In what role does theatre play in society? According to the theorists who write treatise after treatise about it, the theatre has quite an influential role in our world. But how is its role defined? Is it a social institution, a place of cathartic release, or a purveyor of simple entertainment? Each of these descriptions has been applied to theatre and to its multiple roles. One of the most controversial roles of theatre is its function in teaching. The theatre has been shown to be didactic, but opinions vary on whether this type of instruction is a good thing. Theatre has also provided evidence of having influence on politics. Once again, theorists debate the benefits and detriments of this influence. More specifically, the theorists Schiller, Zola, and Plato individually discuss this concept of social influence in their works. Though their opinions vary, they each focus on “truth” in the theatre.

Truth seems easy enough to define: that which is not false. But how does one define truth on the stage? What is happening on stage is not actually happening, but the actors are actually doing it, so is it true or not? “Mimesis” is a subjective term that somewhat encompasses this concept of truth by characterizing theatre in terms of imitation and representation. Schiller, Zola, and Plato write about theatre’s role in society and attempt to define and evaluate the concept of truth on stage. Schiller approaches theatre as a moral institution, arguing that a mixture of imagination and accuracy is the best route to influencing society; he feels this influence is positive. Another who feels theatre’s ability to influence society is a good thing is Zola; he finds the didactic qualities will come out of pure truth on stage, which involves meticulous authenticity. Conversely, while Plato acknowledges the mimetic qualities of theatre, he finds them to be removed from the truth and their influence on society to be negative. Overall, the concept of theatre representing truth through mimesis is addressed by Schiller, Zola, and Plato in their analyses of how the theatre plays a didactic and politically influential role in society. It is interesting, though, that the overall implications on society arise in their discussions of how truth is portrayed on stage to an audience instead of how an audience interprets what is truthful to them. With their focus on the power of the stage, each theorist has overlooked the power of the audience.

In his treatises, “The Stage as a Moral Institution” and “On the Use of the Chorus in Greek Tragedy,” Schiller expresses his belief that theatre can and should play a didactic role because it is positive for society. Schiller works on the basic principle that “the creative process liberates humankind by allowing the spectator to see through sensuous matter and discover the free working of the mind” (250). Through the theatre, Schiller feels that moral instruction can be given, and that this process is a good thing. The reason Schiller believes the theatre is so powerful is that he feels that sight is always more powerful than description; thus, both the understanding of religion and laws can be heightened if the stage is used to display their truths (250). However, the stage needs to display these truths in a certain way in order for the play to be the most didactic. Schiller explains theatre as a mirror for society, suggesting that his concept of
mimesis involves exact representation (251). However, just as with mirrors, the stage is simply showing a reflection of society, and it is in this reflection that the stage becomes “a great school of practical wisdom, a guide to civil life, and a key to the mind” (Schiller 252). Since the stage is reflecting society, as Schiller states, the audience is able to see the private lives of characters and from these visions learn to “be more considerate to the unfortunate, and to judge gently” (252).

Schiller is suggesting that what the members of society see in the real world is not the whole story, but the stage shows these well-rounded reflections, allowing the audience to evaluate them and learn from them. What Schiller demands is that the theatre simultaneously abandons actuality and conforms to nature (256). It is only with this combination of ideal (unreal) and actual (real) that Schiller finds the truth that is so necessary for a didactic stage. Schiller comments somewhat on the audience’s role when he states that the stage itself “cannot bring [nature and truth] to sensory perception, but by its creative force it can bring it to the powers of the imagination and thereby be truer than any actuality and more real than any experience” (257). Overall, Schiller understands the ability of theatre to reflect society when it is artistic and not an exact replication; when theatre reaches this point, it has the potential to be didactic and politically influential. However, Schiller is assuming that each audience will view theatre in the same way. Overlooking any differences between audience members, Schiller describes a homogenous audience who will receive the messages of the play in the same manner, learn the same lessons, and bring the same moral changes to their society.

Zola seems to hold a similar opinion on theatre’s ability to influence society. In his treatise, “Naturalism in the Theatre,” Zola expresses doubts that the audience will find truth on the stage unless there is a high focus on exact representation of real life. The type of theatre he focuses on, the type that he feels will influence society, requires an authentic quality. Unlike the seventeenth-century theatre, Zola wants flesh-and-blood characters on stage living contemporary lives in truthful settings (359). The type of truth Zola wants on stage is “individual truth” while Schiller wants a “general truth” (361). Zola explains this difference in truth on stage:

The [character] types in classical tragedy and comedy are true, without being real. They possess a general truth, the great human traits summed up in beautiful verse; but they do not possess an individual truth, living and acting as we understand it (361).

In his lifetime, Zola strongly felt that in order for society to be influenced by the theatre, the audience had to witness truths of their own social class. However, he did not feel this was happening because demands for fancy costumes and sets were causing only affluent characters to appear on stage. Zola proclaims in his treatise that “a whole social class, the vast majority of human beings, finds itself virtually excluded from the theatre” (364). Under Schiller’s definition of truth, every person should be able to relate to the universal truths on stage regardless of what social class is involved. However, for Zola, truth cannot appear on stage unless it is viewed as truth by the audience; if not, truth in the theatre will suffer (364). Once the sites of modern life are put on stage with meticulous reproduction and the costumes show truth in the tableaux, the theatre will be used for its “dramatic usefulness” and the audience will be able to
analyse their own lives (Zola 365). Zola believes that the audience will be most affected by an actor who uses a “truthful inflection [to give] the spoken words the exact value they should have” (366). Unlike Schiller, Zola believes that an exact representation of truth on stage is the most effective and occurs when the audience sees themselves, meaning their own social classes and roles, on stage. Like Schiller, Zola is discussing theatre being didactic and influencing society, but his focus is on a specific method that does not give the audience much credit.

In “The Republic,” Plato differs from both Zola and Schiller in his view of the benefits of a didactic and politically influential theatre. In fact, Plato feels that any type of teaching from the theatre is incredibly detrimental to society. He quite bluntly states that the “power which poetry has of harming even the good (and there are very few who are not harmed) is surely an awful thing” (Plato 29). This power Plato speaks of is the same power both Schiller and Zola felt was a positive characteristic of the theatre; however, Plato does not approve of truth on stage because he does not think it is possible. For Plato, the only truth is in the divine, and all imitations are “thrice removed from the truth” (22). This removal becomes dangerous because the audience will believe the actor to be all-knowing and true and therefore be deceived by him and make conclusions that are false (Plato 21). An example of a false conclusion that may be made by the audience after witnessing a play is to be passionate and fitful during suffering instead of patient, as the law suggests (Plato 28-9). Plato explains that the actor "awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason…he indulges the irrational nature…he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth" (29). All these actions, Plato feels, are dangerous to society.

Plato did not discredit theatre’s ability to influence society; in fact, he felt it could be very politically influential. In his treatise, he describes that theatre often appears harmless, but that it has the ability to penetrate into customs and manners until it “invades contracts between man and man, and from contracts goes on to laws and constitutions, in utter recklessness, ending at last, by an overthrow of all rights” (18). It is apparent that Plato agrees with both Schiller and Zola that theatre can be didactic because what appears on stage seems true and influences the audience. However, he strongly believes that anything copied on the stage, whether virtue or vice, is only an imitation and never reaches the ultimate truth (24). To Plato, all imitations on stage are harmful to those that witness them (19). Even more so than Schiller and Zola, Plato focuses on the influence of theatre on the audience without actually addressing the audience. Overall, his fears of theatre being politically influential require the audience to abandon all critical thinking and accept what appears on stage as truth.

Three theorists, writing during three different times, all have come to the conclusion that the theatre plays a didactic and politically influential role in society. Their opinions surrounding how to show truth on the stage and whether this process is beneficial or detrimental differ greatly. Schiller believes that to influence society, a general truth must be shown on stage. To achieve this general truth and have it influence the audience and society, one must combine the actual with the ideal. Conversely, Zola felt an influence on society would occur if individual truths were shown on stage. Thus, the audience must be witnessing their same social rank in order for it to appear true to them; all physical details must also be truthful if one wants the audience to evaluate themselves in any way. Finally, Plato acknowledges the talents of the
actors to imitate truth but finds these imitations to be removed from the ultimate truth and their influence on society to be dangerous. Despite the differences in their arguments, all three theorists agree that some type of truth is shown on stage and that it affects society. If they are all correct, then the one thing that links their arguments is the audience. Yet, none of them focuses on the audience’s perspective. Each theorist proclaims that there are influences on society by focussing on the method from the stage and not interpretations made in the auditorium. All three theorists ignore any possibility that the audience has the ability to suspend their disbelief, find true what they believe to be true, and be affected by what they want to be affected by.

By each focussing on a different method of showing truth on stage, and illustrating that each method equally affects the audience and society, Schiller, Zola, and Plato have unintentionally admitted the power of the audience regardless of the stage. The implications of this conclusion surround the audience and their importance as a common thread of theatre. It is clear, through discussion of Schiller, Zola, and Plato, that there are different ways to show truth on stage and these differences suggest that the audience will find that truth in spite of any special method. Schiller comes the closest to addressing the audience’s ability to think critically about the stage in his discussion of general or universal truths, but he still fails to acknowledge the audience’s role completely. Regardless of each theorist’s individual interpretations of mimesis and truth, the people in the audience are capable of finding the lessons in the theatre and evaluating their place in society. In the end, it is the audience that holds the power to find and interpret truth, but only if the stage is there to attempt some portrayal of truth.
Works Cited

