

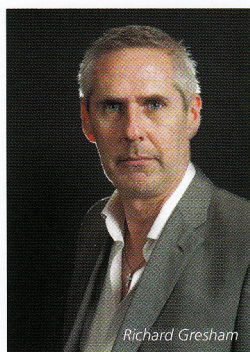
AUDIENCES BEHAVING BADLY

Jo Caird looks into the increase in inconsiderate behaviour of theatre audiences that prompted Richard Gresham to launch the Theatre Charter.

Ringing phones, rustling sweet wrappers, flash photography, late arrivals – some people, it appears, just don't know how to behave at the theatre. Most of us just grit our teeth and put up with it. But one regular theatregoer, frustrated with performance after performance being interrupted, decided it was time to take a stand.

In July 2014, Richard Gresham, who works as an advertising sales consultant in theatre and has been organising large group excursions to shows for 15 years, launched the Theatre Charter. Nearly 2,000 people have since signed up online, pledging to behave considerately to others at the theatre by turning off their phones, keeping quiet during performances and only leaving before the interval in a genuine emergency.

Following a recent spate of incidents where high-profile performers have felt it necessary to chastise audiences



“**People need to be taught and my Theatre Charter's responsibility is to get that education out there.**”

behaving badly – from Kevin Spacey at the Old Vic in July to Michael McIntyre at the Darlington Civic in October – this is beginning to feel like an issue that the industry needs to address.

Gresham lays much of the blame for bad behaviour at the door of new and casual audiences, those who don't know the conventions and therefore aren't necessarily aware that they're breaking them. He stresses that his intention is not to put off new audiences, but maintains that: “People need to be taught and my Theatre Charter's responsibility is to get that education out there.”

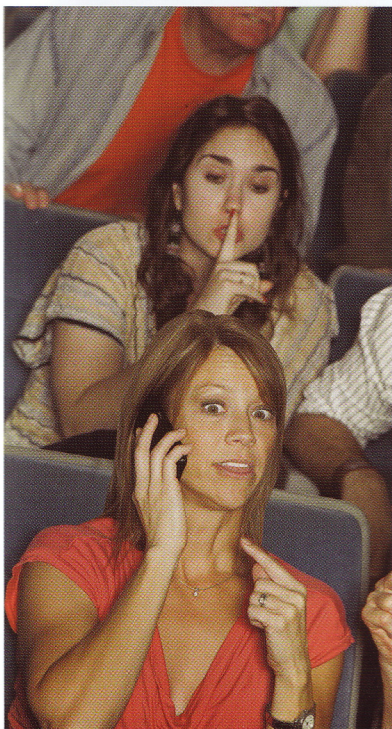
But Stephanie Sirr, CEO of Nottingham Playhouse, is wary that this message is “liable to be misconstrued.”

“For us it's in danger of seeming like theatre is a church and that's not what we're aiming for. I have

complete sympathy for the idea behind it but I think for us it would be really in danger of alienating the very people that we're trying to embrace."

Mark Shenton, chief critic at The Stage, has blogged about his frustration at anti-social behaviour at the theatre on a number of occasions. He acknowledges the tension between keeping theatre inclusive and encouraging particular standards of behaviour, but also points to "a seeming sense of entitlement at large nowadays to enjoy a show on people's own terms, regardless of how it affects those around them."

Inconsiderate behaviour affects not just fellow audience members, but performers too. Cynthia Erivo was appearing in *Dessa Rose* at London's Trafalgar Studios in August 2014 when she took to Twitter one evening after the show to vent her frustration: "Tonight was an odd one I beg of you gorgeous audience, we, on stage, are alive, when you talk we hear you."



If you check your phone WE C U : ([sic]." She later retweeted the link to the Theatre Charter to her followers.

Not everyone agrees that it's the audience that's the problem. "If the work is good people will shut up and listen. If the work isn't connecting, people will do other things," says Kerry Michael, artistic director of Theatre Royal Stratford East. "But if that's happening regularly in your theatre then I think it says more about the quality of the work than it says about the audience."

The TRSE was one of the first theatres in the UK to encourage social media use during performances, designating the upper circle as a 'tweetzone' in early 2011. Other theatres have since followed suit, with the marketing company Dewynters piloting specially designated 'tweet seats' in performances of *Once* in the West End last summer.

Like many in the industry, Michael sees social media not just as a marketing tool, but as a key component in the democratisation of theatre. Officially sanctioned mobile phone use during performances – albeit for certain productions and under particular conditions – is here to stay. The issue, in an age when so many of us are accustomed to being on our smart phones all day every day, is to make those conditions clear enough so that those who wish to enjoy their theatre without distraction are able to do so.

In the end, there may be no 'one-size-fits-all' solution to bad behaviour in the theatre. Just as no two theatres are the same, no two audiences are ever the same either. But whether UK theatres adopt Gresham's Theatre Charter or not, the discussion it's prompting can only be beneficial to an industry united in its goal of keeping audiences happy and engaged.



It's in danger of seeming like theatre is a church and that's not what we're aiming for."