

everyone around you is that you're the most important thing there."

Don't shout out lines. Don't heckle. Don't leave your trash on the floor. Don't talk so loudly that the actors can hear you. Don't mouth the words you know by heart—you're distracting the actor. You want to sing along or shout out the punchline? Stay home and rent *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

If your buddy is on stage, don't shout out his name to let him know you're there—respect his work and his craft. He probably spent time before the show getting into character. Let him stay there. At outdoor venues, the perception is that it's OK, or even encouraged, to be more vocal. But take a cue from the actors and any introductory remarks to get a sense of what sort of audience participation is actually encouraged.

Turn off your phone

Again, we can all see you and the glowing blue square in your hands, and so can the actors. Listen when they tell you to turn off your phone because silencing it isn't enough. We can all hear that too, vibrating down there in the bottom of your purse. At intermission, tag the hell out of the show on Instagram, text your babysitter and take a selfie with your friends to capture all the fun you're having. Then shut it off again for the second act.

If you absolutely must keep it on, maybe for emergency or medical reasons, turn down the brightness. Even at outdoor venues, where the rules are more relaxed, your phone acts like a little flashlight that every eye in the audience and on stage can see.

Are you really gonna eat that?

"We had people actually bring a full picnic," recalls Mary Bennett, producing artistic director at Brüka Theatre. "They were back there unwrapping sandwiches during the show."

It was once standard protocol to forego the food during a show. On Broadway and in many theaters, it's still common practice to reserve drinks and snacks for intermission only. But for many local theater troupes, bars and snack sales help fund what they do and potentially enhance the viewing experience.

It's OK to nurse the glass of wine you bought during the show, but open the pack of cookies before the show starts, or wait until there's applause so we can't hear it. And, please, consider the venue's rules and the appropriateness of the food. If they say no outside food, just don't bring it. Your bucket of chicken may be great at Wingfield Park, but on

Brüka's intimate main stage couches, it definitely isn't. We can see it and, more importantly, smell it. And my final rule ...

Be present

"Theater is one of the last areas where we have public group experiences," said Spain. "There aren't a lot of places anymore where groups of people who don't know each other get together to share something. Theater can't happen without an audience, and it's new every time. Respect the nature of the beast and know that it's a shared experience."

The performers want to engage you in the show, to take you away to someplace new for a couple hours. Go along with them. Laugh out loud so they know you're enjoying it. Clap to support their work. Go to the bathroom before the show starts. And don't let distractions—like your phone or even the raucous folks in the back row—take you away from what's happening on stage.

"There's a thing live performances ask for, and that's kindness," Bennett said. "The audience has a right to come in and let go and feel something, but we also make assumptions that people will know what the performance is asking for. Theater is changing, and theaters need to get better at asking." □

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Mary Bennett



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