

## On the Importance of Live Theatre

By: Nova Grant

In 2018, every person with an internet connection is rarely more than a stone's throw away from the rest of the world. Perhaps, fittingly, a *'Mamma Mia!'* is exclaimed upon this realization. While providing opportunities aplenty, it also invites an insidious vulnerability. In a digital landscape ripe with a dizzying bounty of media competing for our attention, it can be an onerous, ongoing task to wade through the barrages of smartphone games and reality television, in search of something more substantial. As a student, it is no secret that my age group is one of the most heavily-targeted by profit-hungry advertisers. With Hollywood glittering at our fingertips, it is dangerously easy to overlook our own neighbors. This is where local live theatre has the remarkable ability, not only to get us off our phones for a few hours but to bring communities together, delivering unification by way of shared experience.

One of the most important aspects of my time in high school was being given the opportunity to attend and enjoy a huge variety of different theatrical pieces through our film and theatre criticism course. Giving students the gift of live theatre is an effective way to not only inspire the next generation of actors, playwrights, and production managers, but to encourage deeper thinking. While it is disappointing to hear of budget cuts to arts and drama programs, this makes me incredibly grateful for the programs I was fortunate enough to take part in. It cannot be stated enough how valuable it is that we, as a society, become more critical of the entertainment placed in front of us. By integrating theatre into school curricula and facilitating discussions regarding it, students are taught to question what they are seeing and to develop their individual opinions. As human beings, our idiosyncrasies are our strengths, and therefore should not be suppressed. There is nothing to be lost from giving youth the tools to think freely and without fear of judgement, thereby protecting the minds of the future from being easily swayed by faceless and uncaring corporations. This is the type of knowledge that doesn't translate into real life if merely taught in a classroom. In turn, these skills will become advantageous as today's high school students graduate into university and the workforce.

Theatre plays a more crucial role in our society than it is given credit for, specifically in its ability to function as a catalyst for social and political change. This concept is best expressed by the late Augusto Boal, who held the view that theatre allows us to peer through a metaphorical looking glass back at ourselves. It is in this manner that it "can help us build our future", not by mysteriously divining the eventual outcome of every situation, but by offering "the means by which all possible paths may be examined". Forum theatre, pioneered by Boal during the 1960s, is something everyone should be given the opportunity to participate in. By doing so, we are made more aware of "who we could become". All live theatre provides us with a safe space in which we are able to reflect on the way that our world operates and experiment with changing it for the better. In a production, rehearsals allow for innovation with room for errors, as theatre itself is a rehearsal for real life.

There is a debate that is omnipresently argued in the theatre world, comparing contemporary to classic theatre and attempting to surmise which is the “better” of the two. Ultimately, any discourse regarding this topic is futile, not only because it is contrasting an apple and a lightbulb, but because any script worth its salt should be timeless. For example, despite *Mamma Mia!* having premiered nearly 20 years ago, it is to this day universally enjoyable. The evening I attended was filled with audience members from the Silent Generation to myself, a member of Gen Z. In spite of a roughly seventy-year gap between us, by the encore everyone was out of their seat, singing along to ABBA’s “Dancing Queen” and “Waterloo”. I wanted to watch what was happening onstage, but was unable to help myself from gazing in awe at the spectacle unfolding around me. It was as though everyone in the theatre had coalesced into a single entity. In a world where we are feeling increasingly emotionally disconnected from one another, moments like these are a rarity and should be held close when they do come along.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that it is vital that all students be given the opportunity to experience live theatre. Exposure to the performing arts not only inspires creativity and encourages independent thinking, but also serves to stimulate positive change on a much grander scale. The benefits stretch far beyond any single person, reaching outward to our larger communities and, to the greatest extent, society as a whole.



