My Battle With Theatre

By Lola Ross-McLennan

As a child, I was never a fan of theatre. It was probably caused by an attention span too short for sitting still in a chair for anything longer than two minutes. It may also have something to do with the fact that when I was six, my parents took my sister and me to a theatre production of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy.* Three and a half excruciating hours later (we had to watch the post-show Q & A), I was sound asleep in my seat, but forever more would associate darkened theatres as cells. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and Prisoner felt more fitting, but it was too late. By then, I had developed a fear of being held captive in a seat and not be able to escape for hours on end. I much preferred the playground to the uncomfortable seats of that fateful day in the auditorium.

Compounding the problem, I realized that I much preferred film. I was a movie lover because it just seemed so much more realistic. I felt like I was always immersed in the story, not like I was watching people trying to emulate real-life. That was until I went to New York. My mother took my sister and me to watch *Mean Girls*, a popular musical that was based on the movie from 2004. I had readied myself for another snooze fest when the show began, but something else happened. I catapulted into the fraught world of high school, where blondes ruled the roost and the rest of the student population were nobodies. Popular girls scorned the weak and the rest of the school just stood by and watched. I felt like I was witnessing scenes from my own high school, where you either eat or get eaten. High school is a place where people find themselves, but it’s also a place where so many feel like they don’t fit in.

I know that when I started high school, I was scared and I didn’t want to get picked on. *Mean Girls* captured those exact feelings and, in a transformative moment, I began to believe I was right there on that stage, albeit a wallflower, not a princess. I felt rage at Regina George. How could she be so cruel? What if she were put in other people’s shoes? I had never felt that level of excitement from a movie. With live actors, it was as if you were watching something unfold in real life. After the show, I even bought a cup that said Mean Girls on the front. I went home to Vancouver with a whole attitude change. I was transfixed by the performance. I now knew that theatre could make you feel things that movies just can’t. The raw, unfiltered emotions of the actors on stage aren’t something you can capture on tape. I had a new appreciation for the talent and skill that these people possessed to move the crowds. Just one compelling performance from a single actor has the power to completely alter your perception of theatre, I would know: it happened to me.

Back in Vancouver, and much more recently, my class went and saw *Noises Off*, a play that is equal parts comedy and innuendo. Now, I’m not someone who often laughs out loud, but *Noises Off* had me in stitches. It’s about a play-within-a-play featuring a director and cast who have a crazy time trying to coordinate a proper play. Its actors are concerned about putting on a good production, while simultaneously obsessing over relationships—love always makes for a good plot. As funny as *Noises off* is, what I enjoyed the most was that the actors seemed to be enjoying themselves too. I know they were probably nervous about perfecting their performances, but you could just feel the energy radiating off of them. What I’ve come to love most about theatre is how you can feel the atmosphere of the room. With a film, you don’t know what it was like when they were shooting the movie, but with theatre you get to see everything in real time. In *Noises Off*, it felt like the whole cast wanted to be there and their chemistry showed.

People always said live theatre offers something that movies can’t yet I never understood what it was. I realized then that it was passion. There’s a different sort of dedication to your craft when performing live and memorizing all your lines versus relying on cuts and multiple takes on film sets. This is why it’s so important for youth to witness live theatre. Theatre is a self-expression of your innermost ideas, a medium where your creativity can fully let loose with a self-reliance that emerges from being able to perform under pressure. Theatre teaches important skills like collaboration, communication, creativity and problem solving. These skills are not just used on stage but are useful throughout your lifetime. As an adult you may decide to be lawyer. To be successful at your profession, you’ll need to be able to work with others. You aren’t going to be able to win your case if you can’t communicate effectively. If you decide to be a biologist you won’t succeed if you always try and go it alone. We’re stronger working together and sharing new scientific data than trying to figure everything out alone. If you want to be a sculptor, you cannot recreate other people’s work. You need to be creative and find inspiration for your sculptures that will make you unique. Finally, if you decide to be an environmentalist, you’ll need to be able to problem solve and think on your feet about what solutions could be put into place. All of these attributes can be cultivated by taking part in theatre..

Theatre also cultivates a sense of belonging. For a time, I was part of an acting program where we were assigned specific parts, learned dance numbers and how to sing. I bonded with the girls there and soon it started to feel like a refuge from the world outside, a second home. Several years later, I now see one of those girlfriends at least once a month. I know my high school has numerous drama programs including the popular afterschool program Senior Theatre. This is a group of students who put on live performances every term and like the program I used to attend, It’s a safe place to explore ideas. Many students go to the drama studio for that exact reason. Teens may not always have a proper conduit for emotions at home, but when you have a place where you can channel these feelings into something creative, it provides a healthy outlet.

The stage offers tangible benefits, but being part of the audience does too. I love seeing what my classmates have come up with when I watch them on the stage. Friends who are nothing, but positive on regular school days can become teary-eyed widows who mourn the loss of their husbands on stage. Classmates who are normally quiet and reserved can become clowns who crack jokes and will do anything to get a laugh. Teens are transformed into characters that seem originally too complex for a high school student to take on, but the beauty is that in theatre you can be whoever you want. You aren’t forced into any boxes.

Part of what’s so important about theatre is the diversity of the topics explored. You may have a production that was created solely for comedy or a production that was mostly presented in song with little dialogue, but many have an overarching message. Similar to fables, a lot of theatre is here to teach us something, whether it’s about society, ourselves or our earth. Theatre can be a tool used to show us the perspectives of people who aren’t always heard or who we wouldn’t ordinarily know. For many years, and still today, minorities in society have not had an equal voice. Art, and specifically theatre, can be a powerful platform to let someone’s voice be heard. Indigenous theatre is important in Canada and especially in British Columbia for that reason. As a country, it’s our job to make sure everyone is heard, regardless of the number of voices..

For me, theatre was a place where I was safe and learned I could be creative as an actor. Now, I love going to watch plays as an audience member and I am so thankful my high school gives us the opportunity to go on fieldtrips to see productions. Live theatre provides something to our society that few mediums can emulate.