

**This is the Greatest Show**  
A Study in Modern Live Experience and Management

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## Table of Contents

I.	From Live Theatre to Experiential Entertainment	3
II.	The History and Evolution of the Experience Economy	5
III.	The Continued Significance of Walt Disney’s Worlds	10
IV.	Controlling the “Be Our Guest” Experience	12
V.	Disney and The Importance of Theming	16
VI.	The Ever-Trendy Immersive Theatre	24
VII.	The Effect of the Millennial Generation on the Experience Economy	28
VIII.	Technology’s Place in the Live Experience Industry	35
IX.	The Stage Manager’s Touch	39
X.	Works Cited	41

## I. From Live Theatre to Experiential Entertainment

*“The noblest art is that of making others happy.”*

- P.T. Barnum

There is a special desire rooted in the human spirit regarding the ability to leave the real world and find solace in the imaginary, the impossible, and the connection stemming from a live experience. In the United States, P.T Barnum’s circus proved that there is something enticing and thrilling about seeing a human being do something spectacular, and long before “The Greatest Show on Earth,” audiences have sought out that same thrill from much of the entertainment they consume. The same ideals contributing to the success of the circus have spawned mostly from the evolution of theatre around the world beginning as early as the Greek Theatre and stemming to the classic American Broadway musical comedy. In present-day society, one can look along a broad spectrum from gaming to theme parks and attractions and find a wide variety of diversions in which they can procure that same feeling of wonderful excitement that Barnum so efficiently began mass manufacturing through tent and train around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From sports to special events in art and cuisine related festivals, from community building events like Burning Man to luxury travel and hospitality enhancement, and from museums and zoos to the gold standard of theming and attractions at Disneyland, one can easily find something that suits their taste to escape, connect, tell a story, make a memory, and behold something spectacularly wonderful. All of these enterprises have not only embraced theatrical principles in the modern Experience Economy but have grown out of the traditional theatre that they nontraditionally emulate.

In 1998, B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore defined the economic shifts in society from an industrial based economy to a service-based economy ultimately adding a new and final element to an even greater movement: experience. In their book, *The Experience Economy*, they

outline the shift in great detail emphasizing the theatrical nature of this new system centered around manufacturing a consumable memory and connection with community instead of material good production and consumption. Given that the concept of live experience and ultimately the ideas present in the Experience Economy began with the theatre, managing and maintaining newer experiential enterprises lends itself to the need for a basic understanding of theatrical concepts and principles of audience psychology. Provided that in a rehearsal room stage managers function as customer service, executive leadership, hospitality services, and a creative voice, they are naturally suited to a wider variety of industries. It is these qualities and more that leave stage managers the most naturally equipped showfolk to observe and integrate both the business side of affairs as well as the creative storytelling side of the work. Their understanding of the theatrical ideals that initially led to the creation of all live experience and Experience Economy related industries is incredibly adaptable.

To begin, this paper will explore the origins and definitions of the Experience Economy before digging into Walt Disney's<sup>1</sup> ideals and process in creating the modern theme park. This study will then go on to examine new trends in experiential theming, many stemming from the Walt Disney Company's innovations, as well as the ways in which Millennial demand and technology have shifted this economic movement over the course of the last 20 years. Throughout, it will explore how the requirements of a live show in these seemingly non-theatrical enterprises are in fact, at their core, nothing more than theatre in a non-traditional venue in which the stage manager's collaborative skill and leadership ability is crucial to their continued success in the Experience Economy.

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity purposes, this document will refer to Walt Disney the man as "Walt" and all other aspects of the Walt Disney Company as "Disney" or some form thereof. Given that Walt often insisted on being called by his first name despite his stature, it does not feel inappropriate here.

## II. The History and Evolution of the Experience Economy

It seems that in modern times one reviews the experience not the service. However, what many do not understand is that quality of service is one of the key factors of the experience. What guests, audience, and customers really review is the engagement and connection. They focus on how they've been transformed for a moment or a lifetime. Restaurateur Danny Meyer<sup>2</sup> defines hospitality and the service required to present it with the consumable element behind it being time spent:

*What mattered most to me was trying to provide maximum value in exchange not just for the guests' money but also their time. Anything that unnecessarily disrupts a guest's time with his or her companions or disrupts the enjoyment of the meal undermines hospitality (Meyer 64).*

In other words, how is a guest's valuable time spent enjoying the experience; will it be memorable and facilitate connection? And even more importantly, how can managers and staff deliver service in hospitable "dialogue" to enhance the overall experience (Meyer 64)? Through performative labor, another key aspect of the Experience Economy, Meyer's employees and Disney's acutely named "Cast Members" alike are simply theatrical storytellers in a non-traditional theatre space. As Meyer describes, his staff's intentionality, flourish in menial waitstaff tasks, and appropriately timed sense of humor are not only functions of service and conversations in hospitality but elaborate and carefully controlled stories in which each guest has their part to play as well.

Articulating the above concepts in their widely popular book, *The Experience Economy*, Pine and Gilmore compare modern business practices to the industry in which live entertainment

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<sup>2</sup> Since founding his first restaurant, Union Square Café, in 1985, Danny Meyer has created a prestigious hospitality brand in the Union Square Hospitality Group. He has gone on to become an expert on restaurant and food related experience and hospitality, writing the acclaimed book, *Setting the Table*, outlining his beliefs and practices on the subject. He has been involved in a variety of consulting work as well.

began, the theatre. In the traditional theatre, the performance begins by instigating an interactive contract between the players and the audience. Any theatrical piece, whether it be a small political play downtown or a classic musical comedy on Broadway, is based on a conversation or connection between these two parties. If acting is “the taking of deliberate steps to connect with an audience,” then performative labor and the choices of employees is a critical aspect of the Experience Economy (Pine 2426). This is proven above through the ideas of Danny Meyer and the “Cast Members,” however, it must go a step farther. According to Pine and Gilmore’s onstage vs. offstage model, customer-facing employees are actors performing not only their task but also a show, providing many cues as to how the guest or customer ought to behave while consuming the experience. Pine and Gilmore argue more specifically within the theatrical model using both Aristotle’s *Poetics* and another familiar theatrical principle:

*First and foremost is the issue of choice. Acts of theatre demand that boundaries be drawn; actors must formulate and pose tough questions that no one else can ask or answer for them; and they must discern the significant from the insignificant elements in any play performed. (Pine 2293)*

If in any experience one finds two casts- the audience who is participating and the employees facilitating the event- then the act of choice similarly becomes even more important. Not only do the choices an audience makes throughout the course of the experience matter greatly, but the choices that one makes in the implementation of said experience drives the entire perception of the guest. Subsequently, Aristotle’s elements of plot and character become hugely significant in the design of experience. Once choices have been made by cast and creative staff, how does the sequence, progression, and duration of the following events continue to drive the rest of the guest’s time in the space? Managers and creators must consider how the overall story builds and concludes in any and all interactions with guests, as well as what the smallest detail of any action

may convey in the overall rhythm and tempo in the sequencing of cues, aspects of the theatrical art that are the stage manager's bread and butter when considering their role in call of show.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, the theatre is often about escapism and storytelling, elements that stem from the cast and their series of choices. This principle is one of the second major pieces of the experiential entertainment industry and, in both the theatrical and the Pine and Gilmore world, would be considered the script. Experience is essentially storytelling via a combination of the theme, mission, or code of events and business practice. Pine and Gilmore specifically emphasize the importance of the physical text of the drama in a theatrical piece arguing that the script itself informs everything that the players do. Without a unique mission or overarching theme of an experiential enterprise, there is nowhere left to go. The script is the jumping off point for any experience whether that comes from a popular underlying property or an original idea. Pine and Gilmore insist that this story and theming occur in one or more of "The Four Realms of Experience:" entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic. It is the combination of "The Four Realms of Experience" and the script of cues and choices that ultimately dictate the theme of the experience and the story itself (Pine 866).

Theming is a critical aspect of the Experience Economy and one area in which theatre-makers, specifically stage managers, are aptly suited to excel. What is the driving theme of the piece this team is presenting? These concepts become central to the message and the ideals of the work. This element, spoken or unspoken, colors the entire process and is often kept in mind by the stage manager in his or her guidance and facilitation of the rehearsal room, though it has applications far from it. Walt Disney himself created the first "theme park." Previously, anything regarding any semblance of a formal carnival or park-filled with attractions was

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<sup>3</sup> This is an idea that Danny Meyer discusses as well. The timing of a staff visit to a table or the timing between each course is just as important as the rhythm of a theatrical event. It can make or break the experience if one is distracted from their meal one too many times.

referred to as an “amusement park,” and it is not incidental given Walt’s very specific mission and intention for Disneyland that the term “theme park” has taken hold the way in which it has. His creative process with regard to Disneyland is very much in line with that of a theatrical director, holding tight to a theme and intention throughout the course of the process. The Walt Disney Company’s successive leadership has performed many of the same show maintenance tasks that stage managers do when their directors depart a show. All of the encompassing pieces of theme are rooted deep in the elements of service and storytelling that form critical elements of experiential entertainment.

Storytelling and connection via service all lead to the things that make the Experience Economy as successful as it is: a personal memory. The most important facet of the Experience Economy is the idea that an industry or corporation can profit and thrive off of manufacturing human connection and memory. Storytelling, connection, service, personalization, and interactivity are the principle elements of a live entertainment experience made possible through control of environment, performative labor, and personalization. Given that every single one of these factors stem from centuries old theatrical ideals, it is no wonder that stage managers are specifically inclined to manage and maintain any kind of live experience since their skills in organization, leadership, communication, and ability to adapt and maintain creative vision are geared toward executing all of these principles in the form of a traditional theatre production. As technology in manufacturing advances, commodities continue to get cheaper and modern modes of purchase continue to eliminate the need or time for quality service, therefore elements of a memorable purchase become more and more important. However, while service can be machine manufactured (no matter how infuriatingly on occasion), experience will be more difficult to technologically mass produce as it is a commodity custom made for humans by humans. It’s



why the theatre is absolutely thriving despite competition with other mediums since the advent of the cinema in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In simple terms, the choices one makes daily all relate to two resources: time and money. The Experience Economy plays into both of those elements of choice in that time and money can buy a wonderfully cherished memory. In this day and age, when one spends their money on a destination or event, it is specifically important that their time spent there is valued at that cost. In reality, theatre has truly been about engagement of and connection with an audience since the beginning of the art form. Whether they realize it or not, that is the transaction that any theatre company is inherently selling. At its core, the Experience Economy is simply the extension of the theatrical process to all other industrial realms. It's also why Broadway theatre lobbies have almost become less about the work of the performance and more about the atmosphere and adventure of going to a famous Broadway theatre. For example, at *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, there is not only a complete store of merchandise for the show, a complete candy shop themed to the show, the usual plastic cups at the bar featuring the show logo, but the theatre changes from a happy Hogwarts situation into a Voldemort Day darkness in between the two parts. The atmospheric change is palpable and exciting, albeit subtle enough to take a moment to realize that it has happened. Even the ushers wish one a "Happy Voldemort Day" while directing patrons back to their seats in the true spirit of performative labor. More subtly, other theatres have similarly adopted a photo wall area where theatre goers may take pictures and share the memory with their social media followers, a trend that has fallen into place with the shift in the Millennial mindset. The most recent Broadway revival of *Angels in America* capitalized on this with two different sets of wings with which one could pose. This economic movement is practically the synergy of the theatre and entertainment industry with hospitality, sports, and

retail, and it continues to reach farther and farther into business and marketing as the movement has developed over the past 20 years.

### III. **The Continued Significance of Walt Disney's Worlds**

In the early 1950s Walt Disney began holding secret meetings with some of his favorite collaborators in pursuit of a new and ambitious creative venture. Saturday was Daddy's Day. When away from the studio, Walt would take his daughters to amusement parks and carnivals, and throughout the years of sitting on benches eating peanuts while his daughters would play and explore, he became fascinated with the way that people moved through the amusements. He began to contemplate why he would sit while Diane and Sharon would play. In his meditations, he started to muse on how there were very few attractions available for the whole family. He initially imagined Disneyland as a park on the Burbank studio campus, a place to bring animators and their families together. However, the idea continued to grow in size and scale into what can now be found in Anaheim.

With a plot of land in Southern California purchased, Walt busied himself with construction with the help of former animators Herb Ryman, Richard Irvine, Harper Goff, Marvin Davis, Buzz Price, and Ken Anderson. Despite continually growing ideas, Walt and his designers focused on the detail, storytelling abilities, and perfection in atmosphere soon to become the flagship enterprise of the Experience Economy and live entertainment. It is most notable that all of Disneyland's creators, first and foremost, were cinematic and theatrical storytellers. In fact, many of those involved in the construction of Disneyland commented on how none of the original innovators were accustomed to building something that was meant to stand longer than it was needed to shoot a picture. Unlike sitting in a proscenium theatre, at Disneyland and other kinds of immersive entertainment one can write their own adventure within the theming while

simultaneously enjoying family time and connection thus creating that quintessential consumable memory created by the theatre. Never believing that the show was complete, Walt continued to spend all of his time in the parks incognito after the July opening. Walt observed the operations and listened surreptitiously to the public response, then would take his findings and expand and edit the show to fit the demand. He went about ensuring that they got exactly what they wanted by encouraging them to participate in the process, by putting themselves onstage and therefore becoming storytellers just like him.

At this time, suburban America was filled with school age Baby Boomers who drove family spending like no other generation before. Their TV sets featured quintessentially in their American Dream style home teemed with advertisements during every broadcast of “Walt Disney’s Disneyland.” As film and episodic television became common entertainment, Davy Crockett began to convince families that they too could enter the world of a movie at their own Frontierland in this new style of amusement park. Having grown up on Disney’s animated features coupled with a burning desire to forget the recent war and stifle fear of hostility from the Soviet Union, audiences didn’t need much convincing. Disneyland’s Opening Day saw millions of counterfeit tickets in lines outside the gates spanning seven miles. Fifties era audiences were ready for escape with a new accessibility to entertainment that involved and included them and their entire family. They craved the sensation and memory of the day the circus came to town as the novelty of TV lost the ability to maintain a family connection.<sup>4</sup> Life was easy enough given modern technology to funnel money into the most important consumable good in the Experience Economy, a memory.

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, it is about this time that that Ringling Barnum and Bailey Circus had fallen into steady decline. Between the advent of television, the Hartford Circus Fire of 1944, a series of Teamster strikes, and an exhaustion of innovation within the industry, the tent and train tours that had dominated the century’s entertainment had slipped too far in popularity to pay the bills required to run the railroad at the scale in which they had in the heyday of the Circus.

#### **IV. Controlling the “Be Our Guest” Experience**

Considering the level of guest experience with which Disney has been proven to operate, it is important to explore the day to day ways in which they expect and strive for their employees to function. It is not a secret Disney presents itself as a show, for example all employees are called “cast members” and interviews are referred to as “auditions.” While they may take Pine and Gilmore’s “work as theatre” model to a new extreme in this language, the company specifically prides itself on the general response from guests and their impressions of the service provided. In looking at Theodore Kinni’s manual on these “Magic Processes,” cheekily titled *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*, one can begin to understand the method of management behind the experience. Almost all of it involves ease in story-telling, efficiency in logistical process, and cultivating a performative culture that employees feel safe living freely within, similar to the stage managers role in a rehearsal room. The “Be Our Guest” experience is dependent on the philosophies of hospitality that stage managers employ on a daily basis with those that they are leading through a production process. It is easy to take this concept even further in the consideration of Disney’s “Cast Members.” They must employ the same belief in characters as any actors on a Broadway stage. Similarly these performers must be treated by upper management in the same way in which one manages a cast and crew in a more traditional theatre. Connection and personality are critical in these exchanges between upper management and cast members just as they are critical in a conventional rehearsal room. Customer service in this case extends far beyond the audience, aptly putting the stage manager in the position of both customer service and upper management.

Kinni and the Disney Institute argue specifically that none of this kind of service can take place without priority on the employees or actors. After all, these are the people who are

interfacing with the guests and showing them empathy. It is the same argument made by Danny Meyer in *Setting the Table*:

*As we had learned to do many years ago with our guests, we were now giving our staff a lot more opportunities to feel heard...Managers who give only lip service to an open-door policy effectively shut the door by being defensive, by not holding themselves accountable when they make a mistake, and mostly by not actively looking for ways to make their employees feel heard (Meyer 204).*

Empathy in problem-solving is a huge part of good management technique. In turn, there are two ways in which employee care becomes important.<sup>5</sup> The first is that Disney as a company must provide their Cast Members with the necessary resources to accommodate any needs a guest may have, from opening new attractions for members to see and experience first to educating cast on international customs so that all guests feel welcome. For example, in certain cultures it is impolite to point with one finger, therefore a Disney cast member will always direct a guest with two. It is a remarkably successful attempt at mass customization. The second aspect of this is ensuring that the Cast Members believe enough in the brand to willingly and genuinely provide the story the company is striving to present. Disney specifically does this through their training and onboarding process with the Disney Traditions course. They similarly have a variety of programs that send high-level employees to a variety of different lower-level departments to connect and empathize with members on the front lines of the show. This integration is a prime example of the kind of management Danny Meyer talks about. There is no one who is above a specific job, and within that mindset there is a new brand of employee to employee empathy and a new team bond. This brand of compassion and team building is yet

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that there are many issues in how the Disney company pays their cast members. There are also many issues regarding unionization and forward movement within the company. This writer does not wish to overlook these, however, they are not quite the elements of employee care referenced here. Albeit, employee welfare in general is hugely relevant to how well one can put on a show.

another prime piece of a stage manager's personnel skills. Stage Managers in the rehearsal room are the first to take on any task necessary to facilitate the proper show. It's no different here.

Empathetic performative labor is the ability to answer the question "What time is the 3:00p parade?" or a stage manager's favorite, "What time am I called again?" with a smile for the fifteenth time that day, and this is where personnel management skills come in to play on an important level within entertainment entities that are mass consumed. In the theatre, it is easy to maintain a love for the show's brand on the micro-level of a rehearsal room, but how does upper management perpetuate this same love for a brand on a mass scale within a multi-billion dollar corporation that is essentially providing the same product? One answer may come from some of Disney's reflexive theming principles outlined by Alan Bryman in *The Disneyization of Society*:

*The third level of theming at the Disney theme parks is the Disney company itself. Disney can call upon and deploy its reputation for providing magical experiences, especially those that are aimed at children, and the well-known stable of characters it has created and popularized throughout the globe. In a sense this is a form of reflexive theming but it is a much richer one than most organizations involved in such theming can enjoy, in that it extends beyond corporate logos and stylized architecture. (Bryman 6)*

In a sense, many return customers to the Disney parks are people who love the brand more than anything else. In the same sense, many of the people working within the company have a similar love for the Disney Brand. Similarly to many other companies that have become famous for the strides they have made in their industries and their overall ability to embrace unique branding, like Apple or Nike, this principle of reflexive theming makes it almost easy to retain a semblance of pride in performative labor at every level of the company. It happens in any capacity in the entertainment industry and requires the same kind of repetitive drive, energy and encouragement

that it takes to put on eight shows a week. In the rehearsal room, pride begins with the stage manager. It is their attitude and their unique ability to serve and guide that can transfer so well to such a large entertainment venture.

These kinds of hospitality related processes are making their way into the Broadway realm more and more. Jordan Roth of the Jujamcyn Theatres has subtly introduced a “curb to curb” experience with the Broadway shows that license his spaces. When everything is included in the experience from the beginning, like when picking up bags at the airport takes on a magical quality thanks to the Disney services, the entire experience takes on a new light. Jordan Roth has done the same thing on the smaller scale for a night in the theatre as he explained in an interview with Broadway World’s Robert Diamond:

*It’s how you approach the theater and what you feel when you see it...the energy under the marquee; how you are greeted; how you get your ticket; how you line up; how you come to know where you’re supposed to be; what the lobby feels like, looks like, smells like, sounds like as you enter it; how you find your way to the bars, bathrooms, wherever you want to be. (Diamond 4)*

Getting to the theatre is part of the story one is writing about their unique Broadway experience; so why should it only be the time from curtain up to curtain down that is magical? In the course of the Experience Economy, hospitality has become a crucial aspect of the management of entertainment enterprises when attendees want to eliminate all of the potential unpleasanties involved with traveling to an experience. These new trends started by Disney and their many resort services have become staples in the entertainment industry as a whole and yet another way in which stage managers are all the more suited to manage more corporate related mass entertainment ventures. All of it compares, yet again, with the stage manager’s empathy and

hospitality in a rehearsal room or even their emails that sets the tone for the entirety of the experience or event.

## V. Disney and the Importance of Theming

While the “Be Our Guest” process relates to the emotional and intangible way one relates to another person both as an employee or guest, the physical setting of the Disney parks is just as notable and relevant to the stage management process. It is the very physical work of the stage manager to maintain the design and it is the emotional work of the stage manager to maintain the community on a production. Walt Disney essentially created the concept of the themed environment, and it is interesting to consider that this is a concept that stems from the theatre. In the Experience Economy in general, visual cues are key. What is the guest seeing that allows them to delve into a story? How do the logistics of the environment clue them into understanding where to go and how to get there? These aesthetic details are no different than many of the visual design elements in theatre.

All of the parks, including the other areas of Walt Disney World and California Adventure, follow the same kinds of visual cues and seamless transition between one area to another, down to the detail in the way the concrete walkway is laid. The design specifically comes from Walt and his animators including two unique film-related terms, a wienie:

*A wienie was a lure, an inducement, in the same way that an animal trainer used a frankfurter to evoke tricks from a dog act. In Disneyland, the castle served as the wienie to draw the people down Main Street. Then, when they reached the hub, two other wienies would attract them to the right or the to the left. In Tomorrowland it would be the towering Rocket to the Moon; in Frontierland, the Mark Twain steamboat. (Thomas, 251)*



and a cross-dissolve:

*A stroll from Main Street to Adventureland is a relatively short distance, but one experiences an enormous change in theme and story. For the transition to be a smooth one, there is a gradual blending of themed foliage, color, sound, music, and architecture. Even the soles of your feet feel a change in the paving that explicitly tells you something new is on the horizon. Smell may also factor into a dimensional cross-dissolve. (Kinni, 1249)*

Both of these cinematic conventions cater to the overall experience of the guests attending the park as well as its inherent theatricality. The cinematic tropes used grew out of the theatre and became common through the advent of TV. They are familiar to the audience as they have been for centuries, but they are almost imperceptible in the course of the experience. A cross-dissolve involving all five senses provides a cohesive experience free of any need for reorientation and in turn is a huge psychological clue to the seamless service quality Disney strives to provide and its guests have come to expect. This technique is but a small example of Experience Economy level design. With both the wienie and the cross-dissolve always at the back of his mind, Walt consistently refuted any advice from amusement park experts insisting that there be a single entrance to the park funneling people to the castle “hub.” Despite expert architects’ protestations, it is remarkably successful. Each park has its visual draw that functions not only as a recognizable marketing logo but also as an anchor for all guests to move through the experience. The logo itself touches on the sentimentality of a Disney Park while also making sure no one gets lost.

Stemming from the manufacturing era, there is an element of control needed in the production of a product. While Disney guests feel as if they are getting an extremely customized

and freeing experience, what they fail to realize is the level of control that Disney exercises over the setting and process behind the magic. Specifically, the way in which the park naturally moves people from place to place. The control of the cinematic elements not only provides cues to the theme and missions within that land but also the way and pace at which one should move through the park. The initial development involved and continues to involve extensive landscape design, specifically the shipment of exotic trees from around the world to compliment different themes and aesthetics of different lands. There is an art to control and detail in design that allows for the impression of freedom and a pinch of amazement that is proven to be a crucial skill in experiential entertainment. They are the same elements of control that stage managers assist designers and directors in implementing and subsequently maintaining in production. The storytelling, adaptation, and maintenance skills required to implement theatrical storytelling are the same in the Disney Parks, just on a much larger and more detailed scale. Often in experiential theming these ideals require lifestyle elements that don't happen in just two hours onstage. For example, the principle of the famous Disney cleanliness is similar in its level of subtle control. According to Walt as quoted by Cher Krause Knight:

*“If you keep a place clean, people will respect it; if you let it get dirty, they’ll make it worse...Just make the park beautiful and you’ll appeal to the best side of people. They all have it; all you have to do is bring it out”* (Krause Knight 15)

And Disney does just that. There is a trash can, themed to the environment no less, approximately every twenty-seven feet. Aside from cast member hospitality, this detail is one of the biggest aspects of a memorable Disney vacation. Paradise is clean and free of words that may offend children's ears. It is the perfect example of control in theming on the lifestyle level. On a traditional stage, managers put in this same level of control and maintenance into the set,

even if the show's run time is short enough to eliminate the need for a strategically placed trash can.

Theming has gone through drastic changes since the opening of Disneyland in 1955. Compare the Six Flags parks across the country to the Disney Parks around the world. When one enters a Six Flags park, they are met with small cartoon theming elements, but for the most part people run from one thrill ride to another. For all practical purposes, it is a glorified and over-priced carnival. In contrast, when one enters a Disney park, they are immediately influenced by design to feel as if they are in a whole new world. For example, when Disneyland was initially designed, it included a large berm surrounding the park obstructing all views of the outside world. Even at early morning park open, the first thing one smells when passing under the train platform to Main Street, USA is popcorn:

*... which is made in carts placed near the tunnel openings. The experience of entering the park is explicitly designed to remind guests of the experience of entering a movie theater. There is the ticketing, the turnstiles, the lobby, the halls to the screening room lined with posters displaying the coming attractions and even the popcorn. (Kinni 1183)*

Each of the different lands are themed specifically to a movie genre where guests may write their own adventure with the popcorn fragrance greeting all guests from the second they enter the park and providing that subtle and almost unrecognizable cue to this critical aspect of the coming personal narrative. Smell, coincidentally, is even something that Broadway theatres are beginning to experiment with. For example, the freshly baked pie scents greeting the audience at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre before *Waitress*. It is an almost imperceptible clue to what is coming.

Guests are happy to exist in the Disney Parks. The music, the greenery and architecture, and the overall enjoyment of existing somewhere unique, accessible, and semi-exotic has changed

the entertainment landscape in the extreme. EPCOT only has one true thrill ride, and the rest are boat rides focused on education to better the community or catered to the popularity of *Frozen*. Often it is more exciting to meet and greet with characters, eat delicious food, or take in the scenery than run from long line to long line for thrills. It is more thrilling to enjoy the theatrical elements encompassed in the live experience rather than search for stomach drops. The details allow for connection with the environment in ways that cinema and television do not. This all stems from the theatre, the original teaser of the senses. Rich theming allows for one to enjoy the atmosphere and the moment, and it has only become more and more sophisticated in the last several years through super-fans of specific properties and the rise of Instagram. While Disney has continued to completely bend the rules on what theming can accomplish, they have similarly found competition from their cohorts over at Universal Studios. The cases of Pandora: The World of Avatar, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, and the coming attractions of Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge are the best examples of what guests expect from today's entertainment. It all stems out of what Disney began in 1955, and the understanding of the new shift in demand is critical to understanding how it will continue to be managed and produced.

In June 2010, Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida opened The Wizarding World of Harry Potter and took theming to a new extreme. Upon entering "Hogsmeade" or "Diagon Alley," one is completely immersed in the world of Harry Potter. However, there are no characters to meet and very few rides. The setting is almost suspended in time outside of the events of the underlying property leaving the story for the guest to write. In his review of the Hogsmeade opening in 2010, New York Times travel columnist, Neil Genzlinger, writes:

*It's the antithesis of most theme-park attractions, where the point is to get through one ride as quickly as possible to get to the next. There are only three actual rides in the 20 acres of Wizarding World, and two of them- to borrow an image from another fantasy-*

*are ugly stepsisters to the “Forbidden Journey...” It’s just as well that there’s only the one truly outstanding ride in Wizarding World, because rides aren’t really the point; workmanship is. This attraction was made for the kind of people who have more or less memorized Ms. Rowling’s books, and it shows in all sorts of details. The weathering of the stone to make it look indefinably old. The way the snow sits on the rooftops, just on the verge of melting (Genzlinger 2)*

Here, Genzlinger truly sums up the new realm of theming that has grown steadily in the past several years. In this section of the park, Coca Cola or t-shirts with other Universal properties on them are unavailable. To quench their thirst, guests can buy Gillywater, Pumpkin Juice, or a famous Butterbeer. Shops are similarly themed with only gear that matches that store’s merchandise in the book. For example, at Olivander’s one can only buy wands, many of which interact with other shop windows, or at Madam Malkins, one can only buy apparel, even more specifically, wizards’ robes. As Walt had initially dreamed, there is nothing of the outside world interfering with the world in which a guest’s story is to take place, and that is the key. The story is truly the guest’s. They don’t simply visit Gaston’s tavern nestled in Fantasyland in his time, place and storyline, they live their own plotline within the unique world of an even more specified property.

Harry’s fans have been hankering year after year for new additions to the story ever since the final installment of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* released in 2007. For a generation of children that grew up with, learned from, and in many ways connected with their own family through the series, the theme park version of the story was a no brainer for business personnel and a haven for fans. The new park played into their sentimentality in ways that are key to the Experience Economy’s mass memory-making production. The upcoming Star Wars Galaxy’s Edge will have a similar sentimental and detailed quality to it, given the rumors of a

customization level so high that one could crash THE Millennium Falcon of their childhood dreams and find a bounty on their head in the cantina across the street. If in The Wizarding World of Harry Potter guests are allowed to write their own narrative instead of visiting Cinderella's, then Galaxy's Edge will only expand on that; not to mention that with a resort attached, the story cannot be interrupted by a park closure. However, Disney has already started with property specific and detailed expansions with James Cameron's Pandora: The World of Avatar. Even if one doesn't feel like waiting in line for hours to ride one of two thrill rides, they can enjoy the exotic food and drink or absorb the twenty species of plants with their dozens of subspecies that have been invented to blend seamlessly with the live lush plant life surrounding the floating mountains, an architectural feat in themselves. This is an element one can even find in a Broadway theatre now. For example, at the end of *Harry Potter and the Curse Child Part One*, when the dementors appear the audience sits in silent suspension as the creepy dementors fly around them in the house and hover onstage. Not only do they sit and contemplate the cliffhanger and plot twist they've been given to come back to in *Part Two*, but they experience the fear that the dementors have always been known to induce in the book in an experiential and awe-inspiring way. Similarly, in *King Kong* on Broadway, on multiple occasions the audience simply gets to experience the marvel of Kong in his puppetry greatness. Just like in *Cursed Child*, moments of story are suspended so that they can watch the King Company work their magic as Kong runs, climbs, or most satisfyingly, stands on his haunches at twenty feet tall and beats his chest with arms fully extended. He is so emotive that an audience is more content living with him and experiencing his engineering marvel than watching any of the rest of the show. It is in these instances that Disney's new innovations in experience are starting to reach the rehearsal room more and more sixty-four years after the advent of the Experience Economy.

Thrills in this day and age are clearly less about an adrenaline rush and more about existing in a unique and Instagrammable environment. All three of these themed lands not only embody what Walt wanted from his parks, but they also capture all elements of the Experience Economy at its most basic. Sentimentality, story-telling, connection, control over environment, memory-making, and personalization are the key components of the Experience Economy that Disney has continued to perfect. Between choosing the right wand for your personality at Universal or pairing specifically with a Banshee that chooses its rider on Disney's Flights of Passage, there is no end to the realm of customized story combinations that one may explore. It is not coincidental, as outlined in the previous section, that theming stems from the theatre. This aspect is also one of the most critical elements of storytelling in the Experience Economy. Pine and Gilmore outline theming very specifically:

- *an engaging theme must alter a guest's sense of reality*
- *the richest venues possess themes that fully alter one's sense of reality*
- *engaging themes integrate space, matter, and time into a cohesive realistic whole*
- *creating multiple places within a place strengthen theme*
- *a theme should fit the character of the enterprise staging experience*

(Pine 1282)

While some of the above involve reflexive theming, these elements are also widely used in theatrical story-telling. They are the quintessential elements of the three unique new lands explored above, that even 30 years after the declaration of and 60 years after the true advent of the Experience Economy, have only evolved and remained popular. Theatre, even though one may experience it from the comfort of an orchestra seat, functions by relying on altering reality and compressing time and space, all the while relying on a dramatic through line or theme that structures the entire rehearsal process. It is extremely clear that the implementation of a design

including all senses in the course of the live experience is the bread and butter of the stage managers skill set. It will take a specific show-caller to execute the bounty on that Millennium Falcon crasher. It takes a stage manager's eye to maintain the cleanliness, the foliage, and the detail involved in immersive experiential entertainment. It takes their patience and personnel skills to deliver the customer service and performative labor to create a memory. They are the purveyors of theme throughout the course of the process.

## **VI. The Ever-Trendy Immersive Theatre**

The immersive theatre has taken the world by storm since the cult-hit *Sleep No More* premiered in 2011 and is arguably the most significant way in which the theatre itself has adapted to the Experience Economy movement. From the British Punchdrunk/Emersive to emerging storefront companies like Cinereal or Canada's *Brantwood*, there is a wide variety of immersive venues and productions that encompass different levels of interactivity with an audience in the same ways that Disney does. In every way, immersive theatre experiences such as *Sleep No More* or *Then She Fell* provide the same kinds of connection and unique memory experience that more commercial enterprises are striving to provide. Julie Tepperman and Mitchell Cushman, co-creators of everything *Brantwood*, describe how they believe that immersive theatre can be compelling right now:

*Immersive theatre can successfully invite the audience to participate, to be an active spectator in a plethora of ways: by creating a structure where they can choose their own adventure and chase characters and stories around a space; by being invited into a one-on-one; by being cast in a role... or simply by deciding the vantage point from which they witness something. (Tepperman 13)*



While a theme park or pop-up museum allows a guest to write their own story, immersive theatre in particular is more scripted while playing on the same principles. In many ways, the immersive theatre is also unique in defining the events in which one can participate in more succinctly than the guidelines presented by a controlled themed environment. There is something electrifying about the idea that there are potentially no rules in a theatrical setting, which can perceptibly be riddled with etiquette, and that the fourth wall exists in a hugely different dimension than traditional theatre.

None of the methodologies used in the immersive theatre are much different than what Disney or any of the other leaders in the experience industry have done. Immersive theatre is the adaptation of the original experience to keep up with the changing public demands in entertainment. Josephine Machon describes Immersive theatre as a truly interdisciplinary artform, a place in which communication and show maintenance becomes specifically important. Despite all of this, many have found immersive theatre styles difficult to define in a clinical fashion. One potential identifier lies in the role of the audience. In *Sleep No More*, they are ghosts, or in certain characters' cases, one of the vehicles causing them to go mad. At Disney the audience is a VIP guest. If in traditional theatre the audience is simply the audience, then one signifier of a truly immersive performance is the non-traditional role of the spectator. Similarly, where is the fourth wall? How does the skewing of the traditional proscenium fourth wall allow for a shift in perception of the performance? The complicated part of defining immersive theatre follows in the ways in which the answers to all of these questions and more can shift drastically between companies and productions. Stage managers in the immersive theatre world often take on widely different and unique roles in the run of show. For example, *Sleep No More* stage managers move through the building observing cues and ensuring safety for both audience and performers alike. In his essay "In the Body of the Beholder: Insider Dynamics and Extended

Audiencing Transform Dance Spectatorship in *Sleep No More*,” J.M. Ritter discusses the unique role of the mask in Punchdrunk/Emursive’s work, hinting at an even more distinctive role for the stage manager:

*Masking extends the ideas of anonymity and voyeurism by situating the ‘fourth wall’ on the actual bodies of spectators. In addition, black-masked stewards (part of the SNM production team) are sometimes cast as the fourth wall, their bodies choreographed by Doyle to serve as barriers to staircases or rooms and as frames through which the audience can safely spectate (Frieze 49).*

At their core, the production staff at *Sleep No More* are facilitators of experience, a role which can look very different than a traditional show-call while still using the same basic skills of timing and observation. As many immersive productions advertise the interactivity of the audience, the elements of an adventure with few rules, or the ability to touch and experience a story in a hands-on way, there are many dangers that could be presented to cast and set for which stage managers take on special responsibility. Again, the stage managers empathy and patience is also important here in the act of unobtrusively facilitating an experience that requires quite a bit of control to execute safely.

In proscenium theatre, cast and crew maintain that the experience will always be different, but that is because that is inevitable and not by choice. Theatre-makers strive to maintain every performance exactly the same; however, in the process they often chastise themselves for the mistakes they make, but most of the time it is these little things that make the experience truly unique. In experiential theming and often immersive theatre, the same standard is created in the themed environment, and yet the opportunity of a new experience every time is truly celebrated. One of the biggest criticisms of immersive theatre comes from the idea that many feel they miss out on parts of the story while observing another part of the story. This

criticism really only leads to another validation of the need for experiential properties to drum up repeat business. The appeal of seeing a different part of the story or making another memory is arguably one of the major successes of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, a production which thrives off of white maskers reliving their experiences on social media afterwards. Many of the elements of immersive theatre are the same as that presented in some of the new forms of experiential entertainment like Pandora or Galaxy's Edge. Again, there is an element to the idea that in modern entertainment audiences are more and more willing to step into another world and simply exist. Altered time and place is what happens in productions like *Sleep No More* where the set is a truly enchanting vintage hotel tucked away in a hidden corner of New York City. It plays into the desire to escape the real world for a few hours and create a memory of being somewhere Instagram worthy and cool, and is something that Millennials in particular crave within their entertainment.

All of these elements truly bridge the gap not only between the experiential design and the theatre world but also bridge the transition between stage management in a strictly theatrical sense and stage management on the level of any and all live experience. While the language and terms of the trade may drastically differ, the process is the same across the board. The personnel management of both staff and consumer, the control and maintenance of a themed environment, and the problem solving ability is entirely flexible across both similar industries. As the Millennial generation influences more and more the way in which entertainment is consumed, the immersive theatre is only going to continue to grow and expand as society continues to cherish and treasure a live experience in a technology driven world.

## **VII. The Effect of the Millennial Generation on the Experience Economy**

*“The perfect party is an elusive idea. People have to be entertained from the moment they walk in the door to the moment they leave. It’s a grand experiment and I...am a party scientist. Welcome to my laboratory.”*

- Tom Haverford

The quote above from the fictional Tom Haverford (played by Aziz Ansari) of the popular NBC series *Parks and Recreation* accurately and satirically sums up the demands of the Experience Economy in the millennial generation. Everyone wants to be entertained every moment of every day regardless of what setting in which they currently exist. The live experience, especially one that is sharable on social media in some way, has only become more and more cherished in a technology saturated world. Concepts of enhanced live entertainment have spread widely into the world of sports, road running, retail, business to business transactions, special events and weddings, marketing, retail, festivals, museums, zoos, hospitality, and even mega-churches. Subsequently, rising student debt coupled with rising costs of mortgage rates and other large purchases, once considered landmarks of life by the former generation, have led to millennials’ abandonment of an American Dream lifestyle in favor of adventure. This particular economic shift in generational ideals has drastically changed the Experience Economy in its own right forcing corporate entities and industries to rethink their entire platform and sales methods. These kinds of businesses could be anything from Burning Man style festivals fostering short term spirited community visited once in a lifetime or annually, to fitness clubs like that of the upscale Equinox company or productivity cultures like WeWork subscription spaces visited daily or weekly.

In 2014, Eventbrite, a small service ticketing company, published a study of nationwide research on the fuel that millennials are burning for the Experience Economy. One of their biggest findings was the fact that when it comes to money millennials prefer experiences to traditional landmark material items like cars or homes. Considering that the prices of some of

millennials' favorite destination experiences, such as the Tomorrowland festival and its party flights or Burning Man and all of the survival gear necessary to survive "the Playa," are so high, it seems that this generation is hardly even thinking about saving for the car and the house that their parents considered milestones of life. This ideal is seeping into marketing of all kinds and shaping the ways in which all industries are adapting to the demands of showmanship and product delivery. The wedding industry has become a major indicator of a shift in millennial spending with registries with Honeyfund, Zola, or Disney's Fairytale Weddings opening up gift options for couples who collectively have all the home goods and appliances they need and allowing their friends and family to donate what they would have spent on fine china to their honeymoon funds or other costs that allow them to experience life together via travel or other experiential means.

These ideals of ease and leisure are also seeping into the Millennial workplace. Beginning with ride sharing and stretching to the vacation rental juggernaut Airbnb, millennials are using each other to save money and time while simultaneously having a memorable connection and experience. Launched and fueled by Silicon Valley, corporate campuses have changed the work experience to the point where the workplace is going to require the same kinds of performative labor and hospitality management that stage managers are so adept at. In the ways that the Experience Economy initially transformed entertainment and leisure, those principles are now extending into lifestyle areas providing a 24/7 experience of down home comfort away from the home. The live experience that is craved in leisure time is now demanded in the workplace through the want of connection and collaboration in the insistence that work no longer feel like work. The popular space sharing company WeWork (now called the We Company) is making entrepreneurship an experience by providing a shared space for

millennials to create their own work culture. The rebrand campaign is extending this ideal into all aspects of life.

Travel companies are falling into this trend as well with vacation rentals and enterprises such as Roam that cater to work with “backdrops behind a laptop screen” (Chayka 3). A 2014 Airbnb study found that not only do Millennials prioritize travel as Eventbrite has already suggested, but they prefer to use Airbnb or other vacation rental type sites for their lodging since they are most interested in personal, local, and adventurous fodder while in town. Notably, their connections and new internet friendships with those that they meet function as souvenirs over t-shirts and key chains. In his essay for the New York Times, Stephen McCauley outlined the appeal of short-term vacation rentals:

*The problem of alienation in a place where accents, habits, and languages are different than my own is ameliorated by renting a room in a resident's house, sharing their kitchen and sometimes even their bathroom-although I confess I usually avoid these more intimate arrangements. It's easy to feel like you belong in Montreal when you're sharing the cupboards of a fifth-generation Quebecois. (McCauley 2)*

The real appeal of vacation rental in this generation has everything to do with feeling at home in a place that is not home, and even more importantly it has everything to do with the fact that current travelers want to experience new places through the eyes of those that live there. This concept also plays into the sharing idea, in which it is cheaper and more connected for one to experience the world with another and through another without big corporate entities intervening despite the fact that Airbnb in its own right is a corporate juggernaut. In fact, Airbnb is exercising the same control over experience as any of the large commercial entertainment enterprises prophesizing a choose your own adventure like that of Disney that has been manufacturing a fictitious paradise for years. What it all comes down to is the fact that

Millennials are desperate to write their own magnificent story in every aspect of their lives and not just in a theme park.

In all of these lifestyle experiences there is one other common element and that is the cultivating of community. Driven by a social media fostered “fear of missing out” or FOMO, Millennials, who are waiting to make those big life choices such as marriage until later in life, thrive off of their carefully constructed community. One of the finest examples of fostering community through mutual experience is the Burning Man event. In an environment that could kill one easily without the proper knowledge or preparations coupled with their ritualistic like burning of artistic displays and installations, it is easy to see how and why residents of the Black Rock city have an attachment to the community in the desert unlike any other community of festival goers. The most important piece of the puzzle is the fact that Burners expect each pilgrimage, whether it be their first or their 21<sup>st</sup>, to change them indefinitely. This expectation is one aspect of experience that Millennials truly cling to, and it has become more and more prevalent in music festivals like Coachella, Mumford and Sons’ Gentlemen of the Road Tour, or even the idealistic and laughable Fyre Festival. The Tomorrowland rave in Belgium was described as a “music festival combined with a theme park combined with a food festival combined with a cultural event” by popular DJ Armin van Buuren (Gottfried 1). Of these festivals, many provide camping opportunities, and in the case of Tomorrowland, even midair party experiences to start the party early and allow it to stay later. However, the experience must provoke a change in the attendee through the fostering of community for the better every time, and that change will never occur with interruptions from the outside world or a lull in the entertainment.

The final piece of the Experience Economy for this generation is the element of Instagram. Millennials are most interested in being changed, cultured, and connected as seen

through the popularity of large music festivals. The failed Fyre Festival actually marketed itself almost exclusively through influencers on the Instagram platform. Millennials are extremely driven to share everything that they do on social media, and therefore show stature through their worldliness and breadth of experience while fostering a different kind of connection with their community of followers online. Each post is also part of the consumable memory, and scrolling back through a personal feed lends itself to a photo album of memories. Between the cult-hit Disney photo walls known only to super fans and the new Instagram pop-up museums around the country, it has become clear that part of the experience must include a perfect photo opportunity for Instagram. It is an added piece to the story each guest or participant is writing, and it is part of the story that followers will consume as they scroll through their feed. Instagram has almost become its own character in a storytelling adventure. While spending the day in the Disney Parks, how has posting with many hashtags to Instagram changed the overall feeling of the day? How do people connect with other fans in that way? How do “likes” play up the sense of joy felt from showing off one’s experience? Truly, there may still not be answers to these questions. The theatricality of Instagram is customized by each user and their own ability to reach and gain followers. One thing is very clear; millennials often show a picture-perfect version of their day. That specific adventure will always look perfect no matter how hungover one woke up or how much trouble they had in the parking lot.

Elements of Instagram can be seen most clearly in the advent of new Pop-Up museums that have made their way through major cities across the United States. Not only do they provide an opportune Instagram photo, but they are reminiscent of children’s museums and zoos, Experience Economy staples in their own right, that were frequented in childhood. Most of them are themed around food, like the new Museum of Pizza or the ever-popular Museum of Ice Cream. This writer attended the Color Factory in New York City this September and discovered



what is essentially a picture-perfect children's museum for adults. These installations are the perfect illustrations of how Instagram has taken hold of the millennial mindset:

*Pop-ups are also almost by definition "hot;" they're installed for a limited time, often pricey, and require being somewhat in the know. There's a growing retail economy built around them, as the Financial Times reported recently. (Haigney 4)*

For the New Yorker, Sophie Haigney accurately describes this new phenomenon. In her article for the New York Times entitled "The Existential Void of the Pop-Up Experience," Amanda Hess takes the criticism even further while sarcastically remarking that they all feature some kind of grown-up ball pit:

*The most these spaces can offer is the facsimile of traditional pleasures. They take nature and art and knowledge seeking, flatten them into sight gags and stick them to every stray surface. (Hess 5).*

Neither journalist is incorrect considering that this is simply what Disney has always done at a higher price point and on a larger scale. Despite how occasionally looked down upon it is to consume a fake paradise in this day and age, this experience is what audiences crave and have shamelessly craved since theatre began. At the same time, it is always understood that a happy ending may be unrealistic. Yet the concept of something made for that perfect photo is creeping into everything. Broadway and Off-Broadway shows have followed suit by installing photo backdrops for people to utilize instead of simply sharing a picture of their Playbill. While it may seem a little patronizing and silly, these small devices become huge marketing ploys while simultaneously providing an added element of experiential service. Throughout the experience of the Color Factory in Soho, guests were treated to samples by local eateries and, after making their way through the installation, were then sent on a scavenger hunt to more local establishments throughout Soho. At the Mickey Mouse: The True Original Exhibition guests

were treated to Ample Hills Creamery while browsing incredible historical drawings from Walt and his top animators, which were pulled out of the archives. Both exhibitions show slight potential in these kinds of enterprises to grow into something that could involve education in some way or another. How does it then differ from a museum? Why is it special other than that it's a trendy place to take pictures and eat a free snack?

The biggest takeaway from the Millennial brand of the Experience Economy is the promise of the future of the theatre industry especially considering the new popularity behind immersive theatre. Since millennials grew up with the ability to stifle their boredom via scrolling social media anywhere at any time, it might now require more innovation to entertain and engage an audience. However, it is in these ideals that truly makes the live experience so genuinely cherished and relevant. In this new evolving version of the Experience Economy, the medium of entertainment must be special and exciting enough to not only draw one away from the ready-made diversion in front of them in the form of a smart phone but be extraordinary enough for them to share with the many of their generation entertaining themselves by scrolling through Instagram. Millennials believe that life is fulfilled via connection and life experience. This demand is where the stage manager's creative vision truly becomes important. Managers and developers in this age must latch on to that skill. The control and performative labor elements are important, but the executing and maintenance of creative design in these kinds of ventures is critical. The ability to transport an audience into another world is the quintessential function of the theatre, and theatre-makers are primed to understand the knowledge of both how to do that and what will resonate with an audience. Massive live experience such as a music festival or an explorative museum are no different. Corporate juggernauts like Airbnb and fitness enterprises like Equinox are similarly providing their own stories to their members and customers. With social media driving this generation, the story-telling truly never stops, it simply takes other

forms from time to time. With experiential brands and a major portion of the population hankering for an adventure, there is a whole world full of opportunity for the stage manager's ability to facilitate story on a large scale.

### **VIII. Technology's Place in the Live Experience Industry**

One phenomenon with which stage managers and showfolk have already begun to contend with is the element of technology and how it affects rehearsal and performance. Given the Millennial generation's reliance on their Instagram story, this concept is not a surprising trend. On the micro-level, there is the question of what to do about the ways in which smart phones have become a distraction for both performers and audience alike. On the macro-level, there are the ways in which performance elements and production organization have become both more impressive and efficient. How does one foster audience connection and communication with other patrons as well as the artists? There is no easy answer yet. One of the bigger questions in show development has been how to include cell-phone use in a production in a non-threatening or non-distracting way. Although, it has yet to be truly perfected in the manner of the fictional show *Hit List* on NBC's *Smash* seemed to do with its show-based Twitter feed. Cirque Du Soleil's *Toruk* managed to incorporate moments of audience participation via a smart phone if one downloaded their specific app. However, the activity involved little else than holding up one's phone as it glowed a particular color of light to create a stadium effect. Many popular recording artists have started incorporating this same technique into their stadium tours. Taylor Swift used glowing bracelets during the Reputation Tour that synced with the lighting design of the concert, similar to another effect that Disney has perfected with special ears during the nightly fireworks show. However, as big of a challenge as audience cell phone use can be in a Broadway theatre, there are bigger and more advanced ways of incorporating technology into

the live experience. Fictional properties such as Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* and Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* are small hints at what many imagine when it comes to futuristic entertainment technology. HBO's *Westworld* might portray the most interesting fictional technological entertainment construct in a theme park teeming with robots and outlining hundreds of storylines in which the guests can do anything they please without suffering consequence. However entertaining these fictional futuristic depictions may be, there are currently some interesting technology related experiences making their stake in the entertainment business today.

One of the newest and seemingly most exciting real life elements of technology making its way onto the market is virtual reality. While the new Oculus has made its way into homes around the country with a 2018 Christmas release, there are other opportunities for virtual reality and augmented reality in the world of attractions. Most notably, and twice tested by this writer, is the Void. As a separate attraction popping up in many cities that already have large tourist populations, the Void is a unique experience designed to "combine AR, VR, and the real world into an amalgamated, theatrical event" (Martindale 1). The company aspires to release experiences similar to movies that are set within a theme like *Ghostbusters*, *Star Wars*, *Disney's Wreck It-Ralph*, or a terrifying vintage World Fair demon scenario entitled *Nicodemus: Demon of Evanishment*. Guests are strapped into a haptic vest carrying a computer that is attached to a virtual reality visor. They are then released in groups of four into a warehouse to go on an adventure. From the second the experience begins the world transforms, and what is presumably a dark warehouse takes on the appearance of a Star Wars destroyer, and a world in which one's friends and one's own hands now look like classic Stormtroopers. Moving through a video game in the flesh is a surreal and unbelievable experience. Especially considering that the floors move, winds and flames are felt, and each time a virtual Stormtrooper lands a hit with his blaster

the haptic vest reacts accordingly. Even though the cost of admission allows the same story to play out every time and no guest to lose despite how many times they are shot, the experience is so well designed that it remains exciting and fresh for each participant. Similarly, it is almost so surreal to perceive the world to changing so seamlessly, that at this early stage in the technology, it is almost hard to concentrate on playing out the story. The attraction itself is mesmerizing. However, as new and amazing as this attraction is, and as impressive augmented reality and similar exhibits can be in any situation, they still require the basic amount of control in storytelling. The Void requires a watchful eye on its semi-blindfolded guests. The safety that stage managers monitor is every bit as important here when the floor that one is stepping on is moving (at least this writer thinks it was moving.) The disorienting nature of the experience for the guest must be guided and supervised, potentially even holding back parts of the story until all guests in the simulation have made it to the point in which they are ready to move on. Despite its technological design, the experience still requires a variation on call. The mode of story-telling is hardly different than an actual reality immersive theatre. The future of theatre is almost certainly more and more technological and has been since the advent of many of the automation elements on Broadway and even more so since the advent of the LED screens changing the game at *Anastasia* or *King Kong*. There have been other immersive style uses of technology on Broadway such as that of the audience headphones in the British import production of *The Encounter* in 2016. Screens are such a big part of daily life now, and the advent of newer technology is only going to transfer into the experiential realm more and more.

In Southern California, a new arcade entitled the Two Bit Circus has begun to employ the theming of technology to produce a “micro-amusement park” (Bishop 1). While the story is not overt, one exists in the way of gaming “Easter eggs” that, once found, can send a participant through the arcade on a sort of scavenger hunt. These kinds of tricks that entice one to play a

game a second time only to realize that it reacts to them differently are quintessential to many of the principles of experiential entertainment. Founders Brent Bushnell (son of Nolan Bushnell, ironically the founder of Atari and Chuck E. Cheese) and Eric Gradman imagine the park to be its own kind of theatre incorporating “Story Rooms,” as well as housing immersive theatrical pieces, and also playing into the connection provided by interactivity with the event and sentimentality of old games like Tron and Pac-Man. Arguably, part of the reason that Disney was successful and remains successful is the element of sentimentality. Parents taking their children to the park on opening day had grown up with *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, and *Bambi*. Going to the park not only created a family memory, but also allowed them to introduce the things they loved as a child to their children. Their children subsequently grew up with *Peter Pan* and *Cinderella* to whom they could introduce their kids to when they returned to the park as adults. With the 90s Disney renaissance, the cycle repeats as they continue to produce family films. The Two Bit Circus park is capitalizing on the same concept. With nods to the 80s arcade games that many folks grew up with featured in a small park geared toward family entertainment, Two Bit Circus is able to offer the same kind of sentimental element of entertainment. Even technology based, the amusement requires the same customer service and management skills that the Disney parks require and that stage managers exemplify on a daily basis in the rehearsal hall. It simply requires one more step by the turning on of a few more computers.

While technology is capable of presenting new and exciting attractions in many forms, there is many a question on the time and place for it. Similarly, where does technology impede the creative and collaborative process, and how can stage managers attempt to alleviate these concerns with their unique position? Even now, most theme park attractions are being designed less as tracked coasters but with large concave Imax style screens in which a smaller apparatus

moves to tell a more detailed and thrilling story. Technology has also become a huge factor in how people move through a theme park with apps, Magic Bands, and now even queue-less attractions that have begged the question as to whether or not technology detracts from the overall story of an environment. When does the audience start applauding the technology over the complete performance? Or better yet, when does the use of technology interfere with the overall intent of the experience? Does the lack of anticipation of waiting in line and listening to the screams of those falling faster than gravity allows on The Tower of Terror fall by the wayside when the attraction is queue-less? These are all questions that both stage managers organizing the day to day execution of a project and designers will have to continue to contend with. The stage manager's ability to look at the broad picture of a production and observe how the details affect the whole will become more and more valuable in the technological experience. For something like the Void or Two Bit Circus, the basis of the experience is the technology. However, they are isolated examples of a new kind of live experience that still happens in the moment but that retains a digital stamp. There is still something to the old circus ideal that humans want to see something spectacular happen before their eyes but not on a screen.

#### **IX. The Stage Manager's Touch**

Overall, it is very clear from the magnitude of live experiences available in this day and age that opportunity abounds for the theatrical management type. Beginning with Walt Disney and the initial advent of the Experience Economy and working through the ultimate transformation of the genre through Millennials' hunger for life and love for social media short stories, there is little question as to whether the same production principles and methods of the traditional American modes of entertainment like the Circus, Musical Comedy, and Disneyland continue to expand and grow with the support and application of theatrical methodologies around the world.

Considering the main aspects of theming, control, service, memory-making and connection found within the practice of live experience stem directly from the theatre, the above examples among many other standards found in sports, museums, zoos, and an abundance of hospitality and tourism related establishments, not only establish the standardization of the Experience Economy but truly picture the relevance of the stage manager's specific skill set in the development and maintenance of the live entertainment experience.

The stage manager's vivid powers of observation, ability to connect with collaborators and facilitate connection between both cast and crew and audience, organizational drive, leadership specialties, and overall ability to problem solve and manage time are the cornerstone traits required to manage and maintain any experience based endeavor. Experience is not only prevalent in almost all business these days, but it is coloring the way in which one reviews their service and exchanges far outside the entertainment realm. Tourism and hospitality, for instance, are two of the less theatrical industries that have led the way in this worldwide change that continues to seep into retail and corporate transactions with extreme regularity. Stage Managers have a truly unique ability to manage from both the inside and the outside, as evidenced when they facilitate the creation and stamina of experience from the rehearsal room to the audience in every sense of the word. As the Experience Economy continues to thrive and ultimately morphs into what could be a Laziness Economy, Sharing Economy, or some kind of exclusively Technological Economy<sup>6</sup>, the stage manager's universal ability to lead, connect, and adapt will continue to fuel the live experience and fantastical memory-making of a theatrically based entertainment industry.

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<sup>6</sup> These concepts are purely speculation by this writer based on research of both the Experience Economy and the consumption habits of Millennials



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