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## Message to Audiences: Put Down Your Phone!

*Sascha Radetsky – Former Dancer, American Ballet Theatre*

The instant screens light up, the spell is shattered.

-Hey. U up?

-Ya. I'm at the ballet.

-Oh ok. Talk later.

-Nah, it's cool, it's a slow part right now.

Nope, it's not cool. Put your phone away. In the hushed darkness of an auditorium, light explodes from that screen like shrapnel, blasting those around you out of their viewing experience.

Your fellow audience members have ponied up considerable cash for tickets, and the artists onstage and in the orchestra pit have devoted their lives, since childhood, to a single craft, spending weeks, months, years preparing their roles in any given show. Honor those investments. Honor your own.

A measure of interruption during a live performance is expected—the Marco Polo call-and-answer of sneezes and coughs, the matinee toddler tantrums, the occasional snore of the exceptionally aged or fatigued. I remember Mexican free-tailed bats dive-bombing us mid-show in Austin, Texas, and ground squirrels waddling, like overzealous supernumeraries, onstage in Vail, Colorado. I remember, during a wild thunderstorm that christened my retirement show with American Ballet Theatre, the Met roof springing a leak and a puddle forming downstage right, in prime pirouette territory.

### Facebook can wait until intermission.

It's hard to control a cough or a cranky kid's wails. Tough to tame the artistic ambitions of bats or squirrels. And sometimes, I guess the rain gods want in on the festivities too. But most philosophers and legal scholars would agree that even the most strung-out phone addicts possess free will. Force majeure has nothing to do with Facebook.

On Broadway, the use of phones during shows is the new normal, as epidemic among the theatergoing masses as shorts and flip-flops. My sister, a ballet dancer with The Phantom of the Opera, could fill volumes with tales of outrageous cell phone behavior—viewers blithely carrying on phone conversations, ringtones that don't exactly complement Andrew Lloyd Webber's songs. Every night, multiple audience members are lost in their phones at once, screens beaming ignominious halos

around their faces. The ushers, by way of reprimand, march down the aisles and shine their flashlights at the offenders. These light shows erupt throughout the performance, from front row to balcony, as if the romance between Christine and her Angel of Music were flowering not at the Paris Opéra in the 1880s but at a Pink Floyd concert a century later.

Ballet audiences have yet to slide that far below a standard of decorum, but they're losing altitude fast. When I sit among them, I inevitably see people texting, scrolling through email, snapping photos, checking the activity of social media posts. Fortunately, the expanse between stage and seats in most opera houses is broad enough that the performers don't notice.

But those of us on the less sweaty side of the pit sure do. As far as I'm concerned, the instant those screens come up during a show, the spell is shattered. I'm no longer carried along by the story, the movement, the music; I'm wrenched back into my seat. And now, instead of enraptured and exhilarated, I'm just irritated.

The phone fiends are likewise missing out, so why are they there? Don't they, like the rest of us, come to the ballet in the hopes of quieting the chatter of the mind, touching a collective consciousness, being stirred, provoked, getting their hair blown back? By fixating on their phones, they swerve away from that purpose, away from the rewards of the three-dimensional present and a unique swath of space and time that will never be experienced again.

## Don't the phone addicts realize they're missing out?

These might sound like the puritanical ravings of an anti-tech grouch, but I love my phone too. I peer into its numinous fathoms far too many times per day, and I sometimes find myself doing the loathsome text-while-you-walk zombie zigzag down crowded sidewalks. I too tumble down the rabbit hole of animal videos on a shamefully regular basis. I too jones for the dopamine suckle of social media. But a trace of self-discipline stays with me from my dancer days, at least while the curtain's drawn. (And luckily, I take terrible selfies.)

It's hard not to view the illicit use of cell phones in theaters as symbolic of society's larger problems. If we're apathetic to the experiences of our fellow citizens in the audience, with whom we ostensibly share an interest, why would we empathize with people of different ideologies, races, sexual orientations, cultures and classes?

I'm not suggesting that bad phone behavior is necessarily a gateway to graver transgressions, that civilization will crumble if our phones don't stay in our pockets, or that world peace will reign if they do.

But I wonder how we'll ever begin to understand one another on this shrinking planet without a language of simple courtesy. Maybe that means, for the 40 minutes until intermission, letting that text go unanswered. Maybe that means powering down, opening up and checking the activity onstage.

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