

Community Theatre: A Manifesto

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“We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is full of passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.” -character John Keating, *Dead Poet’s Society*, written by Tom Schulman.

When I first tried directing, I did not know how life transforming it would be. I did not know what a believer I was to become - but I did become one. I believe in art. I believe it is more than the sum of its parts. I believe in it with breathless wonder and delight.

Creativity enhances our lives, it makes us better, it makes living worth the bother. Not only that, but within man there is the ability, when experiencing nature or art, to be caught up in utter rapture of beauty, joy, laughter, empathy, sorrow and even despair. Art, in its many forms, inspires these things in the artist, and more importantly, in others.

And I believe the greatest art blends both beauty—or even ugliness—and *purpose*.

Community theatre at its best can combine the two magnificently. It unites an audience with a cast and a crew and invites every member into this uniquely magical world in which everyone - from actors, singers, dancers, set builders to artists and lighting designers - can express their personal creativity. I have had the singular privilege of co-leading a theater program and seeing its effect on the lives of those who

participated.

During my time as a director, I received many cards. This is standard procedure. Frequently, at the end of the run, my cast would pull me up and give me flowers and a card signed by them all. That felt great.

I did like to be honored that way, however, one card in particular **hangs on my refrigerator to this day.**

A Special Thank You Card

I received the card after the close of a particularly difficult show, when I felt down and defeated and wondered if I would continue with theatre at all. It reads, “The play was just the thing I needed to get me through the holidays. God puts people in our lives for a reason, and he definitely put an angel in my life in the form of you.” While I had been feeling sorry for myself and struggling through some real difficulties, the theater had created a warm and caring community, not to mention an outlet for his wonderful acting, for this man.

Why We Do What We Do

I recall a conversation with an artist that volunteered to paint the set for three of our productions. She was a very talented artist and her artwork enhanced all the shows for which she painted. She told me that when she initially volunteered, she did so for her daughter’s sake, who had been cast in the show, but she had been nervous because it had been many years since she had painted.

Her work for the theater was a real gift to us, but more importantly, it unlocked her talent and she began pursuing her own art once again. *Suppose I’d quit after that earlier show?*

Excellence is important to me. I am the last person who wants to put a mediocre show on stage, just so some sad people can feel better. Nobody feels good at the end of *that* kind of show. The director —unless woefully self-deluded—the actors and the audience walk away from that feeling awkward. Not one show did not receive my very best. And it was a joy to encourage others towards excellence as well.

Surprises... People

The last show I directed, I decided to cast by *invitation only*. I knew it would be my last chance to direct for a while, as my family would be moving shortly after the close of the show, and there were some actors I really wanted to work with one last time.

One woman I invited to audition asked if her husband could come out for the show as well. I agreed, as a favor to her, thinking he could fill in the chorus. When he came out to the audition, he blew my mind. He had a wonderful singing voice, an uncanny talent for accents and comedic timing. He had never even auditioned for a show, much less acted before.

There is a lot of untapped and unseen talent in the world. Very few actors are able to make a living from acting and fewer still make it to Hollywood to star in movies for the wide world to see. In fact, many of these wonderfully talented people would never want that life anyway.

Yet, it would be a shame not to see these people shine on stage, for them not to experience, if even only once or twice, the glory of bringing an audience to riotous laughter, or to tears, or to thunderous applause. At least for a while, I helped prevent that from happening for a good group of people. The memories of all these experiences stay with me and carry me - everywhere.

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