On Theater and Morals

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

D'Alembert wrote the entry for "Geneva" in the Encylopédie, *in which he criticized its prohibition of theater. Rousseau replied in 1758 in his* Epistle to Mr. d'Alembert, *arguing not only that theater encouraged idleness and inactivity but that it left people alone with only themselves. A republic required truly public entertainment, he concluded, which would promote civic spirit.*

The state of man hath its pleasures, which are derived from his nature, and arise from his occupations, his connections and his necessities; and as these pleasures are most agreeable to uncorrupted, innocent minds, they render all others in a manner useless. A father, a son, a husband, a citizen, lie under obligations of so pleasing and interesting a nature, that they can want no amusement more agreeable than the discharge of them. The proper employment of our time increases its value; while the better it is employed, the less have we still to spare. Thus we find that the habit of labor renders idleness tiresome, and that a good conscience deprives us of all taste for frivolous pleasures. But it is the being dissatisfied with ourselves; it is the weight of indolence; it is the loss of taste for simple and natural pleasures, that give occasion to the expediency of artificial entertainments. I do not like to see the heart set upon theatrical amusements, as if it was uneasy or unhappy within itself. The answer of the barbarian to a person who had been extolling the magnificence of the circus, and the games instituted at Rome, was dictated by nature itself Have the Romans, said that honest creature, no wives nor children? The barbarian was in the right. People imagine themselves to be in company at the theater, but it is there that everybody is alone. We repair thither to forget our relations, our friends, our neighbors; to interest ourselves in fabulous representations, to mourn over the imaginary misfortunes of the dead, or to laugh at the expense of the living. But I should have perceived that this is not the language of the present age. Let us endeavor, therefore, to assume one that will be better understood.

To enquire whether public amusements are good or bad in themselves is a question too vague and indeterminate: it would be to examine into a relation before we had fixed the terms of it. They are made for the people, and it is only from their effects on the people, that we are to determine their real good or bad qualities. There may be an almost infinite variety of such entertainments; and there is a like variety in the manners, constitutions and characters of different people. I allow that man is every where the same; but when he is variously modified by religion, government, laws, customs, prepossessions, and climates,

he becomes so different from himself that the question no longer is what is proper for mankind in general, but what is proper for him in such a particular age and country. Hence it is that the dramatic pieces of Menander, calculated for the Athenian stage, were ill-suited for that of Rome. Hence the combats of the gladiators, which, under the republican government, animated the people with courage, and a love of glory, only served, under the emperors, to render the populace brutal, blood-thirsty, and cruel. The very same objects, exhibited under different circumstances, taught the people at one time to despise their own lives, and at another to sport with the lives of others.

Let us not ascribe to the theater ... the power of changing sentiments and manners, when it can only pursue and embellish them. A dramatic writer who should oppose the general taste of the public, would soon be left to write only for himself. When Molière corrected the comic drama, he attacked only ridiculous modes and characters; but in doing this, he indulged the public taste, as did also Corneille. It was the old French stage that began to displease this taste: because, while the nation improved in politeness, the stage still retained its primitive barbarism.

It is for the same reason that, as the general taste is so greatly altered since their times, the very best pieces of these two authors, if now first brought on the stage, would infallibly be damned. The connoisseurs may admire them as much as they please; the public admire them rather because they are ashamed to do otherwise, than from any real beauties they discover in them. It is said, indeed, that a good piece can never miscarry; truly I believe it; but this is because a really good piece is never disgusting to the manners of the times. There cannot be the least doubt that the very best tragedy of Sophocles would be totally damned in our theaters. It is impossible for us to put ourselves in the place of people, to whom we bear no sort of resemblance....

What! Ought there to be no entertainments in a republic? On the contrary, there ought to be many. It is in republics that they were born, it is in their bosom that they are seen to flourish with a truly festive air. To what peoples is it more fitting to assemble often and form among themselves sweet bonds of pleasure and joy than to those who have so many reasons to like one another and remain forever united? We already have many of these public festivals; let us have even more; I will be only the more charmed for it. But let us not adopt these exclusive entertainments which close up a small number of people in melancholy fashion in a gloomy cavern, which keep them fearful and immobile in silence and inaction, which give them only prisons, lances, soldiers, and afflicting images of servitude and inequality to see. No, happy peoples, these are not your festivals. It is in the open air, under the sky, that you ought to gather and give yourselves to the sweet sentiment of your happiness. Let your pleasures not be effeminate or mercenary; let nothing that has an odor of constraint and selfishness poison them; let them be free and generous like you are, let the sun illuminate your innocent entertainments; you will constitute one yourselves, the worthiest it can illuminate.

But what then will be the objects of these entertainments? What will be shown in them? Nothing, if you please. With liberty, wherever abundance reigns, well-being also reigns. Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united. I need not have recourse to the games of the ancient Greeks; there are modern ones which are still in existence, and I find them precisely in our city. Every year we have reviews, public prizes, kings of the harquebus, the cannon, and sailing. Institutions so useful and so agreeable cannot be too much multiplied; of such kings there cannot be too many. Why should we not do to make ourselves active and robust what we do to become skilled in the use of arms? Has the republic less need of workers than of soldiers? Why should we not found, on the model of the military prizes, other prizes for gymnastics, wrestling, runnings, discus, and the various bodily exercises? Why should we not animate our boatmen by contests on the lake? Could there be an entertainment in the world more brilliant than seeing, on this vast and superb body of water, hundreds of boats, elegantly equipped, starting together at the given signal to go and capture a flag planted at the finish, then serving as a cortege for the victor returning in triumph to receive his well-earned prize? All festivals of this sort are expensive only insofar as one wishes them to be, and the gathering alone renders them quite magnificent. Nevertheless, one must have been there with the Genevans to understand with what ardor they devote themselves to them. They are unrecognizable; they are no longer that steady people which never deviates from its economic rules; they are no longer those slow reasoners who weigh everything, including joking, in the scale of judgment. The people are lively, gay, and tender; their hearts are then in their eyes as they are always on their lips; they seek to communicate their joy and their pleasures. They invite, importune, and coerce the new arrivals and dispute over them. All the societies constitute but one, all become common to all. It is almost a matter of indifference at which table one seats oneself. It would be the image of Lacedaemon if a certain lavishness did not prevail here; but this very lavishness is at this time in its place, and the sight of the abundance makes that of the liberty which produces it more moving.