

International Theatre Institute ITI

World Organization for the Performing Arts



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English (Original)

World Theatre Day Message 2026 Willem DAFOE

I am an actor principally know as a film actor. But my roots are deeply in the theatre. I was a member of the Wooster Group from 1977-2003 creating and performing original pieces at The Performing Garage in NYC and touring throughout the world. I have also worked with Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson and Romeo Castellucci. Now, I am the Artistic Director of The Venice Theatre Biennale. This appointment, the events in the world, and my desire to return to theatre work has strongly formed my belief in the unique positive power and importance of the theatre.

At the humble beginning of my time in The Wooster Group, the NY based theatre company, we would often get very little public at some of the performances at our theatre. Often the rule was if there were more performers than public we could choose to cancel. But we never did. Many of the company were not trained in the theatre but were people of different disciplines that came together to make theatre- so “the show must go on” was not really our mantra, however we felt an obligation to keep our meeting with the public.

We would also often rehearse during the day and in the evening show the material as a work in progress. We would sometimes spend years on a show while sustaining ourselves with touring of older performances. Working years on a piece would often become tedious for me and I found rehearsals somewhat trying but these works in progress showings were always exciting- even if the tiny public was a damning judgment of the level of interest in what we were doing. It just made me realize how no matter how few people, the audience as witness gave the theatre its meaning and life.

Like the sign in the gambling hall says “YOU MUST BE PRESENT TO WIN.” Shared experience in real time of an act of creation, that may be scored and designed but is always different, is certainly the obvious strength of the theatre. Socially, politically, theatre has never been so important and vital to our understanding of ourselves and the world.

The “elephant in the room” is new technologies and social networking. which promises connection but seemingly has fragmented and isolated people from each other. I use my computer daily even if I have no social media, I have even googled myself as an actor, and have also consulted AI for information. But you have to be blind not to recognize that human contact risks being replaced by relationships with devices. While some technology can serve us well the problem of not knowing who’s on the other end of the circle of communication runs deep and contributes to a crisis of truth and reality. While the internet can raise questions, it very seldom captures a sense of wonder that theatre creates. A wonder based in attention, engagement and a spontaneous community of those present in a circle of action and response.

As an actor and theatre maker I remain a believer in the power of theatre. In a world that seems to get more divisive, controlling and violent, our challenge as theatre makers is to avoid the corruption of theatre solely as a commercial enterprise dedicated to the entertainment by distraction or as the dry institutional preserver of traditions, but rather to foster its strength to connect peoples, communities, cultures and above all to question where we are going.....

Great theatre is about challenging how we think and encouraging us to imagine what we aspire to.

We are social animals and designed biologically for engagement with the world. Every sense organ is a gateway for encounter and through this meeting we achieve greater definition of who we are. Through storytelling, aesthetics, language, movement, scenography - theatre as a total art form can make us see what was, what is and what our world could be.