

THE DEATH OF MANNERS

by Diane Lewis

Wichita, Kan. -- Item: A toddler attending a touring performance of "Cats" in December in Century II squirms and chats throughout the 2 1/2 hour show. She doesn't have a seat, but sits on Mom or Dad's lap or stands.

Item: Weeks later, during a performance of "A Christmas Carol" at Century II, a middle-school student Grinch tosses pennies and pebbles onto the stage, hitting actor John Goldenow in the head and halting a Wichita Children's Theatre production for the first time in 15 years.

Item: At opening night of "A Doll's House" at Wichita Community Theatre, several Baker university students giggle uncontrollably through most of the second act. A week later, as the character Nora (played by Deanne Zogleman) strikes her oppressive husband, Torvald (Lance Oschner), an audience member shouts, "You go, girl!"

Item: In August, actor Brian Dennehy stops in mid-performance during Broadway's "Death of a Salesman" to admonish latecomers bickering over seats with the usher.

Then there was the playgoer at a performance of the same play who mad restaurant reservations on a cell phone during the poignant scene in which Linda Loman visits her husband's grave.

These days, whatever people are taking to live performances, many seem to be leaving their manners at home. Dennehy has called it "a general epidemic of bad manners," and some suggest the relaxed attitudes and electronic conveniences of modern times are to blame.

"We need a whole new set of manners," said Wichitan Burton Pell, an inveterate concert-theatre-moviegoer.

Cell phones, chatterers, and children. Pell finds them all irritating when they're inappropriate. Mitch Berman, general manager of the Wichita Symphony Orchestra, would add another "c" to the hit list: coughing.

There's a lot of coughing during concerts, said Berman, and it's not limited to the cold and flu season. When audience members lose interest, Berman has observed, some start coughing.

But the biggest problem at the symphony, Berman said, is people who talk. During concerts, he regularly sits in the back rows, where some concertgoers apparently think they are so far from the stage it's OK to visit while the orchestra plays.

As for that outburst at Wichita Community Theatre, actress Zogleman said, the cast had talked about the possibility of just such a reaction because of the play's intensity and its attention to relationships between men and women that remain unresolved 120 years after it was written.

"I guess we should be glad as actors we are making it seem so real that they do react," said Zogelman.

Longtime performer and director Dick Welsbacher said basic good manners include turning off pagers and cell phones in the theatre and not taking young children to shows they won't understand.

But, he acknowledged, times change and so does behavior. Theatre people initially resisted the movement toward audiences wearing casual attire to performances, but over time, that became acceptable. Welsbacher, however, still can't get used to rock-concert whoops and hollers that increasingly accompany audience applause at stage shows.

And he sounds a cautionary note that our collective attention span is not as long as it used to be. Until recently, most plays, musicals, and operas ran 2 1/2 to 3 hours. But shorter productions are common now. (Two seasons ago, one of Broadway's biggest hits was the 90-minute "Art.")

Welsbacher and others blame television, which doesn't demand close attention for long periods - or silence - during performances. And it's not just kids who get antsy. "People want to get in and get out," he said.