

The Impact of Social Issue Theatre, an Interview by Nora Perone with Joey Madia, Artistic Director and Resident Playwright

For this assignment, I interviewed my acting coach, Joey Madia. Joey has a dual degree in Theatre and English from Arcadia University. He is an actor, director, playwright, and teacher who specializes in theatre for young audiences (or TYA), and is particularly interested in “social issue theatre.” He is the Artistic Director and Resident Playwright of New Mystics Theatre Company and Resident Playwright of Youth Stages, both of which are based in New Jersey. In addition, Joey is currently working to start a second branch of New Mystics Theatre Company in West Virginia. Joey is a “teaching artist”—a working professional in the field of theatre, who applies his skills to educate today’s youth about social issues. He is a member of several professional associations, and has been a keynote speaker, conference presenter, and national student mentor in both acting and playwriting. I spent an afternoon with Joey discussing the impact of theatre on society over the last several decades, and learned quite a bit in the process.

Theatre is generally thought of as purely a source of entertainment. For example, cheerful, showy musicals like *Oklahoma!* and *42nd Street* have been very popular on and off Broadway for decades. However, theatre can be so much more than just sequined costumes and pretty songs; in fact, it is often the perfect vehicle to provide education about current social issues and to inspire social and political change.

The beginning of modern social issue theatre, according to Joey, happened around the time of World War II and involved two men in Germany: Bertolt Brecht and his partner Erwin Piscator. Together, they developed the “epic theatre,” the concept of which is basically that the audience is in no way supposed to forget that they are seeing a theatrical presentation, and is therefore forced to reexamine reality. This was achieved through the use of such techniques as very minimal scenery, harsh lighting, and actors speaking directly to the audience. These performances were not meant to be seen as being real, but rather as representations of reality. The intent of this representation was to inspire critical reflection, rather than to encourage to audience to emotionally identify with the characters and actions of the play.

Brecht’s belief was that the theatre has the power to change society. To him, after the show is over, the work of the audience member has just begun. They must go back out into the world and make changes, behaving according to what they had seen in the theatre. The idea that theatre could be used as a means of instigating political and social change became very popular. Brecht’s ideas were the foundation for a lot of theatrical protests through the 1960s and 70s. The Vietnam War brought about a widespread motivation for change, and soon the theatre became an important part of the protests.

During this time, “revolutionary theatre” (also called “guerrilla theatre” or “street theatre”) was very prevalent. The underlying theme was this: Theatre can be used to open people’s minds and affect change. This is theatre with a goal—to raise awareness and activism—and a very different, non-traditional method of achieving that goal. Actors performed on the streets, or in basements or converted garages—anywhere that they could be seen by an audience. Performances were spontaneous, not highly organized, and often relied heavily on improvisational elements.

One very influential person during this time was Antonin Artaud, who developed the idea of “Theatre of Cruelty.” This style of theatre is focused on forcing the audience to face unpleasant truths; it is a very in-your-face, unsettling experience that uses all five senses to bombard the audience. This is meant to provoke a very instinctive, visceral reaction from the audience, and most importantly, to compel them to DO something, not just to be passive.

Although most current philosophies of theatre may not be quite as violent as during that particularly turbulent time in history, the idea that theatre can change the world has not been completely lost. For example, playwrights like David Mamet are known for dramatic works that analyze the political process. Works such as the rock opera RENT bring attention to serious issues affecting our society such as HIV/ AIDs. There are numerous theatre groups, such as New Mystics Theatre Company, that present productions intended to educate young people about the dangers of alcohol, drugs, bullying, and risky behavior.

Modern social issue theatre is also very prevalent in formal education. Both performance and theatre-related lessons and games are used in the classroom with great success. According to studies done by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), using theatre in the classroom builds self-confidence, critical thinking and problem solving skills, as well as teaching about team building. In addition, it allows children who have become very passive in this “No Child Left Behind” atmosphere to take a more active role in learning.

Theatre is incredibly effective as a method of improving reading comprehension and writing skills, and can even be applied to other classes. For example, theatrical elements are often used in history and social sciences classes through the use of role-play, character building, and costuming. There is even a place for creativity in math and science, through the acting out applied situations; for instance, solving a mystery with the use of forensic technology.

In a sense, this modern use of theatre as an educational tool is a return to socially conscious theatre minus the militant or guerrilla aspect. The application is different, but it incorporates the same underlying themes: using theatre to change the world and educate our youth in a very active, motivating, inspirational way.

Having the opportunity to speak with an experienced professional about this topic (it being something that I have always been very interested in) gave me a new perspective on social issue theatre and opened my eyes to countless new possibilities. As each of my questions was answered, I found myself wanting to ask a thousand more. I realize now just how much more I have to learn before I can even begin to hope that I, like the many men and women from history that I learned about this afternoon, can use my passion—theatre—to change the world.

[Nora Perone is a member of the West Virginia cast of New Mystics Theatre Company]