



THEATRICALS CANADA

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FUN STUFF**



Welcome to Earth! Let's Go See a Play!

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In honour of the start of the new theatre season, let's engage in a thought experiment. Let's pretend you're an intelligent, friendly extraterrestrial, visiting Earth from another planet, in order to study humans.

We, your human hosts, are proud to introduce you to various human activities and accomplishments. You've found our math, sciences and engineering

interesting and respectable, but it hasn't knocked your 17 alien socks off: after all, you've already got to our planet while we're still taking shots at our moon. You're more curious about those human activities that are known as, well, the humanities: philosophy, psychology, anthropology, politics, law, history – and especially those peculiar pursuits called “art” and “culture.” You've sampled music, painting and sculpture; and now, we're taking you to a building called a “theatre” to witness a human activity called a “play.” This will be your first introduction to human fiction.

Wait, what? Why not start with written stories, novels, comics, movies, TV, streamed video? Because we want to hit you with the full magical weirdness of the most direct kind of fiction we have, unmediated by distracting technology. Just as this was the first form that fiction ever took among humans, let it be the first form you experience. We'll go see something in IMAX and three-D next week. For now, welcome to the live theatre.

You come with your hosts into a large room divided into two parts. The larger part contains numerous humans facing the smaller part, which is designed to replicate a human environment: perhaps the interior of a home, perhaps an outdoor Earth landscape. You and your hosts find your empty seats. Soon the lighting in the larger part of the room goes dark while that in the smaller part gets brighter, and then a few more humans come into this brightly-lit area, where they proceed to behave rather strangely, even for humans.

They stand, sit, walk across the well-lit space, pick up and put down objects, and talk more loudly and clearly than humans normally talk, evidently to make sure we can all hear what they have to say. Some of them may not seem quite real. (“O, there be players that... have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well.” – Hamlet.) The larger group around you sits quietly, except for occasionally emitting that weird

sound called laughter, and sometimes slapping their hands together to make a sustained percussive noise.

After a while the humans in the brightly-lit area seem to become upset about their circumstances. Then they get more distressed, until everything either gets better or turns truly awful, perhaps involving violent death. Then they get up from the pools of fake blood they've been lying in, and take a bow.

Partly thanks to your hosts' prepping you beforehand, you do have some understanding of what's going on. You know that the brightly-lit humans are pretending to be humans who they are not. The situation they're talking about is not real. Nor is their apparent emotional distress, nor the deaths.

I don't know whether your species can lie. In the history of science fiction, there have been alien species depicted as incapable of lying, and alien species who are as good at it as we are, or better. But in any case, you have already learned that humans sometimes say things that aren't true, to deceive other humans. However, here, in this strange space called a theatre, the large group in the dark know perfectly well that the small group are lying, and the small group are completely aware that they're not fooling the large group. And yet the brightly-lit humans enjoy telling these lies – and the other humans, for some reason, enjoy watching them do it. In fact, they enjoy it so much that they pay human money, sometimes in significant amounts, for the privilege of witnessing these elaborate falsehoods. And this practice was invented independently by human societies all over the world. What strange creatures!

Your hosts explain later that the point of all this is to let us exercise our emotions in a safe space, by showing us non-real humans going through non-real circumstances, and thus to purge us of bad feelings; and that we also get enjoyment out of watching the talent and skill of the artists who created and are performing this hoax. You admit to your hosts that it still seems surpassingly

weird. Then they baffle you further by confessing that they think it's kind of weird too.

We humans are lucky that respected artists have blazed a trail for us that goes back thousands of years. If we lived in a world without theatre or fiction, and a group of us suddenly decided to make up a complicated two-hour-long fib about a bunch of nonexistent people, and to pretend to be those people, and to expect other people to pay money to watch us do this, we would likely be ignored, committed, or beaten up.

So let's be grateful to all the theatre workers who have gone before us, and given this peculiar human pastime an air of respectability, thanks to its long history, which goes all the way back to the era when – at the same time that your ancestors, dear alien, were already designing the systems that got you to our Earth – our ancestors were sitting around the fire, celebrating the hunting, killing, cooking and eating of a wild boar. At that moment, somebody said, “So we surrounded the boar, and – Hey, no, wait, Cyril, you put on the skin and stick the tusks in your mouth, and Phyllis, you be the dog, and Estelle and Gareth and I will be ourselves, and we'll get up and *show* you how it happened!” – and theatre was born.

And with that, I wish all my fellow humans, as well as any aliens who may be reading this, a great theatre season.