

Reflection Through the Stage

A live performance is unlike any other experience of storytelling, where the audience is present to be immersed in the lights, sound, and production design. We're drawn into the story's universe, and are allowed to suspend our disbelief for hours, allowing everything to feel real. When I was about four years old I was taken to see The Arts Club's production of *Beauty and the Beast*, and I was so terrified at the wolves' attack in the first act, that I watched most of the rest of the show from the lobby on the screens with my mom. It was just too real for me, and I wasn't the only kid in the lobby who thought so. That extra layer of realism when you are in the moment connects you to the lives of these characters, and in person you can see how a performance sharply holds a mirror up to our culture and society.

A work of live theatre contributes to society by interpreting and reflecting society's realities back onto the audience. Every production says something about our world-- if not an outward message of what we need to consider or take charge in, then a statement on what the company put their time and passion into. It is all up on the stage, cascading into the rows of seats before it. The process of creating these shows requires creatives to tap into their minds and respond to their surroundings, reworking the world around us to fit into a theatre. In the musical *Hadestown* by Anaïs Mitchell, the Act One finale "Why We Build The Wall" goes, "The enemy is poverty/ And the wall keeps out the enemy/ And we build the wall to keep us free." These lyrics are so poignant because they parallel the famous "Build The Wall" chant from a certain political campaign in 2016. But despite *Hadestown* opening on Broadway in 2019, this song was written in 2006. Theatre will often fit the times we live in because it is a reflection of our world, and has always been able to move forward with us.

Forms of live theatre and performance have been around for forever. Before we even built amphitheatres in Ancient Greece, Indigenous cultures used performance as a method of storytelling. It is important for youth today to feel the same magic that's been captured for centuries. As our world evolves, so does our art. When we see new productions of older shows, students not only get a glimpse of the past, but also inspiration from the reinvention of it. Like revivals of Broadway classics, we try to look at our world for things that need the most reinvention, and keep the good stuff while replacing the rest. This doesn't mean burning down the past, but keeping it recorded in history for us to learn from. That way we learn from the generations before us and can direct their legacies to accompany us in our progress. When we reflect on our past and compare it to our present, audiences can see how much has really changed and how we can do better, especially in the diversity of voices telling these stories on stage. We on this planet have so much richness in our culture, so it is vital for students to see what is being represented so we can try to grow up to take charge and fill in those gaps

through all the avenues theatre provides us, including writing, singing, acting, dancing, production, and design.

Theatre can stitch our fantasies so tightly to reality, but to do so, a production takes copious amounts of passion and energy from all edges of a company. Being a theatre kid in high school can be incredibly formative and the opportunity to work on any aspect of a show calls for teamwork and improving yourself over the whole process. You find personal breakthroughs, and qualities to yourself that you never knew you had. The outlet for expression through creation that can be shared with fellow peers in high school makes accessibility to the arts in schools so special, but the courage for students to seek out these options has no fuel without exposure to live theatre.

In grade seven, I went on a field trip to see a matinee of Eric Hamber Secondary's production of *The Wiz*. Not only did I have a great time, but I was also blown away by the fact that on stage and behind the scenes, it was kids only a few years older than me that were able to do this, working together and having fun through theatre. The reality in this moment as I was sharing a space with these performers helped me realize that this was possible for me too, and the desire propelled me the next year in grade eight to audition and sign up to crew for any show I could at that school until it happened. It means a lot to me to have been inspired to pursue these opportunities at my school and find a community where I feel welcome, and I am excited for more generations of students to make their own steps as they are inspired by any exposure to the theatre landscape that is yet to come. I hope they too get a chance to enrich their education with the chance to play and be funny, serious, or dramatic as a part of a team. I hope they get to immerse their own audiences in the lights, sounds, and design of their performances, and make it work within any parameters of financial cost, because the courage it takes to work hard and devote time to put yourself out there is immensely valuable.

When theatre digs into the depths of humanity, aspects of us resurface that an audience member may have forgotten. It could be a piece of history, or a feeling that one felt so many long years ago. Some parts of our society are kept forever, as they flow through time and land on stages around the world; we relearn or experience the love, the heartbreak, the grief, the joy, and the tension that those before us have when we feel it in front of us, real and raw. While a dramatic production conveys its story on stage, it can take an audience to any corner of the universe, to any nook in one's mind, and also bring something fresh to the world. A new analysis of society or reinventions in limitless ways expand the worldview of an audience. For students, we get to learn about things that we'd never think to look for without theatre. Plays give reflections into each other's unique lives and hold that mirror up for us to see for ourselves-- worlds afar or communities in our neighbourhoods. We discover an interpretation of other time periods, or struggles from other perspectives, or even see heartbreak before we experience the first of our own. This wealth of sharable knowledge is so interesting because there really is no limit-- while big producers select certain stories to attract audiences, any idea could make its way onto its own small stage, and the smaller scale would only make it more intimate and direct. Removing a barrier like a screen or page puts

these stories in an exciting way before a crowd, and the actors, crew, and audience all let these pieces of humankind be embodied in personal ways, to be soaked inwards for a couple hours in one dark room.

What we do with that experience is a personal decision, influenced by the impact of a production on oneself. The magic of theatre has to do with the way nothing can be done the exact same-- each breath can only be taken once in a lifetime, but it's the beauty of how they are used each time to tell the same thing every night with certainty, grounded to a stage. Theatre can move us in little ways like listening to a new song the next day, or as much as taking that inspiration and using all of our heart and mind to create something of our own, a legacy to be passed down to generations beyond. Monumental changes can be made when we reflect on ourselves, so for masses to see a striking glimpse at entire communities? Our culture and outlooks can shift just like they have before. Theatre is a looking-glass for anyone to look through, to see past ideas recorded and replayed live in order to shape one's future.