

## Wall Street advises the players (or Shut up and drink your gin!)

Sunday, January 24, 2010

On January 9, *Wall Street Journal* drama critic Terry Teachout published a column headlined “America’s favorite plays.” In it, he correctly observed that readers “willing to mine” Theater Communications Group’s public database of production schedules across the country could get a “detailed picture” of “what plays get performed most often” by not-for-profit professional theaters in America.

But after mining the data himself and calculating the statistical favorites, Teachout ignored what the data says about theaters and leapt instead to a conclusion about theatergoers. Surprising? Maybe not. He does, after all, work on Wall Street, where the Lords of Financial Logic leap tall buildings every day.

“American theatergoers,” Teachout writes, “are not know-nothing Neanderthals, but intelligent people who are prepared to spend time and money grappling with straight plays that are artful, thoughtful and well written.”

In other words, he joined the general outcry among arts writers and academics who complain that producing organizations are irresponsibly “dumbing down” their seasons with musicals and comedies. In effect, he’s saying to us, “Sure, the economy is tanking. Sure, donors are writing smaller checks (when they write them at all) and box office phones aren’t ringing. But you’re the Artful Dodgers! Taken as a group, you’re statistically more inclined to produce Shanley than *Showboat* ... and statistics don’t lie!”

But statistics do lie, Terry. In your case, by omission.

If you’d continued digging in your data mine past the layer of titles most produced down to the layer of tickets most purchased, you’d have drawn a very different conclusion about the average American theatergoer’s willing-

ness to spend his time “grappling” with “thoughtful and well written” theater. While it’s absolutely true that theaters do still strive to produce entertainments that challenge and inspire, we don’t do so in response to demand. We do so in defiance of it.



The popular media – movies, television, the World Wide Web – have dumbed down our audiences. They’ve shortened attention spans and softened intellects and those of us who’ve ignored these market realities, who’ve heeded the call to prayer you yodel from your ivory tower, are suffering and dying in droves.

Box office statistics prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that American theatergoers prefer by a wide margin products that sing, dance, titillate and amuse, so please, before you do any more damage, pick up that shovel one more time and try to break a sweat. Spend a season of 80-hour weeks completing grant forms, soliciting sponsorships, arranging HVAC repairs, negotiating production contracts, cutting production budgets and brainstorming clever ways to convince patrons that your production of an important new work by an unknown playwright is better use of their discretionary dollar than nosebleed seats for the national tour of *Wicked*. Then and only then may you issue another word of advice to the players.

**Length:** 4:16

**Music bed:** *Consider Yourself* from *Oliver!*

**Writer, voice:** Tim Brosnan





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