

Donna Walker-Kuhne on Audience Etiquette

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DONNA WALKER-KUHNE: The etiquette, because I believe that's what you were describing, the etiquette of one coming to this — to a performance, and what's allowed and what's not. I think that you're absolutely correct. Let's be honest, we're all adults, we put on big girl, big boy pants. We know that classical music, various forms of the visual arts, certainly ballet, come with a very elite culture. And so if you don't feel that you fit into that, then why would you go? And so that means, to your point, why can't I applaud? When I go to the movies, I applaud. In fact, we talked back to the screen. So why can't I do that when they hit a high note? And I'm like, "Girl, you got it!" Why can't we do that? What happens? What happens?

So my students — I teach at Columbia and NYU. My students said, "Well, I went to a performance —" Oh gosh, I forgot. It was one of the Broadway shows. And — oh, it was called *Jaja's African Hair Braiding Salon*. It was a play on Broadway, about what happens in a day in an African hair braiding salon. So it's lots of humor and lots of fun things. And so of course they were targeting the Black community. So my students said, "You know, in my row there were these Black women, and they were laughing and clapping and all that." And I said, "Did that disturb you?" He said, "Yes, because I wanted it to be quiet." I said, "But that's not what — first of all, it wasn't for you. The play was to target Black women. So they should feel free to be able to express themselves."

So it's the lens in which we expect our audience to, quote, behave. So why do we all have to sit there politely and nod and wait until the end? How does that disturb your enjoyment? Does that mean, speaking back to psychological safety, that as an audience we have to expand? We have to think about other ways of experiencing the art that hasn't — that in no way detract from the quality, brilliance and excellence of the performance. I think you absolutely hit a very important point, because we can try to cultivate and build relationships. But what happens the moment I sit down?

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So the playwright, Dominique Morisseau, produces — she writes for Broadway shows, all kinds of plays. In her Playbill, she has an insert that says, "Dear audience, you are allowed to do the following things." So she gives the audience permission, clap when you want, say something when you want. It does not affect our production. We expect that. We look forward to that. So you have to think about, now in the sacred world of opera, what does that mean? Will they be upset? They, meaning the

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composers who've been dead for a couple of 100 years. Will they be upset if someone says, "Oh! What does that mean?"

I think that's the place, if we can change that, then we wouldn't have to dwell, and I could be having drinks. I mean it seriously, I don't want to make light of it, but I do know how people feel about it, how do I go in. When I was at Dance Theatre of Harlem, I was the marketing director, we went to Lincoln Center for the first time to do a two-week engagement. And everyone was worried about, who's going to come, how do we — what do we do? And I had been working with a group of Black professionals, lawyers and doctors, for other events.

So I said, "Guys, we're going to Lincoln Center. I know you're going to come and support dance theater." And they said, "Oh, we're so happy you're going, but we can't go." I said, "What do you mean? The tickets are affordable." You know, I had broken the budget down. We got \$65 tickets. They said, "No, it's not the price of the ticket, it's how we go to Lincoln Center. We need a limo, we need diamonds, we need furs. That's how one goes to Lincoln Center." That was their belief, their understanding. And so without that, then I won't be accepted, I won't be welcomed. They'll make me feel that there's something wrong with me. So no, we can't go.

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So I started to have monthly meetings at Lincoln Center with this group in the seats that they wanted to sit in. I said, "Pick out your seat. Where do you want to sit? Okay, let's go sit down. Okay, let me show you where the bathrooms are. And then let's go meet Jimmy in the box office, because he's going to take your money." Demystify that whole experience. And so use your spaces, bring your audiences in, show them what it's like. And you think about how a person can be themselves and come to a performance, and that does not mean insulting the artists. We're not talking about throwing food up at the stage, none of that. We're talking about, how can I express my enjoyment at a performance when you're ready to step into that space? Then I think you'll really see some significant movement. So I thank you for that comment very much. So thank you.

END OF TRANSCRIPT