lover-like airs. It is rude to converse loudly, especially during the performance; but a low tone is all that is necessary; not a whisper.

To appear to comment aside upon those near you is extremely ill-bred.

A lady is not expected to bow to a friend across a theatre or concert-room; but a gentleman may recognize his lady friends.

A lady must answer a note of invitation to visit a place of public amusement as soon as possible, as, by delay, she may keep her gentleman friend in a doubt, and deprive

him of the pleasure of inviting another friend, if she declines.

It is ill-bred to arrive late at any public entertainment, and looks as if you were not sufficiently master of your own time to be punctual.

In a theatre, give your attention entirely to the stage when the curtain is up; to your companion when it is down.

It looks badly to see a lady staring round the house with an opera-glass. Never is a modest dignity more becoming than in a theatre. To indulge in extravagant gesture, laugh boisterously, flirt a fan conspicuously, toy with an eye-glass or opera-glass, indulge in lounging attitudes, whisper aside, are all unlady-like in the extreme.

If you speak to your companion during the performance, do so in a low tone, that you may not disturb those who are near you, and wish to hear the actors.

In entering a concert-room or the box of a theatre, a gentleman should precede a lady, if there is not room to walk beside her, until they reach the seats, then hand her to the inner one, taking the outside one himself. In going out, if he cannot offer her his arm, he must again walk before her, until he reaches the lobby, and then offer her his arm.

Boisterous applause and loud laughter are ungentlemanly.

It is in bad taste to distract your companion's interest from the performance, even if you find it dull yourself.

No gentlemen should leave a lady alone for a moment in a public place of amusement. He may subject her to annoyance, or he may find another lady in his seat when he returns, which would separate him from his companion until the close of the performance; for, although a gentleman when alone should offer his seat to a lady or old gentlemen who cannot procure one, he is not expected to do so when escorting a lady. His place is then that of protector to his charge, and he must not relinquish it for a moment.

Secure a libretto, or programme, before taking your seat, that you may not be obliged to rise to get one.

At the opera, conversation during the performance is in the worst taste. The lowest tone will disturb the real lovers of music. Exclamations of “Lovely!” “Exquisite!” “How sweet!” and others, are all proofs of vulgarity.

If you promenade at a concert or between the acts at a theatre, you may bow to friends the first time you pass them only. A lady must not allow other gentlemen to join her, if she would not offend her escort and no gentleman will stop a lady to speak to her. A conversation of a moment or two is all that is allowable in such meetings

If seats are secured, it is best to arrive about five minutes before the commencement of a performance; but if a gentleman is escorting a lady to an entertainment where seats cannot be secured he should call for her at an early hour, that she may get a good place.

A gentleman alone may join lady friends for a few moments between the acts at a theatre, or in the intermission at a concert, but only for a few moments, as their escort has a prior claim upon their attention.

It is an act of rudeness to join any party about to visit a place of amusement, or at one, unless urgently invited, and no one of taste will ever form a third. If two or three ladies are in the party and but one gentleman, another gentleman, if well acquainted, may offer his services as escort to one of the ladies, and if not allowed to share the expenses, should invite the party to partake of refreshments after the performance is over.

Always enter a concert-hall or lecture-room as quietly as possible.

Never push violently through a crowd at a public place. A lady will always find room made for her if she requests it, or if it is requested by her escort.

After escorting a lady to a place of amusement, a gentleman may ask permission to call the following morning or evening, and the lady must be at home to receive that call. She should take that opportunity to thank him for the pleasure she has enjoyed, and find some warm words of praise for the performance. To severely criticize on such an occasion is rude to the escort, who has intended to give pleasure and the performance must be bad indeed where nothing can be found to merit a word of praise.

From *Rules of Etiquette and Home Culture: or What To Do and How To Behave*, by Walter R. Houghton, et al., Sixth Edition (Rand McNally, New York, 1884):

Gentlemen should precede ladies, to clear the way, in a public hall, unless there is an usher preceding them. Upon reaching the seats, he should allow her the inner one, assuming the outer one himself. He should on no account leave the lady's side from the beginning to the close of the performance.

Some acts which, we are sorry to say, are often to be seen among young people at public entertainments are so manifestly improper, it is not necessary to comment upon them here; a mere suggestion will suffice. To talk and laugh in tones loud enough to disturb others, to whisper, to force one's self into a seat already full, to elbow one's way through a crowd, to unnecessarily obstruct the view of others, to make any noise which would disturb the performance, or to interfere with the rights of others, are all properly regarded as acts of flagrant rudeness.

A gentleman accompanying a lady is under no obligation to give up his seat to another lady. His duty is solely to the lady whom he accompanies.

Persons attending a public performance, concert, lecture, opera or theatre, should be appreciative of the excellent parts of the performance, and express their appreciation and satisfaction by proper applause.

By all means remain in your seat till the close of the performance. The practice of leaving the hall while the performance is in progress, or while it is drawing to a close, is justly regarded as offensive. Common politeness to the performers, a courteous regard for the rights of the audience, the common instincts of civility, all demand that this offense shall be avoided.

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